

Research, applied.

Transformation
research at
Demos Helsinki



Content

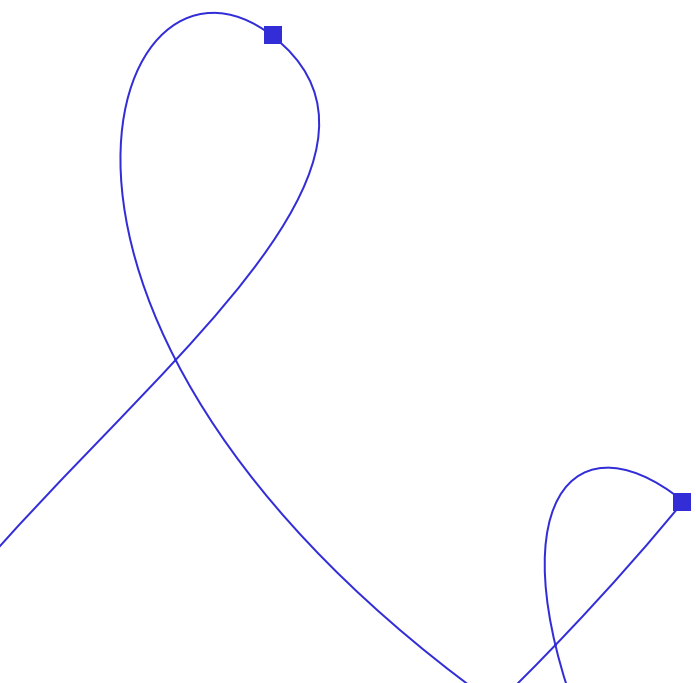
I Approaching Research at Demos Helsinki	3
II Research and Societal Transformation	5
Doing research on and for societal transformation	5
The role of time in transformations	6
III Ongoing and future research at Demos Helsinki	8
Urban Transformations	8
Transformative governance	9
Transformations of democracy	9
Technology in society	10
Socio-ecological justice	10
Conclusion	11
Bibliography	12

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Academic research at Demos Helsinki seeks to open up the possibilities of societal transformation. The pace of today's technological revolutions, global ecological breakdown, the imperilled futures of democracy, unequal economic structures, the complex and entangled nature of our current societal crises calls for a distinct approach. At Demos Helsinki we believe research has the capacity to challenge harmful norms, to illuminate societal structures that can no longer serve us, to uncover political pitfalls and to, above all, expand our sense of what is possible.

Yet as a think-tank, Demos Helsinki believes that working for societal transformation can only be done together. We work with(in) and aspire to bridge the worlds of academic research, policy and society. Our research and community is indispensably shaped by the work done by fellow communities at universities – across dozens of disciplines – and the forms of knowledge and practice that comes from governments, business actors, civil society and citizens. We believe the potential of research is intimately tied to this broad engagement with and, ultimately, the mobilisation of the variety of society's actors. It sustains both our keen sense for the strategically essential points where transformative change may be possible and our belief in collective hope: radical societal change is possible only by acting together.

Here, we outline how we approach research, what it means to do research for transformation and the five different but overlapping focal areas of our research.



I Approaching Research at Demos Helsinki

Over the last three decades we have begun to grasp the sheer magnitude and complexity of the global challenges facing human society. In attempts to steer the future in the face of these crises, societies have produced vast amounts of democratic, social and technological innovations. Yet where some have offered promising routes for transformational change, many have unintentionally aggravated existing social crises and generated new ones. It is at this delicate juncture that Demos Helsinki approaches the question of how to navigate and spark processes of desirable social and institutional transformation across sectors and polities.

Part of the answer lies in a closer, more dynamic relationship between ambitious academic research on the one hand and on the other, the lived political and social realities of citizens, governments and organisations. Demos Helsinki works towards this goal in at least three ways.

