

July 2014

Transition management as a governance tool for sustainable development

Umberto Pisano

ESDN Case Study N° 17



European Sustainable Development Network

Author:

Umberto Pisano

Contact:

*ESDN Office at the
Institute for Managing Sustainability
Vienna University of Economics and Business
Welthandelsplatz 1, Building D1, A-1020 Vienna, Austria*

Visit www.sd-network.eu for

- Basic information on SD
- Country profiles
- Quarterly reports
- Case studies
- Conference papers
- Workshop papers
- Getting in touch with us

The **European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN)** is an informal network of public administrators and other experts who deal with sustainable development strategies and policies. The network covers all 27 EU Member States, plus other European countries. The ESDN is active in promoting sustainable development and facilitating the exchange of good practices in Europe and gives advice to policy-makers at the European and national levels.

© 2014 European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN)

Contents

1	Introduction.....	4
2	What is transition management	4
3	The transition management cycle.....	7
3.1	The Transition Arena.....	7
3.2	The Transition Agenda	8
3.3	Transition Experiments	9
3.4	Transition monitoring and evaluation	9
	References	10

1 Introduction

This case study directly relates to our work on the [ESDN Quarterly Report No. 33](#) that explores the topic sustainability transitions and transformative environmental and sustainability policies. In this case study, we focus on the transition management approach as a tool and a valuable lens under which to consider on governance for SD and SD policy. This case study complements [ESDN Case Study No. 18](#) that provides a deeper overview on one of the six national initiatives at European level towards sustainability transitions, namely Finland.

2 What is transition management

Transitions are understood as multilevel, multiphase processes of structural change in societal systems; they realise themselves when the dominant structures in society (regimes) are put under pressure by external changes in society, as well as endogenous innovation (Loorbach, 2010, p.166).

One of the four main strands of research that have been identified in the literature is the so-called 'Transition Management approach' (Markard et al., 2012). This approach is particularly interesting as it offers a practical operationalization and a way to facilitate transition governance. In the context of sustainable development, one of the most interesting facets of transition management is that it "seeks to overcome the conflict between long-term imperatives and short-term concerns" (Kemp and Loorbach, 2006, p.125)¹, which is probably one of the most crucial difficulties that policy-makers who deal with governance face on a daily basis.

In light of sustainable development (SD) and governance models, three important considerations are raised by Loorbach (2010, p.166):

1. All societal actors exert influence and thus direct social change, being aware of the opportunities as well as the restrictions and limitations of directing;
2. Top-down planning and market dynamics only account for part of societal change; network dynamics and reflexive behavior account for other parts;
3. Steering of societal change is a reflexive process of searching, learning, and experimenting.

With this in mind, a form of governance is, therefore, suggested by Loorbach (2010) based on complexity. We summarised its main principles in the following Box 1 as they also furnish several important points for reflecting on governance for SD in general.

¹ KEMP., R. and D. LOORBACH (2006) Transition management a reflexive governance approach, (chapter 5) In: Reflexive Governance for Sustainable Development [Jan-Peter Voss, Dierk Bauknecht, René Kemp: Edward Elgar Publishing]

