

Discussant Commentary

# Expanded Perspectives on Social Transformation in Brazil:

A commentary on Cimini and Homem, “Psychopolitical Foresensing for Social Transformation (PFST): Theoretical Reflections for Action Research in Brazil towards the SDGs”

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## Abstract

This commentary presents a broader perspective on the paper Psychopolitical foresensing for social transformation (PFST): theoretical reflections for action research in Brazil towards the SDGs. It is generally accepted that the current path of capitalism is accelerating the planetary climate crisis and social inequality and is bringing an individual and collective feeling of frustration. Cimini and Homem’s brings in their paper a proposal in tackle this frustration feeling through advancing the theory of change (ToC) concept by creating a framework for an action research project based on awareness-based systems change (ABSC). I highlight three relevant contexts to Brazil to be considered in their action research project: i. Decolonization and good living: concepts in Brazil’s current transformation mindset; ii. Nature-based solutions: the value of socio-biocultural diversity in Brazil; and iii. Practical experience on building a participatory ToC for the Amazon. Cimini and Homem’s proposed journey on

PFST aiming to expand on ToCs approach by adding ABSC methodologies using presence-sense-reconnection, seems to be a path to integrate inner and out change with social and cultural transformation. They have a great opportunity, combined with a challenge, to plant a seed in leaders and changemakers in expanding their views of how impact can be generated. They can be bold in the PFST journey by enhancing awareness and actions, going beyond the SDGs, and bringing light to Brazil's position as a global leader in nature-based solutions to face climate change.

## Keywords

theory of change; decolonization; good living; nature based solutions

## Introduction

The purpose of this commentary is to bring a broader perspective on the paper Psychopolitical Foresensing for Social Transformation (PFST): Theoretical Reflections for Action Research in Brazil Towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I come from a background of more than a decade as a professor at the Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, where I coordinate the Sustainable Actions Laboratory. The Laboratory focuses on practical actions in dialogue, mainly for sustainability, education, and social innovation, and in the past few years I have worked on consultancy projects creating space for dialogue, collaboration, and development for multi-stakeholder forums in Brazil and abroad by combining research and practice in dialogic processes to access collective intelligence. My initial degree in Biology with a Master's and Doctorate in Ecology give me the perspective of the importance of going from 'me' to 'we' and the reconnection with nature in building change of a sustainable future. I see the connection between individual and collective wellbeing for bringing social and cultural transformation at scale that provides the grounding for Cimini's and Homem's (2023) paper to be an interesting approach.

Cimini and Homem begin their paper by positioning the role of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting the international urgency of this topic. However, historically, Brazil has based its economy on the exploitation and destruction of nature, dating from the beginning of the country's colonization (Dean & Ferro, 1996). Other world nations also based their development on this same principle, which has led humanity to the current critical situation in relation to its sustainability, with socially and environmentally unsustainable practices destroying nature and increasing poverty (Pachauri et al., 2014). It is widely accepted amongst those working in sustainable development that the current path of capitalism is accelerating the planetary climate crisis and social inequality, is leading society to destruction, and is bringing an individual and collective feeling of frustration.

Cimini and Homem dare to ask: “What if we guide this discontentment to become active engagement with social transformation?” (2023, p. 151). This powerful question guides their narrative on PFST. I would like to highlight that the systemic failures and general feeling of frustration that the authors bring in proposing a theory of change to foresensing the connection between individual and collective wellbeing, can be seen as a parallel with the ideas of the two-loop model, a nonlinear theory of change that guides transformation in complex organizations, also known as the Berkana model (Wheatley and Frieze, 2006). It is inspired in the growth and decline cycle of living systems and in the recognition that the change in complex contexts activates a life cycle (germination, innovation, maturation, and rejuvenation) and a death cycle (stagnation, disintegration, and decomposition) in order to impel transformation. The key point here, which is often missed in the transformative change literature, is that generating alternative futures needs to first connect with the existing assumptions that drive mental models of change.

