



Summary: Survey Results of the Transformation 2017 Conference to contribute to the Learning for Transformations 2019

PREPARED FOR:

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CONFERENCE SPONSORS:



Introduction

The evaluation team of SustainaMetrix LLC, with contributions from Michael Quinn Patton, has conducted an external assessment of the *Transformations 2017: Transformations in Practice* conference (hereafter referred to as T2017). Results point to a highly effective conference with important lessons for Transformations 2019. Full results have been sent to the T2017 conference organizers and hosts of the next Transformations conference to be held in 2019.

The T2017 conference was hosted by the Centre for Environmental Change and Human Resilience (CECHR) of the University of Dundee and convened on 30 August – 1 September at Dundee, Scotland. T2017 was the third in a biennial series of international conferences focusing on transformations toward sustainability. As stated in the conference brochure, the goal was to create “a better understanding of the practices that facilitate social and environmental transformations at local and at large scales in both developed and developing country contexts.” The design encouraged interaction and the exchange of ideas with a mix of plenary sessions featuring keynote speakers, panel discussions, a transformative practice session, as well as interactive breakout sessions. Six breakout speed talk sessions were convened (145 talks presented in total) followed by in-depth conversations. Three breakout practice sessions were held, (28 practice sessions presented) as experimental mini-workshops on the practice of transformation. A mass transformation practice session blending both a plenary introduction and ten facilitated breakouts was designed to engage all conference delegates. Five T-Labs were held as optional pre-conference full day workshops on the practice of transformation. Other events held in Dundee in conjunction with the T2017 event included the Facing the Future conference designed for doctoral students and post-docs working on transformations in practice and a Transformation Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals held the day after the conference.

The assessment includes two key elements: direct participant experience, extensive participant feedback gained through interviews and a post-conference survey completed by 147 participants. The evaluation team applied a utilization-focused, mixed-methods evaluation strategy grounded in a developmental evaluation philosophy to enhance innovation and use of the results (Patton 2012¹). The evaluation is designed to contribute to “institutional memory” for past (Oslo 2013, Stockholm 2015) Transformation Conferences and develop a continuous learning and improvement culture for future hosts, organizers, funders, sponsors, attendees and non-attendees.

¹ Patton, M. Q. (2012) *Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation*. Sage Publications Inc. CA.

Select Evaluative Comments by Michael Quinn Patton²

I've been studying utilization (of evaluation) for 50 years....We know that there are policy makers not using information and ignoring what's going on with climate change. But I want to focus our attention on the knowledge that you're not using about how to bring about transformation. A lot of what I have heard at the conference was people kind of unsure what we know about this. I think a lot of actionable knowledge about transformation already exists. Again, the problem is not what we don't know, it's what we know and don't use. Personally and individually, I invite each of you to reflect on to what extent are you doing all of what you know you ought to be doing.

...I was impressed with the large number of you involved in various forms of transformation facilitation, the T-labs and a variety of other things. A great many of you are involved as intermediaries and working with stakeholders in a variety of ways. There's a huge knowledge base here about how transformation facilitation is different from other kinds of facilitation that needs to be harvested and synthesized. You know what you're doing, I have found people are modest about that. In part because our kryptonite is yielding to demands for certainty. We all get certainty in this work! Our narrow perspectives, our silos, our timidity about what we know. The overall theme for climate change is a sense of urgency and a sense of scale. We can't wait for definitive findings to go out and do this work. We have to be doing it with what we know and learning while we are doing it. Which is part of the change in research that came out of the Three Horizons work.

...What we found is that when we combine research findings, theory, practice with the evaluation findings and when we do so across disciplines, that the triangulation reveals a great deal of actionable knowledge. This conference has manifest that quite dramatically. I want to mirror back to you some of what I think we know and its implications, things that I've heard here and with the addition of my own framing... This will give you a sense that actionable knowledge already exists and we need to get on with doing it.

