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## Episode Information

Topic: Transition Governance

Hosts: Ian M. Cook, Kate McGinn

Guest: Derk Loorbach of DRIFT – The Dutch Research Institute for Transitions

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## Transcript

### Episode Introduction (0:00 – 1:28)

Ian: Welcome to episode two of Urban Arena, a podcast about sustainable and just cities. I'm Ian Cook, and I'm joined by Kate McGinn. How're you Kate, and more importantly, where are we?

Kate: I have wet feet and we are standing outside the Hungarian parliament.

Ian: And we're here not because we like to stand in large squares in the rain, or at least not only because we like to stand in large squares in the rain, but because today we're going to talk about failures of traditional governance structures.

Kate: Exactly. When faced with the biggest challenges of our time, politicians and mainstream political parties have, by and large, failed to rise to this challenge.

Ian: But, you know, we're not here to blame individual politicians or political parties as much fun as that might be. But rather, we're here to discuss the failures in existing structures of governance, not just here in Hungary, but pretty much everywhere when it comes to building just and sustainable futures.

Kate: But who do you want to speak to about it? I'm guessing not a politician.

Ian: Nah, rather someone who does something a bit different. I want to speak to someone who thinks about governance and how to transition to a sustainable future.

Kate: So someone who works on transition management as governance approach?

Ian: Exactly. And I know just the man. His name is Derk Loorbach, or at least that's how I pronounce his name, and he's an expert on transition management as a governance approach. But he's in Rotterdam, he's not here, and he's at a real-life Urban Arena.

Kate: So you should go and meet him!

Ian: I will. And the train leaves in 20 minutes. I'm going to sprint to Keleti train station. Bye!

Kate: Bye!

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[Music]

### Guest Introduction (1:30 – 2:28)

[Sound of phone dialling]

Ian: Hi Kate!

Kate: Hi!

Ian: So here I am on the train to Rotterdam, I made the train on time, and I'm off to meet Derek at the Urban Arena, but I didn't get time to read up on him before the interview, which is very unprofessional of me, I know, but the Wi-Fi here is really terrible. So I'm wondering, could you help me out?

Kate: Absolutely. Derk is director of DRIFT, the Dutch Research Institute for Transitions and Professor of Socioeconomic Transitions at the Faculty of Social Science, both at Erasmus University, Rotterdam. Derk is one of the founders of the transition management approach as a new form of government for sustainable development. He has over 100 publications in this area and has been involved as an action researcher in numerous transition processes with government, business, civil society and science.

Ian: It's amazing how you had that just on hand just when I called! Thanks so much Kate!

Kate: [Laughs] Good luck!

### Introducing the Location (2:28 – 4:39)

Ian: Okay, so I'm standing here with the Derk Loorbach, and we're surrounded by a lot of sort of very passionate, very noisy and very... um, yeah hopefully inspirational change makers. Where are we right now?

Derk: Yeah, we're in Rotterdam, which is a city in the Netherlands, specifically in the neighbourhood called Katendrecht, which is gentrifying area, and we're here in the Verhalenhuis Belvédère, which is a very historic place of immigration, of cultural diversity. But it's also now a local initiatives by people from the neighbourhood that crowdfunded this building and to occupy it for social purposes. So a lot of cooking, a lot of communities coming together and a lot of meetings. So it's like being a guest in the home of the people of Katendrecht.

Ian: That's great. And what are all these guests doing? I mean, there's people from cities, from all across Europe, and they're all busily discussing stuff. What is it? What is it that they're talking about?

Derk: Yes, they are all working on their- they're the fellows, as we call them, from the project; from UrbanA. And they are all change makers, some in policy, some in local initiatives on different topics, food, energy, water, whatever, trying to create some kind of local, meaningful, transformative change. And the reason that they are here is that we can not only help them change experie- exchange experiences, inspire each other and help each other, but also to see if there are lessons to be learnt from all these local

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experimentation towards maybe more generic policy support or interventions or- and to bring those local stories to a higher level or maybe to a bigger audience.

Ian: Well as great as these people are and as interesting the topics and the ideas that they're discussing, it's a little bit too noisy. So, let's make our way upstairs and then we can have a proper discussion.

