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CSC – Community Supported Consulting:



#collaborativespace being created - A bright empty room with the remains of its old purpose as a youth center. Some of the remains are mere debris that has served its purpose and is in need of replacement, but some remains are beautiful and shall serve as a reminder that youth forms the future and change is inevitable. Construction is going on, but at this point there is still much room for imagining what will be. The sun shines through the window, lighting up the room and inviting activity to flourish.

PART I: What we have learned from practice

Aim:

Companies hire consultants to help solve problems or implement business solutions when they lack the internal resources, expertise or human and financial capital to address certain issues themselves. Along with global agreements such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as with regulations and policies like the environmental, social and governance (ESG) reporting framework, the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), due diligence audits or the supply chain law, the rise of sustainability consulting is noticeable throughout all different kinds of industries and company sizes. Companies are increasingly looking for support in tackling pressing issues like decarbonization, sustainable supply chains or circular economy business models.

Today all big consulting firms like PWC, Deloitte, McKinsey or Bains & Company offer consulting that specialises on sustainability transformations and aim to advise clients in fostering innovation and economic growth that safeguards our planet and advances sustainability (PWC, 2022; Deloitte, 2022; McKinsey, 2022; Bains & Company, 2022). Methods include establishing transformation-roadmaps, leveraging thought leadership, integrating innovative tools and promoting vibrant ecosystems of industry associations and knowledge platforms (McKinsey, 2022; Bain & Company, 2022). However, it is questionable whether this type of consulting is actually transformative and working towards a more sustainable future and business world. As said on the front page of one of the Big Four consulting firms¹: “Sustainable is the new profitable” (PWC, 2022). The focus remains on traditional capitalistic structures, on economic growth and on competition. If we really want to promote sustainable practices, is it the right or the most effective way then to stick to silo-thinking solutions and to hold onto the concept of competing instead of cooperating? Isn't there a more efficient and resource-wise solution to tackle the urgent problems of the 2020's?

¹ “The "Big Four" is the nickname used to refer to the four largest accounting firms in the United States, as measured by revenue. They are Deloitte, Ernst & Young (EY), PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), and Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG). Aside from auditing services, the Big Four offer tax, strategy and management consulting, valuation, market research, assurance, and legal advisory services.” (Investopedia, 2022).

The concept of CSX allows us to envision how the idea of collaborative problem-solving and non-competitive change-making could be brought to life. The participation at the *CSX meets Lüneburg* event fueled the vision to find out more about how the CSX framework could be transferable and applicable to the consulting industry and sustainability consulting in particular. The encouraging kick-off led to the research question of: “Can sustainability consulting better fulfill its purpose in a CSX context as opposed to the conventional way?” The aims connected to this research question were to determine the status quo of community-supported approaches in sustainability consulting and to increase the visibility of existing organisations. Goals were also to find out how community-based work can lead to fruitful results in sustainability consulting. This was ought to be done by assessing the embodiment of CSX aspects in existing examples from practice.

Approach:

The participation at the *CSX meets Lüneburg* event, where an open space for *CS Consulting* fostered debates around the topic of sustainability consulting, sparked our interest. It also functioned as an introduction to the practice example and role model of the CSX based consulting agency *Sustainable Thinking* (ST). The research process included field observations of the Thinking Circle (TC) online kick-off meetings, facilitated by Sustainable Thinking, followed by a semi-structured interview with the founder of the company, in order to gain deeper insights into already existing real life practice². Through a guide with loosely pre-formulated and/or open-ended questions and predetermined core topics, semi-structured interviews allow room for new topics or focal points to emerge while conducting the interview (Sustainability Methods Wiki, 2021). A second semi-structured interview was conducted with the *Myzelium* network and ecosystem for community based economic activities. Additionally to the interviews, sources that were looked at and embodied in the research were the

² The status quo of CSX-based sustainability consulting firms shows that there are currently barely any business models and approaches of sustainability consulting that embody CSX elements or claim themselves as CSX-based consultancies. The only practice example identified is the Stuttgart-based consultancy *Sustainable Thinking*. The company has undergone extensive training for the purpose of creating and facilitating communities. One of the formats offered are the so-called *Thinking Circles*. The idea of the Thinking Circles is to develop and use synergies between companies, to promote peer learning and to build effective business communities to accelerate sustainable transformation. The aim is to achieve tangible results and to learn from each other throughout the whole process. So far, the TCs cover topics as circular economy, sharing economy or sustainability in particular fields like future-proof climate transformation in the real estate sector.