First and foremost, academic research at a think-tank means working closely, over the long-term, with multiple and diverse collaborators. In practice this means continuous interaction and conversations with university departments, individual researchers, business leaders, consultancies, civil servants at different levels of government, policy makers, politicians, civil society organisations, communities and citizens. This breadth of engagement is central to Demos Helsinki's organisational history. For our academic researchers this socially dispersed and embedded approach is also a prerequisite for genuinely just and legitimate societal transformations, as well as an indispensable form of knowledge production in our current context of multiple, overlapping, complex systemic crises (Nowotny et al., 2003).

At one level, it allows for deeper and more nuanced insights into where society's transformative possibilities may exist and how they can be nourished. From civil society, individual researchers and universities, we are able to draw upon, and occasionally add, to their ability to identify those political and social blindspots that

prevent us changing the trajectories of the crises we find ourselves in. Similarly, our work with civil servants, policy and decision-makers allows Demos Helsinki to better sense the pulses of shifting power relations, deeper political and economic trends and their possibilities for society. Put otherwise, our engagement with many different epistemic communities allows our researchers to identify and explain the strong and weak currents for societal change, as they emerge across these various contexts.

Second, our academic research aims to be transdisciplinary. This means that the knowledge created in our research projects is produced within and for the contexts in which it is to be applied and that it is often heterogeneous because it is co-created with a wide variety of societal participants (Scholz and Steiner, 2015). Many of our research projects push methodological boundaries through action research, experimentation and co-creation with the explicit purpose that the knowledge produced is not only socially robust but also scientifically rigorous. Though we draw from different forms of research, disciplines and methodologies, ranging from critical-analytical to application and problem-solving work, our aim is to show how societal structures and institutions are transient and malleable. Research which produces knowledge that is able to resonate deeply with, and offer mutual learnings for, both researchers and policy makers – whilst holding a critical distance – has the capacity to marshal collective action for transformative change.

A final aspect of Demos Helsinki's academic research has emerged from attempts to embed research into our organisation. Intimately linked to each of the above points, it has also become clear that our research projects work in two directions simultaneously. They deliver scientifically rigorous and socially robust knowledge that guides the development of more just and sustainable societies; and continuously the results of this transformative work is brought back for verification and the development of original academic contributions and ideas. The underlying energy and ethos of our research is this iterative dynamic between practice and theory, between application and ideas.

This has several implications. Most obviously perhaps, it allows us to work on societal change at different levels of abstraction. Our researchers may seek to make original contributions to academic conversations, to facilitating interactions between different societal actors, to designing methodologically innovations in applied research, all the way to making short-term instrumental interventions in complex institutional contexts.

Perhaps more crucially, it demands that our research be deeply reflexive. Having the distinct goal of generating transformational change whilst guarding against aggravating existing societal challenges, means paying close attention to and continuously challenging the assumptions, blind spots, premises and choices in our methods and

theories. This is all the more necessary because our research projects are deeply socially embedded, enabled by certain forms of research funding and radically interdisciplinary. Transparency about the choices that shape the knowledge we produce in our research projects goes hand in hand with being clear-eyed about the real-world effects of our knowledge production.

II Research and Societal Transformation

To spark transformational change, we need to understand the frictions and power dynamics at play in societal structures and institutions. In this section we offer a nuanced understanding of societal transformation, what it means to conduct research for and on it, and how we can relate it to change over time.

Doing research on and for societal transformation

The concepts of transformation and transition sit at the core of our work. Because transformation and transition are used interchangeably in some contexts, it may be useful to distinguish these terms. Etymologically, ‘transition’ means ‘going across’ (Brand, 2014) and analyses focus on the patterns of change produced from processes and dynamics to explain ‘how’ a non-linear shift from one state to another is supported or hindered. They are mainly employed to analyse changes in societal sub-subsystems (e.g. energy, mobility, cities), focusing on social, technological and institutional interactions (Loorbach et al., 2017).