### What is Transition Governance? (4:40 – 10:10)

Ian: So I'm very happy to welcome Derk Loorbach to the Urban Arena's podcast. And I want to dive straight in and talk about, I guess, the thing which occupies your waking moments because you're- because you think about it a lot and that's transition governance. And so what is it? And why should we be thinking about it ourselves?

Derk: Yeah, very happy to be here, first of all. It's basically two things: one is a philosophy of change and change makers. So it's more analytical academic idea on- on where change comes from and how it is organised. But we also have a very practical, more applied side, let's say, action research, and it's basically working with change makers to try to experiment with ways on how to accelerate and guide sustainability transitions.

Ian: Okay so it's transition from what and to what?

Derk: Well, the main- the main academic answer would be it's a transition away from an unsustainable situation. So the idea of transition, it's not change in general, but it's a shift from a dynamic equilibrium to a completely different dynamic equilibrium. And this shift is always non-linear. The basic insight is that in a societal system like energy or cities or mobility, we've organised things in a particular way that we cannot sustain indefinitely. So we know about climate change and biodiversity loss, those are symptoms of how we have organised our economy basically based on fossil fuels on linear growth, and we know on a finite planet that's not possible.

And the idea is that transformative change potential builds up as this unsustainability increases and there are two sides to it. One is- becomes more and more problematic to continue business as usual, and on the other hand, more and more people start to explore alternatives. So they come up with new technologies, new lifestyles, new business models, new value systems, new concepts. So that's why we find it so interesting that we don't have to think about the solutions but there are people everywhere that are trying to constitute or build up a new type of economy.

Ian: Okay, so then your- I say that's quite on an abstract level, but then let's- let's be a bit more practical. So then it's like- so then what you're doing is trying to find those people who are thinking about solutions or ideas in different localities and find a way to- to what? to make that happen or to share or...?

Derk: Yeah. So basically a transition is two dynamics or two processes that work into each other. One is this increasing destabilisation and disruption of the status quo, the regime, as we call it. And on the other hand, there's this build-up of alternatives – in our jargon, niches – and the actual transition is when these two forces come together; and it makes it very political and tense and also socially unstable and uncertain.

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So it's- this- what then happens is uncertainty increases and a relatively short period of very chaotic structural change appears. And nobody is really in control and certainly not in control of the outcomes and the direction, and the fundamental question is who is then in charge or who influences the outcomes and how can we then empower and strengthen the mechanisms that help us move towards more desired outcomes?

Ian: Okay.

Derk: I can make it practical, but I'm- I'm cautious deliberately because it's- it's also a search process where as an action researcher, we should be also very open and humble with regards to predictions or find identifying solutions as better or the best.

Ian: for sure, because exactly, you want to draw from the people who are responding to the societal changes themselves right?

Derk: Yes. And they are often working on this solution, these frontrunners or change agents. They- they also have- always have a mindset that is- is about trying to push a solution. As action researchers, we look at these initiatives more as experiments. So, they tell us something about how the regime works or doesn't work, what motivates people to look for change, but also on how these alternatives might work.

And interestingly, these initiatives, they- they develop based on certain principles and mechanisms and tools that can travel. So what we see is a lot of these initiatives are often very locally rooted and specific. At the same time, they also collaborate across boundaries and often on the global scale in networks, and they organise conferences and platforms and manuals and they travel from one place to another. So we call it trans local diffusion. But it's- it's we see emerging global communities of transformative change.

### Who Contributes to Transitions? (10:11 – 13:25)

Ian: So you have- uh I'm just trying to get an idea then the types of groups who are trying to come up with, you know, solutions or ideas or sometimes quite local or sometimes trans-local. Is there any sort of shared characteristics of these groups? That they are coming from a certain social class or, you know, certain political environment, or are we talking really more generally?

Derk: Well, that's, uh, you might say in general there is this green bubble or a progressive kind of higher educated people that are not struggling for survival, but have something to give, but it's also in their character to give. So it's a particular you could say it's a transformation elite, um- and I'm all for it. But at the same time, an actual transition implies mainstreaming. And often these innovations are- we also define them as alternatives to the norm, which means that they are more expensive, they are socially perhaps awkward or alternative, they don't work that well, they're not so commercial. So there's all sorts of aspects or characteristics to a lot of these innovations that make them alternative to the norm.

