

## Deep Democracy meeting May 15, 2023

This document contains a description of sentiments shared during this meeting, and does not reflect the ideas or policies of Utrecht University for now.

### Introductions

The session starts with a check-in with the participants. How do you feel and why do you feel this way? Moderator Yonathan Keren expresses that he feels tension around facilitating this discussion. Can he do the conversation justice? Sentiments in the room are:

- I have strong opinions, on this matter but not a lot of factual knowledge.
- I feel friction, an internal conflict between reality and my ideals, and friction about my different roles in this conversation.
- I see every day as an opportunity. This session is important and I feel the potential.
- To prepare for this session, I looked into all the ties between companies and universities, and that was quite depressing.
- I've been researching collaborations between fossil and cultural companies. I have factual knowledge but I have no opinion about it. And I'm confused about the fact that I'm not clear about my opinion about this.
- We have to disappoint part of the community either way. Transitions are difficult. There will be disappointment, no matter what we decide.
- I'm feeling hopeful, I just came back from a conference in Brussel, it's good to see that what we've been advocating for is helping things move forward.
- I feel proud that we as UU are having this conversation.

### Goal of the meeting

Henk Kummeling, Rector Magnificus of Utrecht University, welcomes all participants. We need a discussion with our community on what the way forward is around this theme. We sought for a method that brings a safe environment for people to share their knowledge, and also their emotions. In the first session, what struck me as most relevant is that everyone felt the deep urgency about the climate crisis. The sentiment that UU should be an agent of change was shared widely, so we have a role to play there. But how?

This is not a decision making meeting; we're gathering input to come up with an assessment framework for collaborations. Take aways from the last meeting were, for example, that we might want to install an assessment committee at UU that works with clear criteria, e.g.: to see if there are no other partners possible; if organizations live up to the Paris agreement. We don't want to engage in greenwashing; and we will need to come up with other clear criteria and metrics. We want to be transparent on our collaborations with the fossil industry. An overview will be published before June 1. After this introduction, I will just be an participant in the dialogue, and the same goes for my colleagues from the Board (Vice-president Margot van der Starre and Student assessor Anneloes Krul).

### Introduction to Deep Democracy

The Deep Democracy movement originated in South Africa in the 1990s, when organizations were transformed from racist and apartheid-based to non-racial. The method gives attention to the undercurrent in groups, which is full of emotions, values and beliefs. It is a tool for decision-making and conflict resolution. Yonathan came into contact with Deep Democracy in 2007, through

teaching. He wanted - partly because of his personal past - to learn more about dynamics in groups in times of conflict.

Then he introduces how a conversation following this method works and draws a picture of an iceberg on a flipchart. The top of the iceberg visualizes the conscious, and at the bottom, everything below the so-called "waterline" visualizes the unconscious. That's where our primary drives are: what influences our actions. In Deep Democracy, we use this model for the collective, not for the individual. What everyone knows is the conscious, what not everyone knows is the unconscious. On top of the iceberg he draws 'the king's crown': a symbol for autocratic rules. These are made by one person and you cannot speak up against this 'king'. Question from Yonathan to the group: what do you do when you are told to do something without being able to respond, or when you are in a situation where you are not being heard?

- Anger. And related: anger is precluded by helplessness: a very pointed type of anger.
- I mistrust the person, I cannot relate to them anymore. I will not do it.
- I try to listen and have a conversation with them.
- It depends on the sharpness of the king's crown: I can change the task based on my expertise. Or I leave the king and go to another king.

Yonathan introduces what he calls the 'terrorist line' - also called the sabotage line or resistance line. There are several steps in the process towards sabotage, which signal voices that are not being heard:

- Through humor (a joke) you quickly escalate to sarcasm. This usually means that there is a lot that's not being spoken about.
- Next come excuses. These are hard to grasp, as they often have a grain of truth in them. When these excuses keep repeating themselves, they point to something happening below the waterline: "the fish". This symbolizes what is left unsaid: topics of emotional nature. Those are usually expressed in excuses. Something that is repeated three times or more refers to something that is unsaid and therefore has to do with feelings and emotions.
- After excuses, you escalate to gossiping/lobbying: a way of venting and finding like-minded people. This is a phase where people avoid contact: communication breakdown.
- Next comes sabotage and delay, followed by protest/strike.
- The last phase is war or separation.

When we take majority votes in decision making, we are feeding the terrorist line. And we are missing the knowledge from minority views. Important tools for moderating a Deep Democracy decision: neutrality (temporarily disengage from your own views) and compassion (recognize in yourself what you see in others). When we make a decision in Deep Democracy, we take the following steps. Steps 1 through 4 are above the waterline, step 5 is below the waterline.

