

Towards a new transformation and new governance

While a consensus seems to exist on the need to move towards a sustainable development pathway, we seem to be unable to develop the appropriate policy and governance responses. From a transition perspective, this inability to create fundamental change is related to existing path dependencies and associated interests that help to sustain existing societal regimes. This paper offers a new governance perspective that might help to develop new governance approaches that focus on institutionalizing emergent social innovation along with managing the breakdown of unsustainable systems and structures [1].

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Introduction: From the great to the new transformation

The era of industrial revolution or Great Transformation, beginning in the mid-19th century, can be understood as the aggregated process of a multitude of underlying shock-wise transitions [2] in our societal systems such as mobility, energy, food/production, housing, health care and welfare. In hindsight, these historical transitions can be described as revolutionary systemic changes, but in everyday practice they were more incremental processes of experimentation, breakthrough, institutionalization, behavioral and cultural change, and so on. As such processes of “evolutionary revolution”, the transitions of modernization and industrialization completely altered society. Strikingly, it seems that many of these historical transitions were driven by a few very fundamental common drivers that

provided the basis for the transitions of modernity: central mechanisms of coordination, fossil energy and resources, and linear models of innovation. These historical transitions brought us welfare, well-being, democracy and justice.

Yet by now, we are confronted with systemic problems deeply embedded in these historically developed societal regimes. We are increasingly experiencing growing tensions in our societal regimes, based on centrally organized control over and distribution of resources, and on end-of-pipe problem solving. It seems difficult, if not impossible, solving these problems through the traditional means of regulation, liberalization or negotiation. This lock-in is evident in many societal systems now increasingly confronted with the changing societal context and the economic crisis. Efficient waste-management, health-care, energy system, food production, and building have all been thriving upon demographic and consumption growth but are now completely locked in regimes focused on growth, efficiency and problem-treatment.

In other words: we have developed societal regimes based upon (past) problem solving through central (government) planning and control, based on cheap fossil resources and linear modes of innovation. This perspective predetermines

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a particular way of addressing problems such as health problems, lack of education, poverty, hunger, waste, access to cheap energy, and so on. It inevitably leads to solutions that are based upon singling out problems, quantifying them, and implementing planned solutions through policy (or market-based strategies). Environmental policies, much alike the Sustainable Development discourse, have become part of these established regimes and have primarily served to optimize these regimes, making them “less unsustainable”.

While at the level of regimes the focus is on optimization, consensus building and incremental improvement, simultaneously all sorts of alternative niches have been developing for years. Since the 1970s alternative currencies, renewable (energy) technologies, local democracies, and sustainable community initiatives started to appear. For long these were small, expensive and often ridiculed as too alternative. Yet, over time and with experience they grew, developed, and matured. By now, many of these alternatives are starting to touch mainstream, from urban gardens and farms to energy producing buildings and from renewable energy cooperatives to credit unions and collective health care insurances.

By now, the old stability of the welfare state providing growth, security and governance is destabilizing, but an alternative direction is still diffuse, fragmented, suboptimal and uncoordinated. This state of confusion is bound to persist for some time, expressed by social feelings of unrest and a negative attitude towards the future as well as increasing tensions between the dominant mechanisms behind the modernistic regimes and the emergent new mechanism of a New Transformation. The new mechanisms are hybrid and mixed forms of governance and coordination, renewable resources and systemic innovation. The transformative social innovations that emerge responding to our global challenges are in this sense undermining existing power structures, dominant interests and paradigms, not least those of national governments.

New Governance for the New Transformation

As individuals, networks, institutions, companies, collectives and all sorts of other types of agency are increasingly self-organizing societal functions in alternative ways, it is no wonder that the “bottom-up”, “participation” or “big” society is dominating public, political and scientific debates.