...A bit about how we got here from my perspective. When I first got into this work at the beginning of the field of evaluation we were focused on getting people to articulate their activities in relationship to outcomes. ...We found that over time that projects, which were based upon activities and outcomes and logic models and SMART goals, are largely successful when they can cut themselves off from and protect themselves from the dysfunction of the larger system they are a part of. They fail when they cannot do that and they are crushed by the dysfunctional system. In either case projects don't change systems. And then we started to get into impacts. Longer term, broader effects on systems. We still found that broadening and lengthening the impacts don't change systems.

So, we find ourselves talking about transformations as a way of reframing major systems change in fairly short periods of time, and framing the work that way. But what I have heard over and over and over again, is after framing the work in terms of transformation, what your actually describing is doing projects. The

² These quotes were from the plenary talk given by Michael Quinn Patton on the final day of the conference.

project mentality is insidious. It's what funding is based on, it's what we know how to manage, it's what we know how to evaluate. The linear bounded narrowness of that is what a lot of you are actually doing and simply wrapping bows of transformation around the work. I repeat that I think the evidence from around 50 years of evaluation is that projects don't change systems. They in fact get isolated by or get crushed by this. The project mentality is part of what we have to transform... We haven't been trained well in (systems thinking)... most evaluators, are not trained in complexity based evaluation. They will force what you are doing into a traditional project box, because that's what they know how to do... You need to resist that. They come with a certain amount of power. You need to resist that. It doesn't make sense and it will do damage to transformation to stick it back in a project box.

Do your work to find the complexity-based approaches to management, evaluation and implementation that are true to transformation and watch for the allure of the project mentality. It is powerful. It is the sea sirens. We've heard a lot about learning here, purposeful learning. Real learning occurs when you are purposeful in your learning. It requires mindfulness, and attention to take in data in an ongoing manner. As Pasteur famously said, "chance favors the prepared mind." Part of the insidiousness of the project mentality is the notion that you have to have goals and targets. Goals and targets interfere with learning in complex dynamic systems. They create narrow blinders, they distort resources, and the capacity to actually engage in innovative and disruptive activity in complex dynamic spaces, for real transformation is not based upon pre-determining where you are going to end up. That puts you back in a project mentality.

I review virtually all the major evaluation texts and a lot of research texts. The most common story in all of those books is Alice in Wonderland and her encounter with the Cheshire cat. She shows up and she's lost and the Cheshire cat appears and there's a roundabout, a road going in all directions. Alice asks the cat, "Which road should I take?" The cat says, "Where are you trying to get to?" And she says, "I don't know." And the Cheshire cat says, "Any road can take you there." It's made to make fun of people who don't have SMART goals and logic models and ridicule them. Let's imagine at this conference we are at that roundabout together, not alone, but together. We are surrounded by pathways and that we don't know where those roads go, and that we all choose roads and set out to explore them and are in communication with each other, talking about what we are finding as we go down those unknown roads and figure out what the landscape is and how we are connected.

... We have to deal with nation-states but we don't have to allow them to be the front and center of everything. When we are talking about transformation, we are talking about transforming everything -- the formal and informal systems, the top level and the bottom levels, spiral dynamics. A lot of what I find from top down reporting is focused on nation states. That's part of the downside to the way the SDGs are being handled in some cases. The true global perspective in the work that you do, in evaluation and research, becomes important.

We know that context and diversity are critical. Being able to adapt and connect context. Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize for her work in economics and in her acceptance speech she said social scientists need to recognize that individual behavior is strongly affected by the context in which interactions take place rather