It is exciting and heartwarming to read Cimini and Homem’s view that the debate on theory of change and sustainable development goals can be advanced by creating a framework for an action research project based on awareness-based systems theories. What I would like to contribute to their construction is the point that any action research model is put into practice in a particular place, and that the unique context must be taken into consideration. Therefore I want to highlight some contexts relevant to Brazil, as they chose this country to run their project. I will present the topics exploring these contexts individually in the sessions below: i. Decolonization and good living: concepts in Brazil’s current transformation mindset; ii. Nature-based solutions: the value of socio-biocultural diversity in Brazil; and iii. Practical experience on building a participatory ToC for the Amazon.

## **Decolonization and Good Living: Concepts in the Latin American and Brazilian Current Transformation Mindset**

I believe that decolonization<sup>1</sup> and Good Living<sup>2</sup> invite us to rethink the dominant notions of poverty and wealth, giving us the opportunity to envision alternatives

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<sup>1</sup> Decolonization has different meanings for different people, I see it as the decentering of epistemic, political and cultural ways of thinking and ways of existing in the historically colonized world, in order to disentangle the ideas and power rooted in colonialism. This conceptualization has been shaped by contributions from the knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous peoples for the deconstruction of ingrained concepts (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Good Living is an intercultural construction of processes based on the ancestral communion between humans and non-humans, which denotes the foundations of a full life, based on a more harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, as part of a all integrated and interdependent. Latin American Good Living is composed of a trinity with the following approaches: Identity - Indigenous and pachamamist; Equity - socialist and statesman; and Sustainability - ecologist and post-developmental. (Acosta, 2016; Quijano, 2013).

that were present, but invisible to our notions of transformation (Lander, 2010; Acosta, 2016).

Decolonization has emerged as a powerful movement across Latin America, igniting a renewed sense of cultural identity and fostering a reevaluation of historical narratives. In the case of Brazil, a country deeply shaped by colonial legacies, the pursuit of decolonization has gained significant momentum, especially reclaiming Indigenous heritage and challenging Eurocentric paradigms (Quijano, 2013; Gandarilla Salgado et al., 2021). Despite the polarized political scenario of the past few years, where the environmental and the Indigenous causes were heavily attacked, the agenda seems to be regaining its strength.

It is a challenge to transform the individual and collective notion of a colonized Eurocentric view into a recognition of the rich and diverse Indigenous heritage that has long been marginalized in Brazil, an understanding of the importance of Indigenous cultures, languages and an effort to actively work to repair the historical injustices inflicted upon these communities. The revitalization of Indigenous languages, preserving traditional knowledge, and acknowledging ancestral territories have started to gain space (Grecco & Schuster, 2020).

Decolonization requires a critical examination of the dominant Eurocentric narratives that have shaped Latin American societies for centuries. This includes deconstructing power structures and reassessing the influence of the Western on local cultures (Escobar, 2005). By challenging these paradigms, we start to embrace diverse worldviews, promoting multiculturalism, and fostering a more inclusive understanding of our own history. In Brazil, for instance, scholars, artists, and activists have been actively engaging in decolonial discourse, highlighting the contributions of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous cultures to the nation's identity (Andreotti et al., 2019).

Aligned with that view, the Indigenous concepts of Living in Harmony with Nature and Community, *Sumak Kawsay*, originating from the Quechua culture in Peru, and *Suma Qamaña*, derived from the Aymara culture in Bolivia, encapsulate the interconnectedness of human beings, nature, and the cosmos (Acosta, 2016; Walsh, 2010). These concepts emphasize living in harmony, valuing community, and nurturing a balanced relationship with the environment, encouraging individuals and communities to prioritize values such as reciprocity, respect for nature, and collective well-being over material accumulation. They are often translated as "Buen Vivir", "Bem Viver" or "Good Living" (Lander, 2010).