Box 1: Main principles for a new form of governance

- ***The dynamics of the system create feasible and nonfeasible means for steering: content and process are inseparable.*** Process management on its own is not sufficient—insight into how the system works is an essential precondition for effective management;
- ***Long-term thinking (at least 25 years) is a framework for shaping short-term policy in the context of persistent societal problems.*** This means back and forecasting: the setting of short-term goals based on long-term goals and the reflection on future developments through the use of scenarios;
- ***Objectives should be flexible and adjustable at the system level.*** The complexity of the system is at odds with the formulation of specific objectives and blueprint plans. While being directed, the structure and order of the system are also changing, and so the objectives set should change too;
- ***The timing of the intervention is crucial.*** Immediate and effective intervention is possible in both desirable and undesirable crisis situations;
- ***Managing a complex, adaptive system means using disequilibria as well as equilibria. Relatively short periods of nonequilibrium therefore offer opportunities to direct the system in a desirable direction (toward a new attractor);***
- ***Creating space for agents to build up alternative regimes is crucial for innovation.*** Agents at a certain distance from the regime can effectively create a new regime in a protected environment to permit investment of sufficient time, energy, and resources;
- ***Steering from “outside” a societal system is not effective:*** structures, actors, and practices adapt and anticipate in such a manner that these should also be directed from “inside”;
- ***A focus on (social) learning about different actor perspectives and a variety of options is a necessary precondition for change;***
- ***Participation from and interaction between stakeholders is a necessary basis*** for developing support for policies but also to engage actors in reframing problems and solutions through social learning.

Source: Loorbach, 2010, pp.167-168

Based on this conceptual context, Kemp and Loorbach (2006) describe the key elements of transition management as:

- **system-thinking** in terms of more than one domain (**multi-domain**) and different actors (**multi-actor**) at different scale levels (**multi-level**);
- **long-term thinking** (at least 25 years) as a framework for shaping short-term policy;
- **back-casting and forecasting:** the setting of short-term and longer-term goals based on long-term sustainability visions, scenario studies, trend analysis and short-term possibilities;
- **a focus on learning** (i.e. learning-by-doing, doing-by-learning, through experiments);
- **an orientation towards system innovation and experimentation;**
- learning about a **variety of options**;
- **participation** by and interaction between stakeholders.

In the transition management framework, four different types of governance activities are identified that are relevant to societal transitions: strategic, tactical, operational, and reflexive (see Box 2 below).

Box 2: Types of governance activities for transition management

- **Strategic activities** are all those activities and developments that deal primarily with the “culture” of a societal system as a whole (i.e. debates on norms and values, identity, ethics, sustainability). Among these activities, very crucial for transition management are processes of vision development, strategic discussions and long-term goal formulation.
- **Tactical activities** are those steering activities that are interest driven and relate to the dominant structures (*regime*) of a societal system, therefore including rules and regulations, institutions, organizations and networks, infrastructure, and routines.
- **Operational activities** are those experiments and actions with a short-term horizon and often carried out in the context of innovation projects and programs, but understood in an inclusive manner, hence, as including all societal, technological, institutional, and behavioral practices that introduce or operationalize new structures, culture, routines, or actors.
- **Reflexive activities** relate to monitoring, assessments and evaluation of ongoing policies, and ongoing societal change, either located within existing institutions established to monitor and evaluate, either when socially embedded (i.e. the media and Internet, science and research). Such reflexive activities are necessary to prevent lock-in and to enable exploration of new ideas and trajectories. It is essential to emphasise that from a transition management perspective, however, the reflexivity needs to be an integrated part of governance processes.

Source: Loorbach 2010, p.168

The approach of transition management includes several steps but is not intended as a method as such as it needs adaptation to every issue at hand. Kemp and Loorbach (2006) propose the following activities for ‘**managing transition**’:

- (a) Transition arenas and multi-actor governance;
- (b) Problem definition and development of a shared problem perception;
- (c) Creation of a transition vision and transition goals;
- (d) Transition paths (possible routes toward the final image), interim objectives and the building of a coalition;
- (e) Programmes for system innovation through new technologies in society and experimenting;
- (f) Monitoring, evaluating and learning; and,
- (g) Creating and maintaining public support, and broadening the coalition.