Ian: Mm hmm.

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Derk: So the transition governance debate is also a lot about mainstreaming and how we take the lessons learnt from all the experimentation of these- these change makers to institutionalise it, to mainstream it. So eating a more healthy organic diet that is low meat and high in seasonal, regional food, how do we mainstream that? Also breaking through the powers of the industrial food system.

Same for mobility. We know we can design cities in such a way that they prioritise walking, cycling. We have all these shared platforms. We can go to zero emissions. So, potentially we could have cities that organise a collective mobility system that reduces 60-70 percent of the cars in the city and is zero emissions and inclusive in a way that is affordable and accessible for all citizens. So that's possible.

So we can imagine these futures. And then the governance challenge, of course, becomes how to organise that, because these food cooperatives or these cycling initiatives- they're vulnerable, they're small and they're not supported by the market. And the government, at least in our country, is facilitating the market-

Ian: In most countries, right?

Derk: In most countries, yeah, so they don't really have a strong vision from which they also use their authoritarian instruments to change. And that's all- that because the government is part of the problem in a way or a part of the regime.

### Democracy: The Formal and Informal (13:30 – 17: 45)

Ian: Yeah, yeah. I mean- and then you could- so that's- that's certainly one way of reading the government and probably one I would sympathise with. But other people might say, okay, but they are actually- they're elected, you know, and they're elected – assuming we're talking about democracies, and I'm guessing for the most part, the work that you do is in democracies, because this is where, you know, ideas supposedly can move from being, you know, just an idea and making its way into something that actually has power on the ground – and people say, okay, you're talking about a group of change makers who you said yourself were often relatively elite, certainly they have the possibility in their lives to experiment with things because they have- they don't have these pressing material concerns, and so you're taking, you know, these sort of, you know, elite green- elite concerns and you're trying to find ways to subvert existing democratic principles. You know, surely you want to bring about change, you should be using existing democratic governance models and not trying to make new ones which sound a little bit undemocratic.

Derk: Yes. Then you have to make a distinction between the formal democracy and the informal democracy. So, uh, I think often the formal democracy is made too important. Uh, it's the election cycle. It's the politicians. It's the way we formally take decisions. And I find it a very important mechanism, but it's completely designed for stability. So it's- the formal democratic system is geared towards short term incremental improvements and facilitating the market. Um, the transition governance idea is based on a big debate that emerged in the 1990s about the network society and the democratic deficit, they called it. So the idea that- and scholars started to become aware that around this formal system, there's a lot of stuff also happening. Lobbying, networking companies turn- influencing the agenda, all sorts of advocacy. And the idea of transitions is- let's try to

use this kind of self-organising power in society for a good cause so you can also use transition management like the neoconservatives in the US did. They used the same kind of logic to basically get Trump into a position, create a new discourse, start experimentation, create networks, and then start to influence the formal institutions in the system.

So we see more as complementary. And these alternatives that we look at, they are often driven by- by people with good values. They want to do something good for society, but that also makes them sometimes naive and less strategic. So the transition governance idea is to strategize this undercurrent in society that is actually already building a sustainable economy and then thereby create the policy support base and the ideas and the programme that can then be fed into the formal democratic system. So a lot of decisions need to take place there.

But if people themselves decide to leave the car at home and drive their bike, they don't need a politician. And if then a couple of people create a bike sharing scheme that gives access to other people, they also don't need a politician. So a lot of the decisions are individual decision that we can make as citizens or in groups. And yes, so to me, the democratic check is more- is it good for people and as much people as possible rather than is it approved by some bureaucrat or some politician for which I probably didn't even vote.

### Challenges and Opportunities of the Trans-local (17:49 – 22:38)

Ian: Yes [laugh] but that's it. I mean, and I think actually I mean... I'm- I'm pushing you a bit like this, but I actually feel the critique of, you know, people involved in green or environmental issues is somehow being maybe too middle class is somehow a little bit of an unfair critique when you think about the forces that they're fighting against, which is very often not actually, I don't know the masses of working class, if you like, but it's actually the powerful corporate industrial elite, the real elites of the world.