‘Transformation’, however, means ‘change in shape’, and the focus here is on whole systems and the different enablers of change (policies, practices, relationships, power dynamics, mindsets) within the system (Meadows, 1999; Hölscher et al., 2018). They are commonly focused on more radical, large-scale and long-term changes in whole societies (global, national or local) and involve interacting human and biophysical system components (Brand, 2014, Folke et al., 2010).

Although transition and transformation are different approaches, they are not mutually exclusive. Both concepts provide nuanced perspectives on how to describe, interpret and support desirable radical and non-linear societal change and can enrich each other (Hölscher et al. 2018). Because we value both short and long-term impacts, we believe aspects of both approaches are necessary to achieve societal transformation. For example, immediate short-term steps towards solutions in specific areas (e.g. via mission-oriented and experimentation focused approaches) may yield results that are useful in their immediate outcomes (e.g. on short-term climate emissions) as well as in making the transformations needed visible for public deliberation. Such work, in turn, should be combined with more transformative action based on a long-term vision guided by broad scientific evidence, foresight, and deliberation of values. For example, when tackling anthropogenic climate change, mitigation (i.e. ultimately limiting and reducing greenhouse gas concentrations in the earth's atmosphere) and adaptation (reducing vulnerability and exposure to the effects of climate change) are interventions based on different logics, trajectories and mechanisms. Nevertheless, both mitigation and adaptation call for far-reaching transformative action, and both are deeply connected to ongoing political, social, and economic dynamics. Only in conjunction can mitigation and adaptation contribute to climate resilience and contribute to a sustainable and equitable future.

The discussion above illustrates a key dimension of the task we have set for our research work. We aim to do research *on* transformations and transitions in a very concrete sense, investigating the work done – by governments, civil society, and corporations – to respond to the crises of our times and transform towards desired futures and participating in the knowledge production on these transformations.

At the same time, we do research *for* transformation. Our research, in part, can work to illuminate the points of conflict, tension or power struggle within our social systems and institutions (Habermas, 1987). The task of this research is to allow a clear-eyed society-wide deliberation and assessment of our systems and institutions, as well as the impact they have on the world, and how they align with the goals that our societies collectively set for themselves.

The role of time in transformations

Transformation and transition signify the movement from one state of events, in one point of time, to another. They imply a certain sense of time. Just as Demos Helsinki' stated aim of contributing to just and sustainable futures operates with certain understandings of time. If we are to make sense of long-term political, social and economic developments, it is essential to understand how historically constructed societal structures (norms, institutions etc.) constrain our understanding of our present, to analyse path dependencies and to grasp the institutional limitations and building blocks for possible futures.

In practice this means thinking beyond time as the chronological sequence of past, present and future. For instance, when engaging with research on our ecological breakdown we can notice that society's inability to grasp a hopeful future chronically hampers transformative possibilities in the present. Our sense of hope, of deep societal change and possibility, collapses because our time horizon shrinks. In another example, in the field of emerging technologies the sheer acceleration and intensity of technological innovations in a short time frame can profoundly shift the power relations between groups in society, modify forms of human behaviour in very short periods of time, all the whilst holding open the simulacrum of possibility of a brighter future.

Our sense of whether societal transformation is possible is intimately linked to how we think about time - whether the past, the present and/or the future. From another angle, concrete societal transformations have their own time signatures which shape societal perceptions. Some occur in brief moments, constructing a world before and a world after, whilst others accrue slowly through repetitive structures and incrementally. All of this is to say that as Demos Helsinki conducts its research on and for societal transformation, we will look to reshape our ideas of time in order to fight for just and sustainable futures.