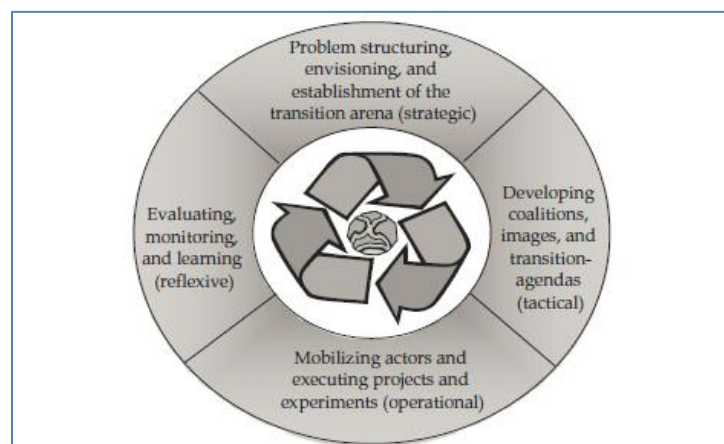
3 The transition management cycle

In terms of the implementation of the transition management approach, Loorbach (2010)² suggests the so-called ‘**Transition Management Cycle**’ (Fig.3) that is represented by a cyclical process model through four main blocks:

1. Structure the problem in question, develop a long-term sustainability vision and establish and organize the transition arena;
2. Develop future images, a transition agenda and derive the necessary transition paths;
3. Establish and carry out transition experiments and mobilize the resulting transition networks;
4. Monitor, evaluate, and learn lessons from the transition experiments and, based on these, make adjustments in the vision, agenda, and coalitions.

In reality, there is no fixed sequence of the above steps in transition management. The cycle only visualizes the *need to connect activities* and presents some possible logical connections, but does not suggest a sequential order of activities (Figure 3 below).

Fig.3: The Transition Management Cycle



Source: Loorbach, 2010

3.1 The Transition Arena

A fundamental part of the transition management approach is the establishment of a so-called ‘**transition arena**’ that is defined as *an institution for facilitating interaction, knowledge exchange and learning between actors* (Kemp and Loorbach, 2006), and it is, therefore, seen as an open and dynamic societal network of innovation (Van Buuren and Loorbach 2009)³.

² LOORBACH, D. (2010) Transition Management for Sustainable Development: A Prescriptive, Complexity-Based Governance Framework. *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*, Vol. 23(1), pp.161–183

³ Van Buuren, A., and D. Loorbach. 2009. “Policy Innovation in Isolation? Conditions for Policy-Renewal by Transition Arenas and Pilot Projects.” *Public Management Review* 11 (3): 375–392.

Loorbach (2010) describes the transition arena as a **small network of frontrunners** – not too many (10-15) – with different backgrounds and their own perception of the transition issue in question from their specific perspective. It is very important to emphasise that these people **participate on a personal basis** and **not as a representative of their institution** (i.e. government, business, science, civil society). These frontrunners do not necessarily need to be experts; they can also be networkers or opinion leaders. They should also be prepared to invest time and energy in the process of innovation and commit themselves to it. It is crucial that an equal number of frontrunners from the societal pentagon are represented: government, companies, NGOs, knowledge institutes, and intermediaries (i.e. consulting organizations, project organizations and mediators). The competencies expected of them and are:

- (1) ability to consider complex problems at a high level of abstraction;
- (2) ability to look beyond the limits of their own discipline and background;
- (3) enjoy a certain level of authority within various networks;
- (4) ability to establish and explain visions of sustainable development within their own networks;
- (5) willingness to think together; and,
- (6) being open for innovation instead of already having specific solutions in mind.

The main efforts of the group of frontrunners are made towards reaching a joint perception of the problem and the generation of sustainability visions.

Based on the sustainability vision developed, a process can be initiated in which *transition paths* are developed and a *common transition agenda* is drawn up.

3.2 The Transition Agenda

A common **transition agenda** contains a number of joint objectives, action points, projects, and instruments to realize these objectives. It should be clear which party is responsible for which type of activity, project, or instrument that is being developed or applied. Where the sustainability visions and the accompanying final transition images and transition objectives form the guidelines for the transition agenda that is to be developed, **the transition agenda itself forms the compass for the frontrunners** that they can refer to during their research and learning process.