And those are the people who are, of course, investing heavily in supporting certain politicians or certain political parties and are very much invested in traditional or-traditional whatever, the last 150 years or so, economic structures and democratic structures. And so this- so the battle is- is very heavily weighted actually on their side. And I suppose, and this is probably something that you get asked a lot, so you see something super interesting, super local, maybe becoming trans-local, and you have to say, okay, I can maybe you can scale it up to a certain degree to a city level or a city or, you know, a regional level, how do you face the challenge or how- how do you tackle the sort of global structures that are pitted against it in terms of interest?

Derk: Yeah, um, that's the interesting thing about this trans-local, it's like a micro growth that is happening also below the radar, you might say, but also slowly but surely undermining the power base of these global regimes. And like you said, these elites of- of a fossil linear global economy of growth, basically, uh, they are also very clever in mobilising the working class against change. Um, so it's also a battle of ideas.

And, yeah, how is it happening in developing countries? I think theoretically, but also from our experience, there is much more space for a rapid emerging growth of these trans-local communities. So, uh, because of these working classes, and these effect

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institutions are maybe less developed or less present, so if people get access to the knowledge and the capacities to build their own- create their own new sustainable economy, that is trans-local, uh, if it can happen anywhere in, for example, in Surinam where I'm lecturing or, uh, we're doing projects in sub-Saharan Africa in slums, um, there's a great movement called Slum Dwellers International, and it's about this. So the marginalised and the oppressed give them the tools to self-organise, to become independent. And it sounds idealistic, but we can see that in a very practical way in many places.

Ian: Mm hmm. And I guess it's also like we- when we think about solutions and existing solutions that are out there, if you are, you know, part of the, you know, sub-Saharan Africa, I mean, the context I know much better is India, but you find cities in India, you talk about very much like, locally collected water – collecting rainwater, treating it to a certain degree and using it. These are the sort of things when we- when we're talking like in- in Europe, like about trying to have cities that actually, you know, produce what they consume and so on. These things actually already exist in many places in the world.

Derk: Yes.

Ian: And so like there are there are ideas there.

Derk: And, uh, actually we're also involved in water projects in India. And one of the things that the new urbanisation, they import the Western urbanisation and to some extent and put in concrete, pipes are everywhere and they are destroying or neglecting their old to rainwater harvesting infrastructures with natural filtration and ecological purification, and then and it all gets clogged with plastics and then- but there's quite a number of growing initiatives that are rediscovering this and involving the community in appreciating these old structures and then adding maybe new technology. So sometimes we say these trans-local shifts towards a sustainable economy, whatever it looks like, we're figuring it out as we move along, it has a sense of forward to the past. So we need to reconnect with the local with a lot of old practises, local identities, but we can combine it now with new technologies, and this is the exciting discovery process that we are on, on a global scale, I would say.

### Alternative Economic Systems (22:40 – 28:11)

Ian: Mm hmm. Yeah. Okay so I have to two final questions, and they're both related to the idea of transition about- about what that might mean for people and how people might think about it. So one time we're talking about a transition to an environmentally sustainable future. Does that also mean a transition to something that's not capitalism?

Derk: Uh, that's, uh, that's not a final question- that's an opening in a whole new book. I think definitely- so transition is in the eye of the beholder. So, uh, it really depends on where you are and what you look at whether or not you can call something a transition. And the academic point would also be that's for future historians to assess whether they would call this period a transition or not. To me, it's without any doubt that there are elements in our capitalist system that are unsustainable. And I see all sorts of signs of change. But there is a hardcore regime that, of course, will fight to the end to prevent it.

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Ian: Yeah. So the reason I never think about transition, which interests me, is that when I first started hearing the word a lot, it wasn't in the- the realms of sustainability, but is actually when I moved to live in the former socialist parts of Europe and in Hungary in a post-transition or, you know, whatever, you know, and this is very much a transition from, quote unquote, "state socialism" to the market economy. And after about 20, 25 years of this people became very tired of hearing the word transition. And it's like stop calling it transition, because actually this is the reality, you know, because you could also people were blaming things on the transition. Some people saying, yeah, okay, there's corruption, but that's just because of the transition or, you know, yeah, oh, there's too much pollution in the river. But that's because of the legacy of the of the old regime and its transition.