Operating within the Good Living perspective, communities strive for ecological sustainability, acknowledging that the health of the environment directly impacts human prosperity. This holistic approach to well-being embraces the preservation of ancestral knowledge, cultural diversity, and the recognition of the inherent rights of nature. A valuable insight obtained from this perspective is to challenge the dominant paradigm of unlimited economic growth that is leading

to a deep civilization crisis and to encourage societies to adopt more sustainable practices that respect the environment and foster social cohesion (Lander, 2010).

In the context of climate change and environmental degradation, these concepts inspire alternative ways of relating to nature, prioritizing its preservation and regeneration. Moreover, they promote a collective consciousness that transcends individualistic pursuits, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared responsibility for the well-being of all beings.

Considering these concepts that derive from and are specific to the Brazilian and Latin American context can contribute to the PFST journey, which aims to enhance awareness and action towards SDGs, by shedding light on local and regional issues that tend to be overlooked when dealing with global agendas (such as the SDGs). Moreover, it will bring value to the socio-biodiversity that is central in Brazil and in the interconnection between humans and nature in pursuing collective happiness.

## **Nature-based Solutions: The Value of Socio-biocultural Diversity in Brazil**

Nature-based solutions (NBS) is often used as an umbrella concept; it involves working with nature to address societal challenges, providing protection, restoration and management of natural environments (Seddon et al. 2021). NBS can be as simple as protecting an area that provides ecosystem services or, on the other hand, as complex as making an extensive intervention in an ecosystem. Some examples of NBS include restoration of native vegetation, and expansion of integrated agriculture systems and recovery of pasture areas. NBS have a key role in changing Brazil's scenario and as the authors point out the solution is connected with public and private sectors engagement. These approaches can contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation, water management, food security and biodiversity conservation, which helps them achieve the related SDGs (Martín et al. 2020). Nature is essential in all SDGs, and NBS can contribute to achieve them.

I believe that NBS can make Brazil a green power. Our natural capital must be at the center of our economic strategy. Building public policies, economic and ecological development strategies, we can become the most important country in delivering NBS. Political engagement is crucial for the successful implementation and scaling up of NBS. Governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders must work together to create enabling environments for NBS, including policy frameworks, financial mechanisms, and capacity-building efforts (Bustamante, 2022; CGEE, 2022; IUCN, 2020; Miles, et al., 2021).

I understand that a transition from a country of commodities' producing, where the destruction of nature was the driver of economic development, to a country that will focus its efforts on NBS, requires an important change in the collective mindset. This is a huge task that needs combined efforts from private

and public sectors. One example that will require a deep transformation are food systems which will be healthier and more resilient if NBS are embedded.

This brings a new perspective, in which the conservation and restoration of nature can generate the economic value and social development necessary to generate a cycle of social and economic prosperity with the protection of nature (S. Diaz et al., 2019).

This change in mindset is not only personal, but also collective. Companies that historically were not concerned with protecting nature, in recent years have invested in nature solutions based to mitigate their impacts. The recent turn towards NBS connects with Cimini's and Homem's PFST proposal, providing an approach to achieving transformative action it calls for grounding in the current context of Brazil.

## Practical Experience on Building a Participatory ToC for the Amazon

The authors present their understanding of the applicability of theories of change (ToC)<sup>3</sup>. They acknowledge the fact that not all approaches that call themselves ToC are the same and that it is being used as an adaptive frame to design change (Vogel, 2012).

I would like to complement their theoretical consideration of the use and adaptation of ToC to promote transformation with a practical example, by sharing an experience of building a participatory ToC for the Amazon Forest as a consultant (Olab, 2023, A Collective Theory of Change for the Amazon). The ToC was a request from a multi-stakeholder collective initiative that aims to develop and identify innovative and tangible solutions for the sustainable development and conservation of biodiversity, forests, and natural resources in the Brazilian Amazon. The initiative seeks to leverage investments with a positive socio-environmental impact in the Brazilian Amazon, to share good practices and foster innovative partnerships that integrate all sectors of society, scaling up private sector investment in NBS and environmental start-ups in the Amazon basin (PPA, 2023).