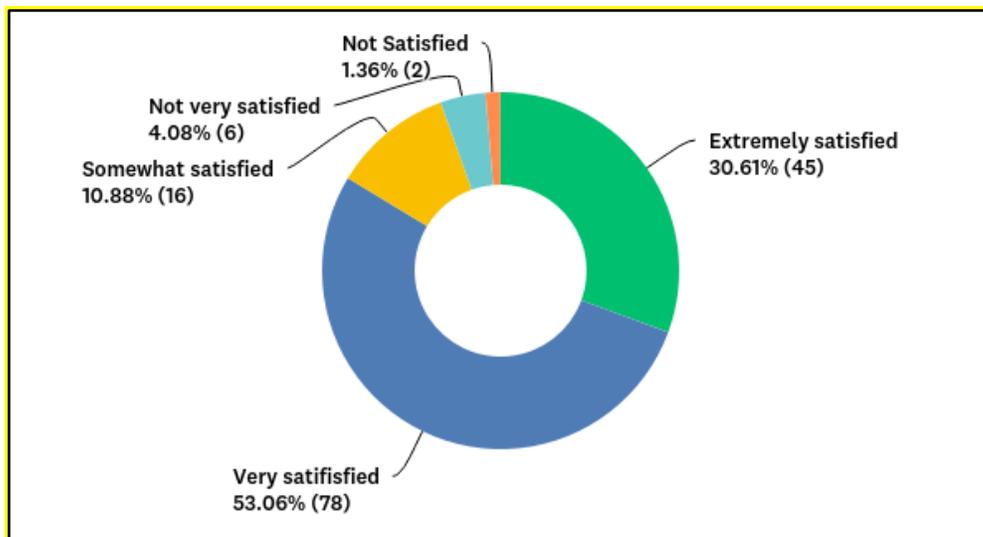
than being solely the result of individual differences. The implication of this is that there are no best practices. Best practices means context doesn't matter. A bunch of folks refer to best practices in their sessions. It's a political term, it's a PR term, it's an insidious term and it's wrong... The question is not: 'does it work?' The more nuanced question is: 'what works for whom, in what ways, under what conditions, with what results in what context?' Transformation will be about connecting contexts. There are no best methods, no gold standards, the methodological hierarchy is insidious.

...Transformation can't be defined, it's contextual. It doesn't need to be defined. It's a sensitizing concept. It's something that invites us to pay attention to dialogue about it. You can define a carrot but you cannot define a garden. You can define what an individual human being is but you cannot define a family. These are sensitizing concepts. They are ideas that we pay attention to and make sense of in dialogue. Get comfortable with the ambiguity. My overall feedback is that actionable knowledge exists, there is a lot of knowledge about transformative facilitation. The project mentality dominates. Traditional evaluation is a barrier to transformation and you need to fight it. Best practices aren't. I want to invite you as you leave the conference and continue to produce and use knowledge to think about what you know that is actionable and what we know together that is actionable. To help us collectively get over our timidity, our yielding and demands for certainty, our narrow perspectives, and our silos.