Derk: That's really a difficult problem because for us, so, whether you call it transition or transformation, it doesn't really matter. We get stuck with the word transition, but it's a particular mental model based on which you can have a more structured dialogue and analysis of a very complex, messy process of societal change. So it's in a way sensemaking device, but in the jargon and how we use it, it becomes something that we want. In your context, in Eastern European, I think it's definitely a process that we can analyse as a transition, but not as a sustainability transition, because you shifted to a different type of regime. That's also not sustainable because people are unhappy, it's not working. So they start thinking about the next transition, I would say.

Ian: Yeah, but I mean, my- my maybe my point where the disappointment comes from and maybe this is where the hard sell is going to be about transitioning to a sustainable future, is that there was there was an end point in mind when this sort of, you know, political economic transformation take place. That was an idealised end form, which was, you know, the Western European utopia, which never existed, but at least that was a- there was a point where people said, okay, we are moving to that. And now you're in a moment where- and we talked about a bit like having used the word experiment a few times or, you know, so- this is and non-linear right? So it's a- it's a nonlinear transition. And so this might be quite scary for many people. You're asking people to create the leap of faith. You say, okay, even assuming that people understand that current structures are destroying the planet, leap out into the unknown like... this is- and this is- how do you deal with this?

Derk: That's- that's also the explanation of a lot of the societal anxiety and uncertainty and unrest. But what happened in the past and in transition that we started is that this convergence on what B is. So if you think of a transition as approach from A to B, then what B is- is also an emergent process. So you call the Eastern European transition a more planned one of people from A to B. Yeah, but basically it was disruptive. So it happened to a lot of regimes and then the default was the Western model. So, like, what my- my point, though, in developing countries, why wasn't there an alternative sense of direction, um, of your own kind of new blended economy, for example?

So I would say this direction of sustainability, sustainable economy, and the idea that the sustainable economy is possible, that is part of what we tried to achieve with transition governance as well. To- and to me, this process is almost inevitable, which doesn't mean that we can predict the outcomes or the pathway or the speed, we could try to influence that, but that we are shift- moving away from this fossil linear economy

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and that more and more people start to discover these alternatives – that is happening, and inevitably that will lead to increased momentum... and resistance.

Ian: [Laughs]

Derk: So the fight is still on. All right. Sorry.

Ian: No, it's great! It's good to end on an optimistic note, right? Resistance is there, and, you know, structural- structural conditions for change are there. It's what we do with it, right?

Derk: Yeah.

Ian: Wonderful. Thank you so much, Derk.

Derk: You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

[Music]

### Discussion (28:15)

Ian: Okay Kate, so you were listening to that conversation. I'm back now in Budapest. What do you think was interesting that me and Derk spoke about?

Kate: Yeah Derk's story and what he does is super inspirational, I thought, unlike a lot of the other Urban- UrbanA fellow urban fellows that we've been talking to, like last month with Orsi who have a more practical approach on solving and addressing just unsustainable city issues. I think what he does is provide this theoretical framework within which to understand this issue. I especially thought it was interesting when he was talking about, kind of, transition economies and transition in developing or emerging countries versus developed countries and cities here in Europe. You know, we might think that in in developed economies that it might be easier to go through this type of transition because we have the financial resources and we're able to disseminate information more clearly and maybe easier. But we also operate in very rigid systems. And so that actually might- might do us a disservice when we're thinking about kind of structurally changing the system within which we live.

Ian: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. I was also thinking, related to that, it's a little bit the case that for a long time we lived for many decades with the idea that the Third World or, you know, the global south or, you know, the developing world, however, it's been termed differently, is somehow in the process of catching up to the final point in, you know, development, which is us, in the West. This was sort of, you know, sort of 1960s and 1970s approach to development. And then maybe then we- we had a bit of a realisation, actually, you know what? Maybe these global inequalities are here to stay. Maybe there are many different paths into the future.

And now I think it's probably a little bit more of a turn where it's a bit like, okay, the problem with thinking like that was that then we somehow, you know, the sort of anti-development approach in a sense, is that it stopped people from- from having like sort of a transformative approach to dreaming about, you know, certain futures or, you know, certain sort of wide scale transformations inside society. So what's interesting, I

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think to think about all these changes, like how they've been going on history and relationship between the so-called First World and Third World, is that now if we're saying, okay, we have to transition and also but everyone has to transition, then it's in a sense- it could be and – now I'm being extremely sort of optimistic for myself, my usual cynical self – is that, like, this has to be a global transformation. It's not like, okay, in the Third World now you have to transform your economies to catch up with the First World. We all have to do it, you know, or we're all screwed, basically.