However, much of these emergent transformative social innovations are countering existing interests and stakes, and do not necessarily (or by definition not) pursue (inter-) national policy goals. I argue that this emerging context of hybrid forms of governance fit to complex local problem contexts (governance panarchy) implies a more fundamental re-shift of power relationships and structures coordinating society. Also, we are only in the first phases of this shift, in which current (governmental) regimes are still able to frame the bottom-up society as part of a strategy of decentralization, austerity and efficiency increases. If indeed it is inevitable that this more structural trend towards governance panarchy will continue, and that it could also provide more effective ways to organize society in terms of ecological, social, and economic value, the question is: what type of governance and government could help to realize this? But also what is the role of science in these emergent, and by definition uncertain, explorative, and disputed processes of transformation?

The challenge I put as central to governance for sustainable development in general, and transition management [3] specifically, is to develop new understanding and mechanisms to use the current period of instabilities and disruptions, allowing to shift towards a new and sustainable equilibrium. We need to move away from innovation policies, experimentation, envisioning and formulating ambitions, towards achieving institutional change, facilitating advocacy coalitions, building transformative networks of networks and finding new ways to identify, measure, and explicate value. In other words, a focus towards reconfiguring social systems based on principles of inclusivity, circularity, and true value. In this understanding of desired futures, the question is not so much how to safeguard the interest of future generations but rather how to collectively deal with the loss, instability, uncertainty and new values, services and profits, that I associate with the New Transformation.

This will require not only adaptive policies and institutions but transformative ones: institutions and meta-governance arrangements that ensure basic values and social services based on emergent social economies and governance panarchy. Such meta-governance institutions need to be able to deal with diversity, surprise and uncertainty, but also to transition themselves. In a way, these institutions need to be able to destruct as much as they help to innovate, to facilitate as much as they direct, and to be able to work within a specific as well as generic context-. To me, this is the logical next phase in the development from a central state model by

facilitating agency and network-governance actor towards “non-linear government”. The dominant and linear planning model is found to work only in some cases, being replaced by hybrid context-specific and temporary forms of co-creation. It is in such contexts that effective solutions can be found and implemented at a much higher pace, but also that the values fundamental to a democratic nation such as accountability, transparency, equity and equality are put to the test.

Transformative science?

Acknowledging that the future is uncertain and ready-made solutions to our global challenges are absent requires also a different type of science that is more engaged, normative in its ambition to address unsustainability in a fundamental way, and explorative in its approach. This line of thinking is part of a broader debate in science under the headers of “post-normal” [4, 5] or “sustainability” [6, 7] science: the thought that inherent ambiguities and uncertainties in the social domain, when it comes to persistent and complex challenges, are so structural that they require novel, inter- and transdisciplinary processes of knowledge co-creation, embedded in practical experimentation.

This by definition requires the use of broader concepts providing a frame of reference to discuss and direct differences in perception, ambition, and understanding between actors, such as Sustainable Development, transitions or the New Transformation. The rationale behind this assumption is that new solutions can only be considered to be legitimate, diverse, resilient and effective when they

are (co-)developed, implemented, and sustained by societal actors [8]. This means that developing scientific knowledge in the context of the New Transformation is not a goal in itself but rather a means to achieve progress through influencing its speed and direction. Scientists in the process of sustainable development are not providers of objective truths but part of the enquiry process. Scientific, as well as political and social knowledge becomes as subjective as the solutions and outcomes [9].

Outlook

The perspective I sketched out implies a new direction for policy. As solutions are emergent in societal contexts, the challenge is not so much to reach consensus on goals and targets, but rather to facilitate the desired emergent alternatives. Policy can do so by engaging with these alternatives and institutionalizing the new emergent structures through regulation. But, perhaps, even more importantly by addressing the own dependence upon existing (unsustainable) systems and developing break-down and phase-out policies, in which existing interests are compensated for the losses in, or made part of, the New Transformation. This would not only require visionary and daring leaders but also an engaged scientific community. That is, a scientific community which both provides the basic, unsustainable science-understanding systems and their impacts and ensures sustainable emerging transitions.

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references & notes

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