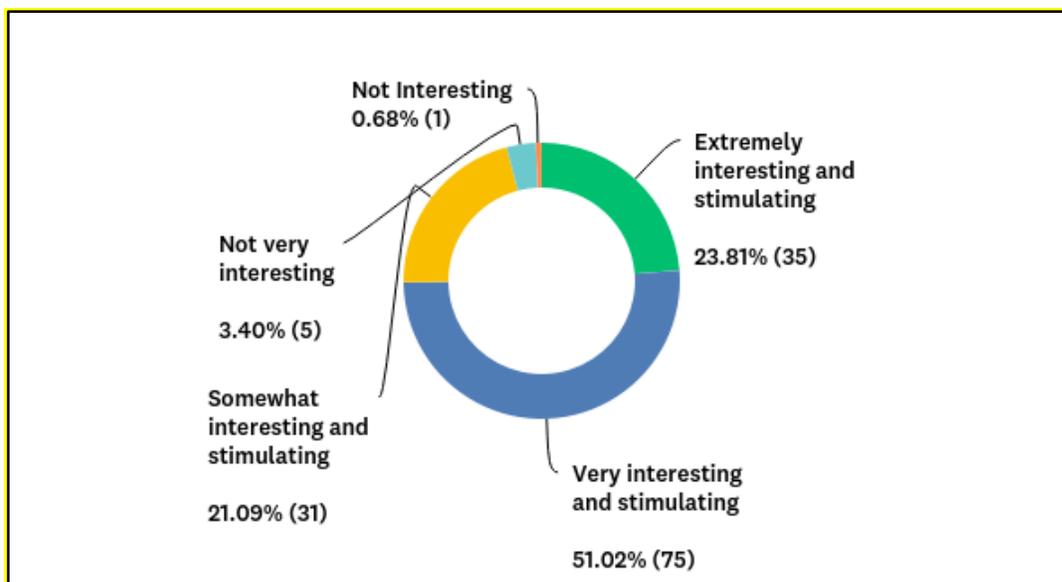
Select Conference Metrics

Transformation 2017 Conference Attendees	342 delegates
Abstracts	350 abstracts submitted
Speed Talks	284 submitted/ 193 accepted/ 91 rejected/ 145 included in program
Practice Sessions	Total of 59 submitted/ 33 accepted/ 26 rejected/ 28 in program
Countries represented at conference	34 countries represented
Facing the Future (Pre-conference event)	Attended by a total of 50 delegates
T – Labs (Pre-conference event)	A total of 11 submitted/ 5 accepted (and ran)/ 6 rejected. Attended by 94 delegates.
SDG Forum Meeting (Post-conference event):	23 attendees
Total number of attendees including pre and post conference events	404 (342 attending T2017, 17 extra from FtF/ 37 extra from T-Labs/ 8 extra from SDG meeting)
Survey Response Information	Response rate = 43% (147 respondents)

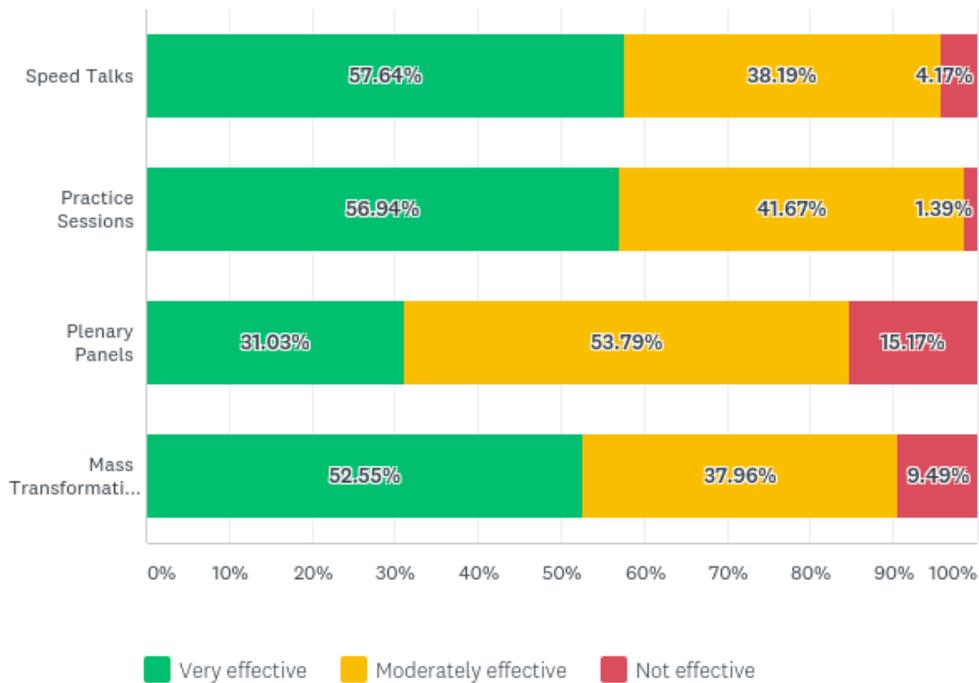
Question 1: Considering the conference as a whole, please rate your satisfaction with Transformations 2017. (n=147)



Question 2: How interesting and stimulating was the material presented at the conference? (n=147)



Question 3: Please rate the overall effectiveness of the following formats (n= 147)



Question 4: Based upon your experiences this week, what key outcomes/outputs should the Transformations 2017 conference produce that would contribute to transformations in practice?