So it's a global- it's a global challenge. It's a global challenge that we have very different maybe there's different, you know, structural conditions in different places, but it's something that we all have to do. So I think in terms of looking at the long sweep of development and how we've viewed the idea of development in different parts of the world in relationship to ourselves, actually seeing that we all need to transform into something is actually quite interesting, sort of global take on- on the idea of development itself.

Kate: And that we can all learn from someone else. I think it's pretty humbling to understand that a lot of the things that maybe are new to us in terms of development, other countries that maybe are, you know, it's quote unquote “emerging” have been developing and have been doing for a while now. And so I think it does lend itself to kind of a new perspective and more space for conversation between, you know, very different parts of the world.

Ian: Yeah, yeah, I know. But it's a very – how to say – it's an optimistic outview more broadly, should we say. But what do you- what do you think? Do you think- where's- where's the role of optimism there in the... yeah.

Kate: So this is- this is the challenge, I think. I think Derk is an incredibly optimistic guy and in his- in his industry and in his work, I think that's kind of key and that's essential. I think he's very cynical about institutions and very optimistic about individuals. And it kind of lends to the question of, you know, are- are individuals, you know, able to kind of cooperate and work together and not be maybe, you know, handheld by the government who wants us to cooperate? I mean, tax breaks, subsidies and different laws. They kind of hold us accountable to caring for the public and caring for the greater good. That is a very optimistic take in itself. But could we maintain cooperation when government isn't necessarily kind of forcing us to do so? But that's you know, that's obviously a larger philosophical question.

Ian: Yeah, I guess it's also the case. Like, I guess even the- the terminology change makers or city makers that was being used in this sort of discourse, is that the quite individualist in the sense they're not talking necessarily about organisations? I- I guess there's, of course, an important role there for organisations, I know from reading some of the literature that's produced, they see different parts of civil society being involved in different ways. With all of this. The question is, is power, I guess.

And- and if we- and like different- whatever different forces which are exerting themselves on individuals' lives. And so, this is always the case when everyone talks about people involved in environmental movements, they say it's a middle class a bit, like once you have your- your base material conditions sorted, you know a house over your head and decent salary, then you can start to worry about the environment. And

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otherwise, people have to, just by means of necessity, have to first care for family and themselves.

But I suppose it's also- it's also the case that we don't- but then we do find amazing, inspirational and interesting people everywhere like who are doing all these things. And I guess we need to find a way, I guess, of harnessing those sorts of. Yeah, those sorts of energies, if you like. Yes.

Kate: And cyni- cynicism won't get us there anyway, so it's better to be more optimistic than cynical because that's the only path forward that we have.

Ian: Yeah, I guess. I mean, although- although I guess it's like- I guess critical rather than cynical, maybe like- but yeah, I think there's only so much space you can have. I guess you can critique forever, but eventually you have to do something as well right? And it's about trying to I guess is trying- to trying to build the conditions from which those people who are really struggling to transform actually have the resources and the space and the time to do so. We can't expect it, I guess, from everybody. But it's- it's I guess it's a question of, um, yeah, maybe- maybe we need to enter an age of optimism. I don't know [Laugh].

Kate: And that's what that's what Dirk was trying to do. I think he's trying to go from kind of these individual chan- change makers, doing good things to change actually happening, which is only possible when a larger base of people kind of accepts it and is involved. So I do think that's- that's really what the essence of what he's trying to tackle with his work.

Ian: Yeah, yeah. I'm going to be speaking to many of those people in future podcast as well, but the discussion isn't just between us and the people on our podcast, it's also for those of you listening at home. So how can they get in touch with us?

Kate: Absolutely. We want you to get involved into the conversation so you could email us through the contact form found at our website. [UrbanA-Arena.EU](mailto:UrbanA@CEU.edu) or at [UrbanA@CEU.edu](mailto:UrbanA@CEU.edu). And you can also find us on Twitter or Instagram at the handle @Arena\_Urban.

Ian: Great. Thanks so much for listening and thanks for this conversation, Kate.

Kate: Bye!

Ian: Bye!