As part of this analysis, researchers at Demos Helsinki dig deep into the historical structures and predecessors of today's societal challenges. Though it is important to recognise the nuances and novelties of today's crises, there is learning and unlearning to be done in regard to analogous past crises. A historical attentiveness offers us a keen diagnostic eye about the transformative or regressive potentials in our current crises. It permits discernment. It also opens our imagination of the future, as we see paths not taken, lessons not learnt and past futures jettisoned (Koselleck, 2004). Above all, a keen attention to historical analogies informs us as we choose our actions in the present.

III Ongoing and future research at Demos Helsinki

The thematic focus areas of our research work are informed by the social and political urgencies of our world. Given the current crises, Demos Helsinki has decided to group its research around five broad themes: **urban transformations, transformative governance, transformations of democracy, technology in society, and socio-ecological justice.**

Our academic researchers enter these areas from diverse disciplines: sustainability studies, political theory, organisational studies, urban planning, history, education, legal and political philosophy, sociology and geography. And our work on these themes takes place in large, project-based research consortiums funded through instruments such as Horizon Europe and the Strategic Research Council in Finland.

In the future, we will continue developing our work in the focus areas, but also look openly towards the political, social, scientific and environmental trends that shape our realities and societies for inspiration. We also continue to strengthen our research expertise and grow our research community, while deepening the links between the different modes of Demos Helsinki operations and project work.

Urban Transformations

The Urban Transformations research done in Demos Helsinki belongs to the emerging urban transitions and transformations (UTT) research field (Torrens et al., 2021) at the intersection of sustainability transitions/transformations and urban studies. This field seeks to enable novel insights and empower interventions into urban change dynamics, drawing on notions of agency, governance and place as key boundary objects (Wolfram et al., 2019). Here, projects at Demos Helsinki have contributed e.g. to leadership of sustainability work at the local level (Lähteenoja et al., 2021) and to the scaling of best practices in urban sustainability (see Sustainable City programme, [in Finnish](#)). We have also, with our partners, elaborated on the importance of

alternative imaginaries and narratives (te Brömmelstroet et al., 2022) and discussed immigrants' right to the city (Hewidy & Schmidt-Thomé, 2022). Currently, in the NetZeroCities project we are providing both academic support (e.g. Parry et al., 2022) and tailored services for the EU Mission Cities striving for climate neutrality by 2030.

Instead of excluding the rural (or 'not urban'), we emphasise that the "drivers" of urbanisation (Koste et al., 2020) also play out in rural contexts where development is often characterised by population shrinkage (cf. Schmidt-Thomé & Lilius, 2023). However, we see that the increasing emphasis on sustainability and resilience can also nourish completely new trajectories of regional development. This is currently on our radar in the Regions4Climate project, where we partner for building a just transition framework for climate resilience.

Transformative governance

Research activities centering on governance focus on the roles, forms and possibilities of political institutions and governmental actors to guide societal transformations. We seek to study and contribute to the development of governance and community responses to the transformational pressures faced by our societies. Effective responses to transformational pressures including crises (such as the climate crisis, health crises, and the biodiversity crisis) and breakdowns (in e.g. democratic processes, social cohesion, or the economic system) are only possible if we can find ways forward in the face of disagreement, the incompleteness and inadequacy of individual solutions.

Our current research on this theme sheds light on the connections between the pressures for societal transformation, collaboration and governance efforts, and the surrounding cultural and institutional norms (e.g. Autioniemi et al., 2023; Jalonen et al., 2018). In the WELGO project, we study and develop resilient decision making systems, through looking back at lessons from decision making during the COVID pandemic crisis and their institutionalisation into governance systems and practices. In REALLOCATE and NetZeroCities, we study and build governance models for accelerating the climate transformation in cities. In the MUST project, we explore the integration of more-than-human interests in urban planning, building governance models that seek to embed the goals of multispecies justice and social-ecological resilience in urban planning.