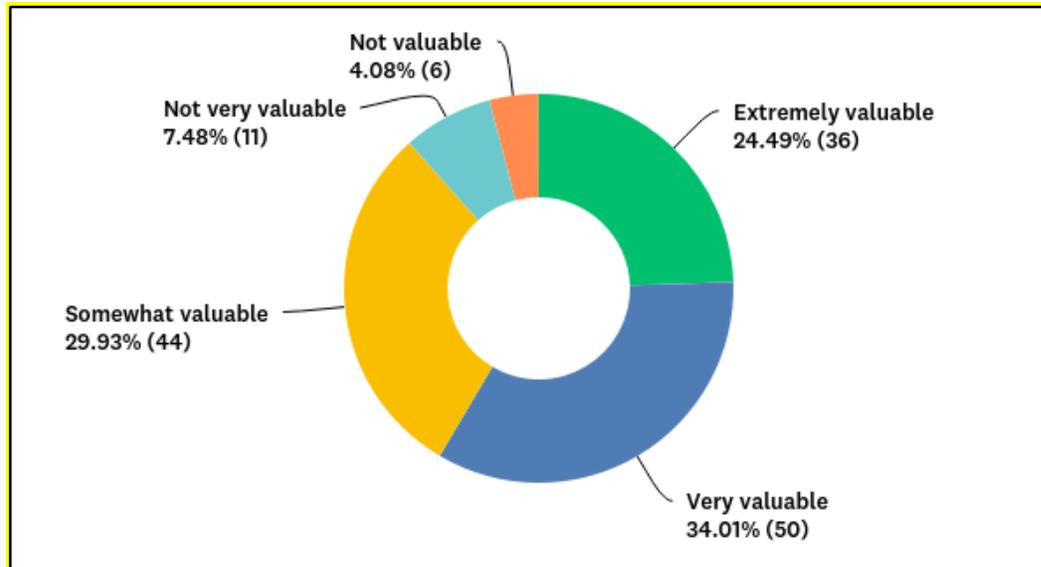
43% of survey respondents (63 people) provided three sets of suggestions regarding what they consider should be products of the 2017 Transformations conference, 66% of survey respondents (96 people) provided two sets of responses, and 34% of survey respondents (50 people) provided one suggestion. Comments refer to network development, specifics on “how to” engage in transformation (25 comments), academic outputs (17 comments), communication tools (19 comments, facilitating actual projects and programs (15 comments), new conceptual and theoretical paradigms (7 comments), manifesto on action/experiential/action research (6 comments), mind-heart connections through creative and artistic experiences (6 comments), and work on how to hold conferences effectively while also reducing flying (5 comments).

Question 5: What was the most useful learning/outcome that you gained from the Transformations 2017 conference?

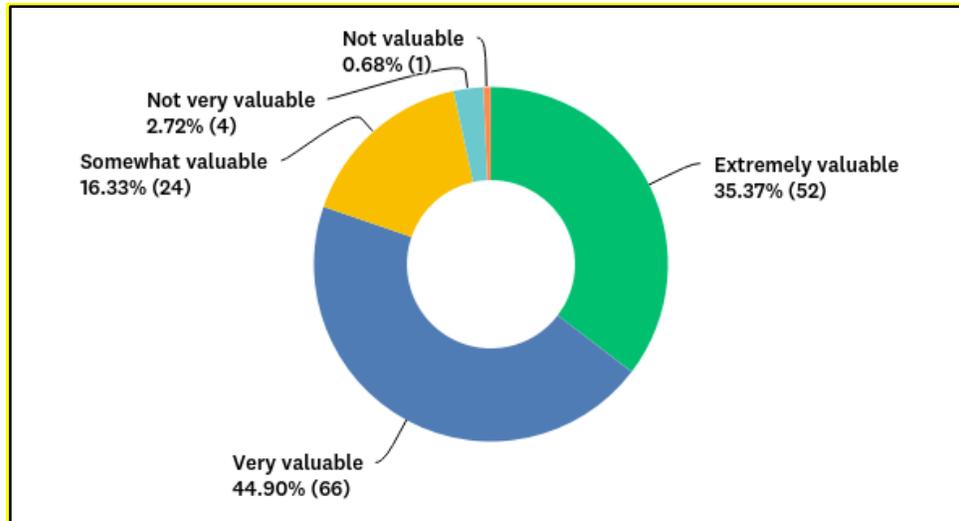
86% of survey respondents (126 people) provided a comment regarding a specific learning outcome and are presented below in their entirety. While some mentioned specific events at the conference and mentioned specific methods such as Three Horizons, most referred to the conference and how it would contribute to the development of areas such as network development (28 comments), integration of arts (21 comments), integrating mind and body (15 comments), moving from theory to practice (14 comments), connections with other 'early stage' researchers (7 comments), new methodologies (6 comments), and importance of story and narrative as a driver of transformation (4 comments).