Myzelium Podcast as a space where projects and visions of the *Myzelium* network are being shared as well as knowledge about community based economy is made accessible. All findings and conclusions, as well as the synthesis of the collected data presented in the following, are derived from these sources. For the transition to the local level, relevant Lüneburg based networks, groups and like-minded groups like *Gut.zusammen* and the *Mosaïque - House of Cultures* were observed and included in the process.

Key Findings:

Customers, investors and the general public expect companies to take responsibility for environmental and social impacts of their business model. All companies have to deal with the pressing issues of a sustainable transformation. These are e.g. increasing importance and aggravated regulation of sustainability reporting (ESG, due diligence, SDGs, etc.). There is an urgent need to hire and train more sustainability experts. However, *neither does the current market supply enough high-skilled experts so far, nor do all organisations have sufficient (financial) resources to establish internal sustainability departments or to work together with consultancies. Therefore, it is crucial to establish corporate communities that support each other in the opportunities and risks of a sustainable transformation (Sustainable Thinking, 2022).*

From the observation it can be seen that peer learning allows exchange at eye level and progress on the basis of practical, agile and creative work. In order to successfully deal with the complex challenges of sustainable transformation, networks of companies from the same industry can be highly valuable. But, up to now, there is a lack of effective intra- and inter-industry company networks. If the goal of developing a symbiotically functioning ecosystem of local businesses would be reached, the surplus of resources of one company can provide the input for another one. The possible fear of information and knowledge outflow would be managed by encouraging *very high transparency between the participating companies but not beyond this peer circle (Sustainable Thinking, 2022).*

As one of the greatest challenges, ST identifies the way companies still think and act. The existing paradigm seems to be competition instead of cooperation.

Therefore, they aim to shift this pattern towards a *dynamic of with each other instead of against each other (Sustainable Thinking, 2022)*. The assumption that builds the justification and foundation of the TCs is that sustainability managers in companies face the challenge of a lack of resources and possibly also a lack of specific knowledge for solving all constantly evolving regulations and policies. A TC is understood as a space where participants collaboratively solve issues they would have to work on anyway. While TCs don't have to be limited to the initial one year frame, ST states that continuation often only works with support and supervision of an executing organisation. Without a *caretaker* and/or *facilitator* projects often tend to die or fade out. *While sustainability is already a huge challenge to stemm, building, maintaining and empowering a community is another major one (Sustainable Thinking, 2022)*.

As CSX also is about defining specific needs of the supplying, as well as of the receiving party, the need in the case of sustainability consulting would be finding solutions for the tasks and problems that come along with sustainable development and the requirement to meet regulations, laws and (local to international) agreements.

Another identified example in the German speaking market is the *Terra Institute*, founded in 2010 in Italy, but also based in Austria, Germany, UK. The consulting company specialises in fostering sustainable transformations. One of their fields of practice is a course for *consultants for global change* with the goal of developing a value alliance and broadening the ecosystem of like-minded change agents and sustainability advisors. As one element, the *Terra community* offers a space of interaction and communication for alumni as well as for all people connected with *Terra*. As the *Terra Institute* believes that *cooperation is the most powerful social tool of humankind*, their mission lays in *promoting systemic change and empowering businesses to take part in the transformation process (Terra institute, 2022)*. The *Terra Institute* shows a holistic approach of advising their clients in external and internal change, but does fully operate according to capitalistic market rules (service-provider with consultants on one and customers on the other site; solidarity not included in pricing model) (Terra institute, 2022). Therefore, even if the *Terra community* does show similarities with principles of CSX, it is more of an alumni network than an actual

community-supported business model. Nevertheless, only through role models like *Sustainable Thinking* and through spreading the word of the importance of communities, can there be a shift towards a *together-we-are-stronger* mentality and a less competition- and self-centered economic system.