The need to build a ToC for the initiative was related to the process of developing the identity and the recognition of the added value that the initiative brings to all parties interested in the conservation of socio-biodiversity in the Amazon. We sought to create a shared vision with partners, in addition to pathways to reach impact, and to consider the strategies, lines of action and results built collectively. Engagement was a central point in building the ToC and the process involved 26 interviews as well as two workshops with around 30 participants for the stakeholders of the initiative.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Theory of Change' is an explanatory framework that outlines how activities are understood to contribute to a series of results to achieve intended impacts. They can be developed and represented in different ways, being an adaptive frame.

In the construction process of the ToC, it was important to consider the socioeconomic context of the Amazon, where there is a need for new development models that improve the well-being of communities, preserving their ways of life and the forest on which they depend, taking advantage of opportunities to carry out undertakings that 'keep the forest standing' in protected areas of sustainable use and indigenous lands (ISA, 2020).

The model chosen for the initiative's ToC was a modified version of the scheme presented by UNICEF in its *Methodological Briefs: Impact and Evaluation 2 - Theory of Change* (Rogers, 2014). We adapted the model to embed it to the context. The original ToC had *implementation strategies* as a starting point, leading to *outputs*, that lead to *outcomes* reaching *impacts*. In the adaptation, we started with *context and motivations*, leading to *strategies* that connected to *Action lines*, that lead to *outcomes* and connected to *impacts* towards a *vision*. From the beginning of the construction of the ToC, we knew that we would need to acknowledge the huge task that is conducting Amazon's economy along a sustainable path. Therefore, ending with *vision* instead of *impacts* felt more connected to the reality that were addressing. The understanding of the context through the interview process with the partners was essential for the choice, as it was imperative to embrace the complexity and the uncertainty in the beginning of the process, and be open to let emerge what the field required, which is one characteristic of a social field approach to effecting systems change (Koenig et al., 2022; Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023). This allowed the model to reflect the needs of the context and also consider the contributions of the interviewed partners.

The initiative's ToC considered the breadth of the Amazon and its socio-biodiversity in its resulting vision: 'Amazon(s) with quality of life, rich biodiversity, and sustainable use of its natural resources'. There are no easy solutions to such huge and urgent challenges, hence the need to structure collaboration spaces wherein collective intelligence, the fruit of dialogue and co-creation can serve as the basis for lasting paths, both for the Amazon and for other biomes of the Brazil and the world.

In this example, a ToC built collectively served to catalyze key stakeholders around a common agenda, creating focus, inspiration, and a critical mass to drive the much-needed transformation forward. The ToC has given the initiative a renewed sense of purpose, built upon their shared vision for positive transformation in the Amazon, where businesses, civil society and local government all have a role to play.

In the past years, I have seen other ToCs successfully used as guidance for social and environmental transformations in the Brazilian scenario. I see value in their use as described above with a participatory approach, probing, and accessing the context. As pointed to by Cimini's and Homem, there is a need to "develop skills for grasping context information, real-time learning and long-term commitment with iterative, flexible and adaptive programming" (2023, p. 154). I agree and corroborate with their view that "Best-practices based on pre-

established understandings, blueprints or linear sequencing of fixed work plans are not helpful for social transformation”. Their proposed journey on PFST aiming to expand on ToCs approach by adding ABSC methodologies using *presence-sense-reconnection*, seems to be a path to integrate inner and outer change with social and cultural transformation. They have a great opportunity, combined with a challenge, to plant a seed in leaders and changemakers in expanding their views of how impact can be generated.

## Closing Remarks

My suggestion to Cimini and Homem is to take into consideration the expanded perspectives needed to foster transformation in Brazil while conducting their experiment. Brazil has its own context considering its history, socio-biocultural diversities, extensive territory with natural unique environments and its great biodiversity, hence any transformative change effort needs to work with, be grounded in, support that context. They can be bold in the PFST journey by enhancing awareness and actions, going beyond the SDGs, and bringing light to Brazil’s position as a global leader in nature-based solutions to face climate change.

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