Question 6: In terms of advancing your understanding of transformation, how valuable was this conference? (n=147)

59% of survey respondents felt that the conference was very (34%) or extremely valuable (25%) in advancing understanding of transformation. The remainder (41%) was a mix of people who did find some value but were already deep in their understanding of transformation or found the conference to be difficult to further their understanding.

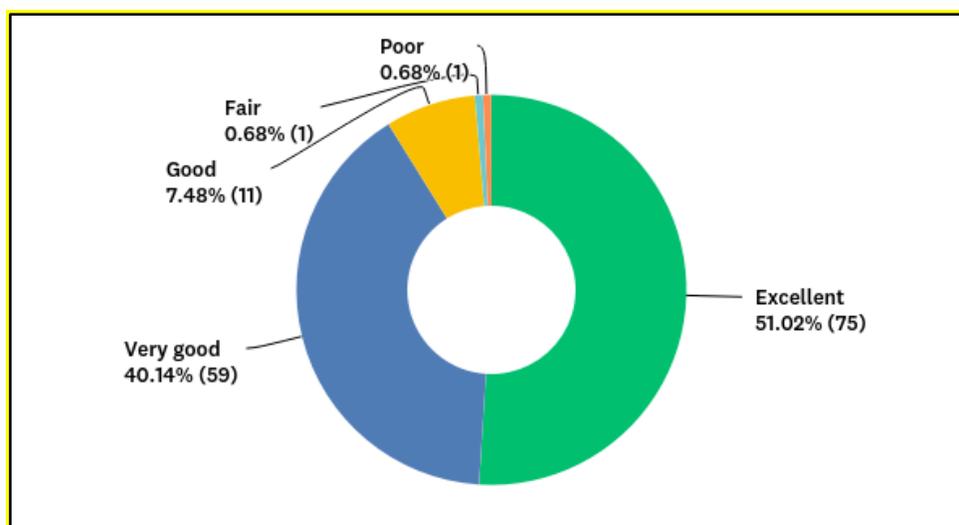


Question 7: How valuable were the networking opportunities at the event? (n=147)



80% of survey respondents felt that the networking aspects of the conference were either very or extremely valuable to them. This is a very positive response given the fact that there were many people who voiced concern over the long days and full agenda. Even with a full schedule, people managed to find great value in the networking opportunities.

Question 8: Quality of the organization of the event? (n=147)



Question 9: What aspect of the Transformations 2017 conference should be part of Transformations 2019?

Of a total of 133 comments, respondents emphasized speed talks (found in 43 comments), the use of art and music (found in 39 comments), and practice sessions (found in 33 comments).

Question 10: What aspect of the Transformations 2017 conference didn't work well and should not be part of Transformations 2019?

Of a total of 111 comments, respondents identified panel discussions (found in 21 comments), speed talk sessions (19 comments), and food service (17 comments) as the areas that didn't work well.

Question 11: What innovations would help to enhance engagement and learning at Transformations 2019?

Of 86 total respondents to this question, 32 respondents provided three suggestions, 59 respondents provided two suggestions, and 27 respondents provided only one suggestion each. Recommendations include addressing language barriers, increasing arts and culture, more networking opportunities, ways to improve practice sessions, and better communication and follow-up regarding the overall purpose of the event for greater pre- and post-engagement.