Transformations of democracy

Research and policy work around topics covering transformations of democracy builds on the ongoing debates on the potential and pitfalls of democratic practices and institutions. While concerns around the democratic decline and authoritarian

tendencies, democratic deficit and technocracy have labelled both academic and political debates over the last decades, theoretical, institutional and practical responses to the identified challenges have also been put forth. In our work, we draw theoretical and empirical inspiration especially from research on deliberative democracy, democratic innovations, social contracts, and political representation.

The combination of research and interaction work has previously supported the development of this theme at Demos Helsinki, and we have for example generated scenarios for the future of democracies (Björk, Neuvonen & Attalia, 2022). Currently, our work focuses on theorising and practising citizen assemblies in the TANDEM project, exploring the resilience and eroding of social contracts in the CO3 project, and analysing obstacles and potential routes to institutionalising democratic innovations in the Nets4Dem project.

Technology in society

Research themes falling under the role of technology in society focuses on the societal impacts of emerging technologies national and European contexts and through the multilateral governance systems. Our current work builds on questions on how artificial intelligence (AI) comes into conflict with democracies and how disruptive technologies should be democratically governed. Furthermore, we are interested in the role of sociotechnical imaginaries and technological utopias in steering our value-based political choices in contemporary contexts, and the potential of participatory practices in democratising technology governance to benefit many instead of the few (see Demos Helsinki White Paper 2/2023). In our past projects, we have for example utilised policy observatories for analysing the policies and relevance of Distributed Ledger Technologies to public good and governance (e.g. Björk, A., Mikkonen, J., Ojanen, A., Sekar, B. 2023) and built a framework for non-discriminatory AI (Ojanen, Björk & Mikkonen 2022). Our ongoing work focuses on sustainable algorithmic futures in the REPAIR project, the risks generated by AI and big data to our democracies in Knowledge Technologies for Democracy, and the challenge of technology to our social contracts in CO3. Furthermore, we will work on ethical human-centric and participatory design of technologies in our ARISE and CommuniCity projects.

Socio-ecological justice

The cross-cutting theme of socio-ecological justice runs through many of our projects, focusing on what is needed to achieve a just and sustainable societal transformation across different sectors and contexts via meaningful engagement, introspection and reflection. Our approach draws from and builds on historical environmental, climate, and energy justice movements and scholarship, as well as more contemporary

multi-species justice and just transition discourses. We consider not only distributive, recognition and procedural justice dimensions, but also intergenerational and restorative justice. In this sense, we look forward to using futures methods to explore what just and sustainable futures could look like, where both the endpoints and pathways to get there leave no-one behind.

Conclusion

In our continuous search for promising research angles and methodologies for describing and explaining transformations, we are constantly operating with a great level of uncertainty. At the same time, the certainty over the need of learning from others and contributing with our expertise through collaboration has only grown. While we may be looking for a specific future without having any way of knowing what the future will shape into, we are very deliberate in our choice of not trying to do this alone. At the time of writing this, individuals, organisations, governments and communities around us are getting to work with the most recent diplomatic developments of the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP28. In the coming months, Europe is preparing for the next EU parliamentary elections in June 2024, bringing about a changing political scenery around us. To us, such shifts mean that also the operational environment for our research is shifting in ways which we cannot fully see yet. With our eyes on these and other ongoing political developments, such as the EU technology regulation processes, our work in exploring the role of academic research in our work on, and for, transformation continues. We may have built solid foundations for our impact goals through extensive and collaborative project work over the years, but this means only that there is now more work to be done to strengthen and further develop this legacy. Exploring our role as a think-tank in the academic world, and as a research organisation engaging with transformations, will therefore continue with us keeping a keen eye on the pulse of our societies and research across disciplines.

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Demos Helsinki is a globally operating, independent think tank. We conduct research, offer a range of services, including capacity-building and training, and host a global alliance of social imagination called Untitled. Since day one, our community has been built on the idea that change can only happen together. That is why we carry out direct engagements and research projects with hundreds of partners around the world. Unlike many think tanks, we are predominantly project-funded and fully independent, without any political affiliations.

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