The **transition agenda has different phases**: In its first phase, the transition arena is a relatively small network of innovators and strategic thinkers from different backgrounds that discusses the transition problem integrally and outlines the transition goals. Then, further on in the process, the network will expand to include less strategically oriented actors (i.e. local authorities, people with practical knowledge about processes of change) in order to develop transition paths: routes to a transition image via intermediate objectives, which, as they come closer, can be formulated more quantitatively. In this phase, the interests, motives, and policy of the various actors involved (NGOs, governments, knowledge institutes, and intermediaries) come out. The actors who should be involved at this stage are those who represent one of the organizations involved, especially those who have sufficient authority within their own organization and who also have insight into the opportunities for their organization to contribute to the envisaged transition process. An important condition for this is that the actors involved have the capacity to “translate” the transition vision and the consequences of this to the transition agenda of their own organization.

3.3 Transition Experiments

Finally, **short-term experiments and actions** are derived from the goals and paths, and more operationally oriented organisations and actors will be involved. In this process, the selection of participants to the transition arena is particularly crucial: what is needed are participants that are frontrunners, visionaries and are able to look beyond their own domain and be open minded (Kemp and Loorbach, 2006, p.112). Transition management at this level focuses on creating a portfolio of related transition experiments that complement and strengthen each other, have a contribution to the sustainability objective, can be scaled up, and are significant and measurable.

Transition experiments represent iconic projects with a high level of risk that can make a potentially large innovative contribution to a transition process. At the operational level of transition management, transition experiments and actions are carried out that try to broaden, deepen, and scale up existing and planned initiatives and actions. The transition experiments need to fit within the context of the vision and transition paths developed and are derived directly from the developed sustainability vision and transition objectives.

When an experiment has been successful (in terms of evaluating its learning experiences and contributions to the transition challenge), it can be repeated in different contexts (**broadening**) and scaled up from the micro- to the mesolevel (**scaling up**). This requires a considerable amount of time—approximately 5-10 years. Transition experiments are often costly and time consuming, so it is important that wherever possible, existing infrastructure (physical, financial, institutional) is used for experiments, and that the experiment's feasibility is continuously monitored.

3.4 Transition monitoring and evaluation

Continuous monitoring is a vital part of the search and learning process of transitions. Integration of monitoring and evaluation within each phase and at every level of transition management may stimulate a process of social learning that arises from the interaction and cooperation between different actors involved. To ensure this, transition monitoring is about reflecting collectively upon the process and in this way articulating next steps.

However, there are two kinds of monitoring to take into consideration:

- **Monitoring the transition process** involves physical changes in the system in question, slowly changing macrodevelopments, fast niche developments, and seeds of change, as well as movements of individual and collective actors at the regime level. This provides the “enriched context” for transition management.
- **Monitoring of transition management** involves different aspects: actors (i.e. behavior, networking activities, alliance forming and responsibilities, activities, projects, and instruments); actions, goals, projects, and instruments; transition experiments (i.e. new knowledge and insight, social and institutional learning); and the transition process itself (i.e. rate of progress, barriers and points to be improved).

References

- Kemp, R. and D. Loorbach, D. 2006. Transition management a reflexive governance approach, (chapter 5). In: Reflexive Governance for Sustainable Development [Jan-Peter Voss, Dierk Bauknecht, René Kemp: Edward Elgar Publishing]
- Loorbach, D. 2010. Transition Management for Sustainable Development: A Prescriptive, Complexity-Based Governance Framework. *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*, Vol. 23(1), pp.161–183
- Markard, J., Raven, R. and Truffer, B. 2012. Sustainability transitions: An emerging field of research and its prospects. *Research Policy* 41, pp.955– 967
- Van Buuren, A., and Loorbach, D. 2009. Policy Innovation in Isolation? Conditions for Policy-Renewal by Transition Arenas and Pilot Projects. *Public Management Review* 11 (3): 375–392.



European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN)

www.sd-network.eu