The *Myzelium* network shares the perception of *Sustainable Thinking* that the network of people with experience and skills in CSX-based work is still very small. In the opinion of *Myzelium*, a CSX mindset is characterized by the paradigm of being *the person who didn't know it couldn't be done and therefore just did it*. Learning by doing and framing a lack of knowledge and skills not as a problem but rather as an advantage is a key essential in community-based work. Also, a business background is not necessarily needed. Fundamentals for starting a CSX-based project are stated to be clarity to the business model you are aiming for, transparent communication of your and organisation's needs, identification of fellow like-minded members plus *the ability for being brutally honest and transparent*. The goal of CSX-based work in any field of practice is described by the *Myzelium* as the development of successful relationships. Contrary to the current understanding of entrepreneurship, the opinion of *Myzelium* is that it's not only about efficient solutions, but about creating good relationships. Even though there are still only very few organisations with a community based approach in sustainability consulting and this field is perceived as *quite tattered and yet very small*, all in all a lot of CSX projects are about consulting, coaching, giving advice, sharing skills and knowledge and enabling other people.³ This approach could therefore also be transferred and applied to sustainability consulting. (*Myzelium, 2022*)

The great advantage of community-based economy is explained to be its *characteristic of being highly agile, adaptable and resilient, despite being very complex (Sustainable Thinking, 2022)*. *The underlying perception is that the market destroys relationships. Therefore, businesses taking place in it are not crisis-proof (Myzelium, 2022)*. In the beginning of the COVID pandemic, much of the conventional one-on-one consulting was stopped, while TCs were able to continue. Identified future potentials of sustainability consulting in a CSX context are being entrepreneurial while showing solidarity at the same time,

³ For examples like Eifel Myzel, FranzWerk or Inciato see the further readings section below.

taking on ownership – in contrast to just receiving solutions top-down from the consulting firm – as well as being connected with people – especially with like-minded people, who strive for the same things. Key strengths of communities are that they foster a sense of belonging, of visibility and fulfillment as well as an experience of self-efficacy. Long-term collaboration is also found to increase innovation potential.

There are already highly promising initiatives to improve conventional ways of sustainability consulting through CSX. However, the competitive mindset deeply ingrained in the way companies operate has to shift toward a sense for collaboration. To facilitate this, sustainability consultants need to encourage peer learning, engage in trust building, in care work, and in creating spaces for continuous exchange.

PART II: Bringing utopia to the reality

- THE STORY -

Lüneburg is a medium-sized town in northern Germany, inhabited by 78.000 people. Its economy is characterised by Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), tourism and strong municipal companies. It is home to the *Leuphana University* that puts its focus on education, culture, sustainability and management entrepreneurship. It is due to this and the special charm of the city that Lüneburg is the home to lots of sustainability change agents. Some of them you can meet in the *Mosaïque* which is the *house of cultures* in Lüneburg⁴. Everyone is welcome to participate in numerous workshops and events in a respectful, supportive and multilingual environment. Other change agents of Lüneburg you can meet once a month in the cooperatively organised coffee roastery called *AVENIR*. This group called *Gut.Zusammen* is more of a voluntary association of liberally oriented people from the universe of agile coaching. There also is a strongly organised civil society in Lüneburg. *Klimaentscheid, Radentscheid* etc. put constant pressure on politics. On the other side, there are lots of SMEs that are frightened when thinking about the rising extrinsic and intrinsic pressure to work in a sustainable way. Even though these different actors live together in

⁴ The *Mosaïque* is financed by grants, donations and from the budget of the city, which partially outsources its mandatory tasks to the *Mosaïque*.

this beautiful town, there is no stable ground for communication or co-creation. What is most urgently lacking is the connection between companies and their representatives with civil society as well as the possibility to work cooperatively on an eye to eye level. Politics also takes a less progressive or connecting role.