1. Gather all perspectives; try to give everyone an equal voice. Do not keep referring to (in)formal leaders.
2. Hunt for the 'no'. Do not only listen to the popular views.
3. Spread the 'unpopular' views, spread the no.
4. If we make a decision: take a vote via raising hands
5. What does the minority group need to join majority? Look for aspects of the issue that we cannot yet see clearly.

## Start of the 'Conversation on our feet'

During the 'conversation on our feet', participants can briefly comment on a statement and then choose a position in the room to show where they are standing in regard to the statement. Those who agree with the response, stand close by the person who shared it. Those who disagree seek a position further away in the room. No questions are allowed (because a question usually has an opinion behind it). Be as direct as you can, don't be polite – Yonathan helps participants with that. You can join opposing views over the course of this conversation.

Question: how do we feel about the first ideas for the framework for collaborations? Where are we at right now, what should we do?

- In terms of pollution, we first need to clean up our mess. So I believe that if we can make a change, and we're sure that the impact is positive, we need to collaborate with fossil.
- I disagree with this from an ethical point of view. These companies had their chance to collaborate; we have been dealing with these issues for a long time. Money drives their decisions. From an ethical point of view I can only offer a hard no for any collaborations with any fossil fuel related companies.
- The real change should be made by the government. It's their job to tell companies how they should behave. I worked in both industry and academia, I'm worried about the impact for science if we break the ties. Not necessarily about the money. But at the university we are very much in our ivory tower and we don't know what's needed to implement technology without these companies. We should get out of our bubble and keep collaborating.
- The climate crisis is not only about greenhouse gasses. It's also about colonial issues, inequality, the polar south and polar north and people that are suffering because of climate change right now. We all have responsibility; we are in a privileged position here, so we also have a responsibility to fix this.
- If we would stop collaborating with e.g. fossil companies, we would also have to stop collaborating with almost every entity that has a negative impact on the global south. As university we have a mission to work interdisciplinary instead of blocking people out. We have to look into what we can do inside our collaborations with all these entities.
- The climate crisis asks for a structural change in our society. A lot of organizations are ethically really wrong and as UU we should not fund or be funded by them. There is a difference between learning from companies and collaborating with them.
- I want to share some facts: if everyone would follow the Paris agreement, 53% of energy would still be coming from fossil. So this agreement does not bring us to net zero in the coming 30 years or so. We need to look at the world the way it is. So, what we need is fundamental research on how to improve fossil fuels, for example. And without good connections, we cannot do that research. And this is our task.

Yonathan mentions that statements are being repeated. So he proposes to switch tools to help us understand what is under the water line. So we switch to a debate between two sides. You may speak for both sides as an individual, so you may also switch sides. The room divides into two groups. We start with the arguments of the side with the most people, and the other side is only allowed to listen in order to pick up all the arguments.

## Arguments in favor of staying in touch with the fossil industry

- We've been talking in abstractions that are fed from personal sentiments. I personally feel very strongly that the collaboration is about people. I've worked 27 years for Shell – 18 years on renewables - and now I'm a professor of sustainable energy. During those years, I dare to

say that I've been an agent of change. I've told the CEO that he should do something about this. When I felt my work as an agent of change was done, I moved to the university to continue my goal in a different place. There's no black and white, no bad and good actors, especially not when you look at the people who work there. Good people work there and we should stay in connection with them, there is a lot of potential in there.

- Putting a strict limit on collaborating with any fossil fuel company would significantly impact my freedom of choice in my research. If I can work with them on a project to combat climate change, I would not like to be told by my university that I cannot do that.
- I work on energy storage and conversion. I could not have the effect that I have now, if I would never (have been able to) work with them. I think in the short term, 5-10 years, our best chance to make a big difference will be in collaboration with them. I would work with Shell if it makes a strong change in the right direction. Making impact is the most important.
- I consider myself as one of the most angry people towards fossil companies. But I'm also pragmatic. And it doesn't make sense to limit ourselves in finding solutions to the problems we're facing. Being able to have a conversation like this is the right way in finding solutions.
- I want to bring nuance into this. It has to come from both sides: if companies are only investing a very small percentage of their profit, are they being sincere in their mission to become more sustainable? We need to be pragmatic in working towards a more sustainable future. We have to be critical in who we're doing it with. We cannot just step away from oil. But we can check if these companies are being sincere in stepping away.
- I studied chemistry to innovate. I've always been collaborating with everyone. But I feel the urgency to accelerate the discussion. We can be an agent of change. Our symbolic expression makes a difference. But how can we make the acceleration? We do marvelous innovation science; but how can we take the next step in making the transition? I'm open to address that. A hard no does not help me find ways to actually change. So help me/us!
- I'm worried about the impact on the less fortunate part of the world. So whatever we're doing, we need to hurry up. The fact that I don't want to cut ties does not mean that I don't want to hurry up. I just want to work with whoever can help us to achieve it.
- I'm an idealist, and I would love to cut all ties, but I wonder if it's possible in this economic system. That makes me very depressed. This research costs a lot of money. I wish we would not be dependent on third parties to do this research. But maybe I'm also brainwashed?