Question 12: What suggestions do you have for ensuring the conference is relevant and useful for practitioners as well as academics?

94 responses were provided and focus on significantly increasing the outreach and engagement of practitioners, reducing the academic focus, and ways to incorporate specific practices into the event. A representative word cloud is provided to illustrate types of responses.



Question 13: What would you suggest as the key themes of Transformations 2019?

104 respondents to the survey provided a suggestion, with 50 suggesting a variety of different themes, 72 suggesting two potential themes and 32 suggesting a single new theme. Responses varied considerably with some common areas, including a continuation on the theme of the actual practice of transformation and how to learn how to design, implement, measure and continue transformative work. The word cloud below reflects a text analysis of the primary themes suggested by respondents

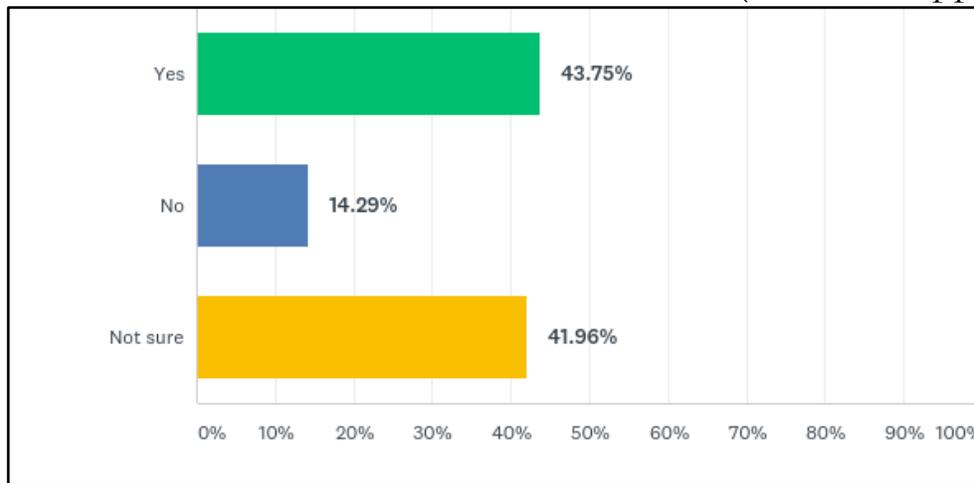


Question 14: Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns that organizers for Transformations 2019 should be aware of?

57 people provided a wide range of responses reflected in the word cloud below. There was positive response to the next event being held in the global south (Chile) as well as comments regarding travel and cultural opportunities. Some noted the need to reduce waste and carbon footprint from these conferences while others felt this conference was moving in a more transformational direction. Some expressed gratitude and others noted content gaps.



Question 15: Do you have any concrete new (second or third horizon) ideas or collaborative initiatives that you plan to put into action as a result of the conference? (n= 112, skipped = 35)



44% of respondents (49 people) indicated they have a concrete initiative that they are planning to implement directly as a result of the conference, which is rather remarkable. 46 people provided examples of these intentions and 60 people provided contact information who will be contacted to help facilitate collaboration towards these goals. The following are examples of types of responses provided:

- I am thinking of adapting the climate change conversations by Scottish Gov't for a Cape Town/ S. African context. Also, would love to continue dialogues on inner transformations, and creativity and transformation.
- Involving some people met in organization of practice sessions; keeping in touch on common themes of research.
- It doesn't involve anyone new, but an existing contact and I have now applied for some (very small) funding to run a workshop on creative practice and transformation to sustainability to pull together some thoughts.
- Trust more what I consider important to do in my role as researcher, and just do it :)
- I will try to bring some of the design elements to conferences back in my country.
- Expanding of H3Uni offerings, and creation of an organisational approach to enable this.
- A collaborative project on meta-narratives with participants in the SDG Transformation Forum that followed the conference.