A group of students have found out that cooperation among those diverse actors is the crucial factor to foster the sustainable transition of the region. At the same time, they see regionally based companies as the heart of this undertaking, as they have the greatest leverage for a sustainable transformation of the region. They realize: The conditions are good for Lüneburg to become the very model of sustainable regional development. Somehow, however, a building block is missing to make things move here - at a speed appropriate to the crises of the 2020s. After a semester full of research on the concept of community supported economy applied to the field of sustainability consulting, they state in September 2022: “The highest potential of community supported sustainability consulting lies in the creation of a sustainability consulting ecosystem for your local community.”

They remember that Lana from the *Mosaïque* told them about her plans to found a place called *utopia* within the next year. What if *utopia* would not only become Lüneburg’s first hub for sustainable and social startups as she initially planned? What if *utopia* became the best frame for a sustainability consulting ecosystem for Lüneburg’s community?

- *THE VISION* -

It is September 2023. Lana takes a sip of her coffee and reflects on what has happened since she read the CSX-book exactly one year ago. She was thrilled reading about the best practice in community based sustainability consulting called Thinking Circles by *Sustainable Thinking*. She wishes she had established something similar in her hometown Lüneburg as well. She meets up for a coffee with Alina who was one of the authors of the aforementioned book chapter and who had interviewed *Sustainable Thinking* back then. Ten minutes later, they are brainstorming about founding a Lüneburg division of *Sustainable Thinking*. But then it occurs to them that the Lüneburg universe has different circumstances, preconditions and hurdles than Stuttgart. The most spectacular

sustainability specialists work here in voluntary structures or come from the university. And they are the ones who need a stable and appreciative stage to present themselves and their abilities. A safe space that offers them the framework to develop their highest potential.

Back then they thought they would need two things:

1. Custom-fit networking, trusting conversations and appreciative relationships between sustainability change agents and companies willing to change, but who's representatives are at the very beginning of the journey of sustainability strategies and regularly feel a gun on their chest.
2. A sustainability consulting universe that operates separately from the market, but masters all the languages that are spoken out there. A sustainability learning universe would be rather an appropriate term here.

This is the only way to get to all the perspectives, to the wildest ideas, to the most revolutionary measures and, ultimately, to the new paths that need to be taken in order to achieve a serious sustainable transformation of the region. "Our highest potentials will not be reached within the neoliberal rules of the game around competition as the driving force. We achieve them in strong, fearless communities" - they reasoned.

Regarding their background (Lana as the facilitator of the house of cultures and Alina as an active municipal politician) they could not get out of their perspectives and started listing all those beautiful organisations the civil society of Lüneburg had to offer as well as the great minds they use to meet in order to keep spirits high among the local do-gooders.

Alina said: "You know - fighting for a better future is a goal in itself. The to-do list never ends and either the circumstances or the people - something always sucks the energy out of you. Many of us even contribute this energy voluntarily or work in universes that don't reflect the capitalist rules of the game. No, of course we do not always suffer from this crazy combination of weltenschmerz and the never change-a-running-system-mentality. But we do often enough. And the system (full of old economic narratives) is running alright. But it is not working."

“Ok cool, but let’s stick to the bottom line”, Lana said. “We know that community is the key. It is necessary for the activists, for the intrapreneurs⁵, for the visionaires among us. Additionally, we need to think about the small and medium sized companies here in Lüneburg. Often, they don’t have the money or innovation managers and are not organised in sustainability networks, they cannot employ a sustainability department or hire an expensive consultancy from Hamburg. The companies don’t know where to begin, BUT what they have is the specific knowledge about their organisation, branch and supply chain. This is an asset that is often lacking among external coaches and consultants.”

“Bringing all of them to one table and creating the sustainability consulting ecosystem for Lüneburg is what we want to provide”, they decided.

“Look at this building: Combined with its history as a youth centre, this community space will honor the past by embracing the potential of the present and creating our opportunities for future generations in a way that breaks all boundaries,” Luna added.