#### Arguments in favor of cutting ties with the fossil industry

- I've been working in environmental organizations for 20 years. I would love to join the other side. But these companies have proved that they're slowing us down. I'm worried about my (grand)children, if we continue in this system, nothing is going to change. We can only collaborate if we make a radical change.
- Shell's CEO has recently said that they want to pump up a lot of oil in the next 10 years so that they can spend more money on the transition later on. This shows again that their focus is on money. If they are so serious about this, where are the huge investments of these companies in the climate, in the energy transition?
- Planetary destruction is ongoing; all the CO<sub>2</sub> we emit will lead to suffering in this century. If we shoot 10 kids today, is it innovation to shoot 9 tomorrow? I think not. There's no way to escape the facts and the morality behind this.
- I want to question the success in the transition that's being sold by fossil companies. All successes were compensated by more demands for oil and using more energy.
- Unless the fossil industry acknowledges its historical role in where we are right now, we cannot have a useful argument. This problem is so much bigger than individual people, it's

about the system. You can only be pragmatic if there is accountability by these companies on the destruction they've been causing for many years, the harm they've been doing.

- The influence of these companies is so huge, they lobby. Government and industry are so intertwined that we can't rely on regulation. It would be naïve to think government is independent.
- I wish we could find a way to still collaborate on sustainable projects, but we need to take a principal step to change something.
- Fossil companies take all the space; they take resources, as long as we work for Shell we cannot work for companies that are actually invested in the energy transition. We need new companies that can replace these giants. We are being used.
- I don't trust these companies, they will not do anything that's not profitable for them, for me they are guilty until proven otherwise. I don't believe in good/bad people, but in good/bad structures and incentives that make people do things. We need clear commitments and an ultimatum. We don't need to disconnect from /individuals, but from the bigger company.
- I have investigated the archive of ExxonMobil and they tried to obtain a societal license to operate. They are not to be trusted. If they would ever offer reparation money: yes, but simply doing research for them, no.
- I believe fossil fuel companies are a big part of the current slavery in the world. That needs to stop, now.
- Most technological innovations in the fossil industry, but also in food for examples, are solutions to keep the current system running. So they are only trying to find new business models. We are being enablers, and should not collaborate with them further.
- I'd rather be in a common effort than in a common conflict. I'm a researcher and I'm fond of collaboration, it's the only way to move forward. I would like to share a quote from Winston Churchill: "You cannot reason with a tiger if you're head is stuck in its mouth." We need to make the playing field, our playing field. Shell will not go away if we don't collaborate with them anymore. So we need to collaborate on our terms.
- System change requires us to step outside of the normal ways we are doing things. But when various universities start to act, we get a system effect. We need to deprogram, move out of the current system, before we can think clearly about this.
- We create future generations. So we can achieve the paradigm change in our education.
- I'm not entirely against the idea of ever collaborating. But we need to set a new precedent and reassess what we are doing. That creates a clean break and that can put us outside of the system. So this decision is not an end point, but its where we are at now. We should not underestimate the potential it has to stand up against these companies. We need to create a culture in which those companies have such a bad image that they cannot survive anymore. We can help make that change in the public discourse by speaking out.
- Fossil industry have proven to deny science, so we should not collaborate.

#### Arguments in favor of staying in touch with the fossil industry

- UU's mission is: we are working towards a better world. But how can we create maximum impact? I think this works via our research and education, that's where we have the steering wheel. So we have to do it ourselves, and make the most sustainable campus in the world. We are in the same system, in the same problem, so if we want to solve it, we have to be the example. We cannot keep preaching if we not walk the talk ourselves.
- Arguments from the other side were simplistic, so I will use simplistic arguments too. Why do they have to make up for all the bad things they did? They also did good things. Our

prosperity is based on the work of fossil companies. Millions of people were lifted out of poverty. We are all in this pickle together. It's naïve to scapegoat the fossil industry for that. We all are the problem because we're consuming too much, so we should point the finger at ourselves first.

- Its true that the fossil industry has silenced their own scientists. Are we in the mouth of a tiger? As a continent, yes. But if we as UU cut ties, we're only leaning into the mouth a bit more. Because it will slow down the transition.
- What will the impact of cutting ties be on other types of research, like blue sky research that does not have an immediate application. The money needs to come from somewhere. What if we cannot do this anymore, that's a huge risk for UU.

