

Lay people bring the positive message: Participatory system mapping for sustainable consumption

SUMMARY

One of the most important arguments for participatory planning and research is that it could merge the different type of knowledge from experts and lay people. It has enormous importance in the field of transition to sustainable society especially in the topic of sustainable consumption, a key concept in the de-growth paradigm. Visualization in participatory research may add more dimensions to enhance communication, cooperation and understanding among participants and researchers as well. In our study we used participatory system mapping to find out more about the constructed mental models of participants on the topic of sustainable consumption. In our exploratory study for sustainable consumption two panels were organized and we could analyze the visualization of the different mental models of an expert and a lay panel. The different focal points the two panels have chosen provides opportunities to draw significant lessons for policy making.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One of the most important arguments for participatory planning and research is that it could merge the different type of knowledge from experts and lay people. It has enormous importance in the field of transition to sustainable society especially in the topic of sustainable consumption, a key concept in the de-growth paradigm. Visualization in participatory research may add more dimensions to enhance communication, cooperation and understanding among participants and researchers as well. In the last few years a new type of participatory approach has appeared in the methodological toolbox of social sciences. This new approach allows participants to jointly develop complex cognitive models using casual loop diagrams in a given topic and they develop their recommendations based on these models.

The potential advantages of participatory system mapping can be related to its four distinctive characteristics. Firstly, it is inherently explorative in nature since through the visualization of casual relationships and feedback loops it helps to deepen the understanding of a group about a situation (Vennix, 1999). Secondly, since it focuses on variables and their relationships, it provides a neutral communication tool which allows for a dialogue between parties with different types of knowledge (either between experts having different disciplinary perspectives or between experts, policymakers and lay people) (Sedlacko et al., 2014). Thirdly, it makes the documentation and tracking of the thinking process relatively easy (Stave, 2002) since the different versions of system maps of the subsequent thinking phases can be effortlessly presented on a few sheets of paper and/or photos after the process. And last

but not least, this ‘structured thinking style’ can be easily acquired and taught, no special training is needed for using it (Forrester, 2007).

The present research aimed at finding out more about the constructed mental models of participants on the topic of sustainable consumption, a key concept in ecological economics (see among others Princen, 1999; Ropke, 1999 and 2009) and the de-growth paradigm (Lorek–Fuchs, 2013). By discovering the cognitive constructions of sustainable consumption, one may also be able to identify policy measures that may not have been exploited in the past. The method of participatory system mapping constitutes a relatively novel experiment in the topic of sustainable consumption in ecological economics (Sedlacko et al., 2014 and Videira et al., 2014). System dynamics investigations normally aim at modelling complex systems within a given timeframe. Within the area of system dynamics, our research devised complex causality diagrams with a participatory approach, using the contribution of an expert and a lay panel. The reason behind the choice of two different panels was to benefit from the different viewpoints of experts and lay people and to be able to draw policy implications based on both perspectives.

The expert group consisted of experts dealing with sustainable consumption issues in the state, civil, academic or business sectors. Engaging lay people was considered highly important since they are the primary actors who “carry out” sustainable consumption. Hence, the experience and opinion of everyday consumers should be of utmost importance to policy-makers.

The tool of system mapping was applied in expert panels previously (Sedlacko et al, 2014 and Videira et al, 2014) but was not used to reveal lay people’ cognitive constructs. The present research in this sense aimed at a new kind of experiment to use the tool with lay people and find out if they can understand and deal with this kind of complicated tasks and handle the abstraction of this kind of modelling.

The two different panels had chosen two different foci on the topic of sustainable consumption. The expert panel had made a choice to focus on the obstacles to sustainable consumption. Therefore, the causality diagram as well as the complex causality map they constructed jointly were built around the need for a critical mass of consumers who practise sustainable consumption in order to reach systemic change. Relatedly, as another message in negative terms, the expert panel has also pointed out the incompatibility of widespread social inequalities and sustainable consumption.

In contrast, the lay panel agreed upon a topic with a more positive connotation, namely the role of ‘strong communities’ in sustainable consumption. Their cognitive systems map revolved around strong communities as the main trustees of sustainable consumption. Relatedly, the complex causality diagram of the lay expert panel has shown that civil, grassroot initiatives and the public space for community activities constitute the basis for sustainability and strong local economy and employment. In accord with the findings of previous research and EU sustainable consumption projects (Jackson, 2005), the lay panel of our systems mapping exercise has also arrived to the conclusion that locality (localisation) plays a key role in sustainable consumption.

Both foci on sustainable consumption may be considered highly relevant in terms of policy directions, one tackling the obstacles, while the other helping grassroot initiatives to support sustainable consumption. The present research may motivate further experiments with participatory systems mapping by ecological economists and points to directions for further research on sustainable consumption.

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