- THE IMPLEMENTATION -

A couple of weeks later Lana and Alina invited those beautiful minds of Lüneburg as well as the inspiring people they learned about from the CSX-book. Together with representatives from the *CSX network*, *Sustainable Thinking*, *Myzelium*, *Gut.Zusammen* and the *Leuphana University* as well as with people from *Klimaentscheid* and typical Lüneburg SMEs, they brainstormed the whole night. It was all about their individual and collective needs that must be met to make the greatest contribution to the sustainable transformation possible.

They came up with a first vision and an idea canvas for what should be called *one.table.utopia*. from now on.

Back in September 2023, the vision had materialised. The offer *one.table.utopia* makes is clear: “You as an organisation send your sustainability change agents to the *one.table.utopia*. As long as your organisation really wants to contribute

⁵ "Intrapreneurs are self-motivated, proactive, and action-oriented people who have leadership skills and think outside the box." (Investopedia, 2022).

to the sustainable development of the fields of action you have a direct impact on, it doesn't matter at which point of development the sustainability change agents are standing. Subgroups of diverse stakeholders from our community are formed around the emerging issues/needs. As part of the *one.table.utopia* community you get permanent access to the beautiful downtown space (incl. hot drinks) which is kind of a museum of local best practices and contribute a minimum monthly fee. As part of a subgroup, you participate in a bidding round and pay a solidarity contribution. In each subgroup, either Lana or Alina is the co-provider as every community needs at least one caretaker/facilitator. Usually a coach/activist/university person is the second co-provider.” This creative and productive space can only be possible because of its members. Lana likes to call them co-entrepreneurs so that they can also literally carry the ownership they always bring to the table.

Lana and Alina like to recall how they ended their first coffee conversation back in September 2022. “Creativity needs resources, space and a good atmosphere”, they thought. They mixed this with the need to develop their region sustainably and the treasures that CSX's new economic narrative had brought them. So, dear reader, who are you going to meet for coffee with to co-create the best frame for a sustainability consulting ecosystem for your local community?

PART III: Getting explicit

It can be concluded that, YES, sustainability consulting can work in a community supported way and there is already great potential in improving conventional ways of sustainability consulting through CSX:

Direct relationships are key in the sustainability consultancy context. While this includes the relationships between consultant and consultee, those between consultees are of highest importance and value. Therefore the focus of the consultant shall lie on building a community of consultees and facilitate **co-creation** and peer-learning, where members of the community learn from and help each other in sharing their processes. **Participatory decision-making** can be employed in deciding which subject matters to work on and how to go about it for the purpose of creating shared ownership of the processes and solutions. One-on-one consultancy may still be offered, but it shall be viewed as a

supplement rather than the prevailing form of sustainability consultancy. The setting for consultation may be in-person, as well as online, but shall be limited in terms of regional scope and number of partakers. Physical proximity has shown to enable collaboration and the community shall remain small enough for all members' needs to be addressed. Ideally, long-lasting relationships will form through the process of CSX consulting, where members of consultancy communities find synergies and form partnerships or an entire community may persist past the timeframe of consultancy. However, evidence suggests that for a community to persist, facilitation is needed and this role is best fulfilled by an entity separate to the community of consultees.

Transparency is important for successful collaboration and needs to be exercised to the greatest extent possible. Competitive market structures cannot always be excluded if consultees come from firms operating within them. For this reason it is recommended to contractually set down clear boundaries (like non-disclosure agreements) on which kind of information can be shared in which context. However, sustainability matters seem to concern all actors in all kinds of markets, with companies in different industries facing the same problems, which are not necessarily related to their core business and competitiveness. Therefore, the field of sustainability is especially suitable for CSX consulting. It has to be noted that the competitive mindset is deeply ingrained in the way companies operate and that a collaborative mindset will need to be learned. To facilitate this learning the consultant needs to engage in care work, creating space for continuous exchange and building trust within the community.

Contributions instead of prices and **solidarity-based financing** is appropriate, especially when companies of different sizes come together in a community. Establishing a framework for this and making sure the **costs are covered** requires honest and vulnerable work from the consultant in knowing their needs and standing by them. Commitment to a consultancy community for one year makes sense. This commitment can be **pre-financed** with an annual payment, although quarterly or monthly contributions might be more appropriate to distribute the financial burden on consultees and create a predictable stream of income for the consultant.