#### Arguments in favor of cutting ties with the fossil industry

- The argument about all the good things fossil companies have done, hits me in my core. We cannot focus on these good things when the amount of damage that's been done is so huge. It's unjust to look at it that way. Of course we should be able to do fundamental research. But the reality of the climate crisis is so big, that we cannot do everything we want to do anymore. We should focus on the world, on the bigger picture, instead of what we want to do as individuals.
- I hear a lot of ideas about possible solutions, but those are coming from our privileges. We need to take steps back and think about the choices we need to take to achieve those steps.
- There are already many solutions at hand; the problem is in scaling these solutions and in investing the necessary money.
- We need to choose partners that are putting their money where their goals are. As a country, as an economy, and as a university, we need to look at this.
- We're trying to convince each other in different categories. We need to go from shallow leverage points - where interventions are easy but limited in their potential to bring about transformative change - to deep leverage points where interventions are difficult but have great potential to bring about transformative change.
- It's fantastic that we got a lot of people out of poverty in the last decades. But we now have to adjust to a different kind of value system, and that's impossible to achieve with companies who rely on economic growth alone. As a researcher, I think in social systems, not in individuals. And I know that this will take a couple of decades.
- We're only talking about fossil companies. But we also need to look at it on a different level, e.g. dairy farms, and other partnerships and activities at the university.
- Apart from the technological side, there is a realism vs. idealism separation in this room. I want to quote Ursula van der Leyen: "A growth based economic model based on fossil fuels, is obsolete." I really want the people on the other side to come to this side and believe that this can happen.

#### Closing remarks

We heard many arguments from both sides. Which ones have hit home? After each statement shared, people show hands when they agree with this statement.

- What hit me was the way that people frame fossil fuel companies. To me they are the dictator bad guys. But others see them as a force that can change, with people at Shell that they are doing good work. I wasn't able to realize this until now. It's hard to acknowledge that.

- These companies have done a lot of bad stuff, and the region where I'm from has been attacked by fossil companies, so I can clearly see what they have been doing. Weighing up the good and the bad, the bad is heavier. And the place where I'm from has affected that. That makes it hard to acknowledge the good part.
- I feel like we are all on the same page regarding that we want to phase out fossil fuels asap. I'm pragmatic and so I think we should be looking into the gray shade. I just don't know if we help the energy transition if we cut all the ties. I'm so happy to see so many people thinking about this. Because I'm not sure myself.
- I feel a bit frustrated because I try to understand why this is still a discussion. And I really want to understand the other side. But I haven't heard anything that will do that. But I am also happy that we are sharing the same concern. Still, over the past years I have not been feeling heard or recognized that this is really an issue.
- Ending the ties does not need to be permanent. It can be a 'yellow card'. We can always come back on our decision.
- Everyone should think about the largest impact they can create as an individual.
- I feel like everyone on the other side is an active researcher in the fossil field. If we cut ties, you will not be left out. We don't want to kick you out. We want to take care of our people. There are many ways to make this change, e.g. look into [www.degrowth.org](http://www.degrowth.org).
- I was on the other side a lot, I think the discussion was fair. But I did not hear anything that makes me consider to start working in another matter in the future.
- I was triggered by a comment about the current people that are already suffering from climate change. We were only taking about ourselves. We should be thinking about others more, the people whose future is already being taken away.
- I need to step down and look at my own privileges, we all need to do that. Our situation gives a lot of perspectives, but we need to strip down from our labels and think about the problems that are attacking our bare existence.
- I was planning to go into this session with a lot of nuance. But the subject feels very big and heavy and personal, so I had to let go of nuance. I noticed how I polarized during the session.
- Someone said that the UU cutting ties won't make an impact, but it would set a huge example. We wouldn't change the world but we might set off a chain reaction.
- We're engaged in this discussion from a comfortable seat. But my fears are about me: about my life, about the consequences for me. We are going into uncharted waters. I think it would be good if we, as UU, dare to go there.
- Do we really trust fossil companies when they say they will change? Based on their track record, I don't think we can trust them.
- I'm very stuck in my personal world view. Joining this convo made me curious about others.
- Science and academia is not value-free.
- When we are talking about big and heavy things, we move into questions about guilt. But that is self-centered. It's a struggle for me how I can create space for my own guilt.
- This debate was about more than the fossil industry only, and I sympathized with every argument from the other side. But I worked with fossil companies for 18 years on renewable projects, so for me the clear answer is still to collaborate with them.
- I'm really annoyed by the dichotomy between pragmatists and idealists, I can be both! Maybe the so-called pragmatists are clinging on to old ideas.

Then Yonathan summarizes the session in an audio file (in English) and Henk Kummeling closes the session.