Shared risk and responsibility is difficult to realize in a CSX consulting context, since the solutions created will be implemented by individual companies who carry sole responsibility for their actions. However, solutions will generally be co-produced, creating shared ownership of the solutions and shared knowledge about the subject matters. This makes it possible for the consulting community to act as a safety net in terms of a supportive resource for members of the community when facing issues with the implementation of solutions.

Overall, it can be concluded that while the market cannot categorically be excluded in the consultancy of companies acting in it, CSX sustainability consultancy bears great potential for the creation of valuable communities and solutions. Peer learning and co-production are key, as sustainability issues are very similar for actors in all kinds of industries whereas good solutions for sustainability-related problems need diverse perspectives to become effective. A sustainability community offers the additional benefit of increased resilience for its members, where problems can be shared and solved together. Of course, each place has different circumstances, preconditions and hurdles to deal with. Therefore, custom-fit networking, trusting conversations and appreciative relationships between sustainability change agents and companies willing to change are crucial to enable the highest potential of community supported sustainability consulting; the creation of many sustainability consulting ecosystems for local communities.

Now that we have shared our key insights on the potential of community-based sustainability consulting, we would like to close by **reflecting on the research question** that was developed directly after the *CSX meets Lüneburg* event in April 2022. After months of constantly diving deeper into the universe of community based economy, we noticed and have been taught that a central part of operating in the CSX narrative is that you essentially need your community as a detector that strikes as soon as you start acting on the basis of the old neoliberal narrative you were socialised in. As we also find ourselves socialised in these capitalistic market structures and just recently started our own journey with CSX, this is exactly what is reflected in the wording of our research question. By asking whether "our" sustainability consulting is *better* than "theirs", the

question feeds off the traditional underlying logic of competition. But while becoming more familiar with the CSX mindset within the research process, instead of defining the “better”, we have rather looked into benefits and values of CSC compared to “traditional” sustainability consulting. Therefore, a crucial takeaway for us is, how even our use of words and our initial approach is trained in a way of searching for a “better vs. less better”, a “winner vs. loser” answer. So rather than asking, "can sustainability consulting *better* fulfill its purpose in a CSX context as opposed to the conventional way?" further research should focus more on benefits and challenges of CSC, on how to increase the visibility of the new narrative and how to get more people on board for shaping the (sustainability) consulting industry in a community supported way.

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Further Reading

Network

1. **Sustainable Thinking** – <https://www.sustainable-thinking.de>
2. **Myzelium** – <https://www.myzelium.com>
 - 2.1. **Myzelium Podcast** – <https://www.myzelium.com/podcast>
3. **EifelMyzel** – <https://eifel-myzel.de>
4. **Inciato** – <https://www.inciato.de>
5. **Terra** – <https://terra-institute.eu>
6. **Gut.Zusammen** – website in progress
7. **Mosaique** – <https://mosaique-lueneburg.de/en/>
8. **Avenir (Kollektiv)** – <https://insavenir.de/kollektiv/>
9. **Utopia** – <https://www.utopia-lüneburg.de>
10. **Realutopien/Reinventing Society** – <https://www.realutopien.de>
11. **FranzWerk** – <https://franzwerk-tuebingen.de>

Theory

1. **Sustainability Change Agents** – http://fox.leuphana.de/portal/files/12937689/Buhr_Harms_Schaltegger_Management_Competerencies.pdf
2. **Inner Development Goals** – <https://www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org>
3. **Sustainable Companies** – https://www.buecher.de/shop/sachbuch/sustainable-companies-ebook-pdf/oberleiter-evelyn-reifer-guenther-streit-hans-ulrich/products_products/detail/prod_id/44969478/
4. **Ecosocial Transformation** – <https://bia.unibz.it/esploro/outputs/editedBook/Die-Kunst-des-Wandels-Anstze-fr/991005772539301241>