

Submission to the special session with the following title: **A complex but necessary interplay: complementing intrapersonal and systemic sustainability transitions.**

Title of Article

Making sense of sustainability transitions locally: how action research contributes to addressing societal challenges

Short Abstract/ Summary

Today's society is facing a broad array of societal challenges, such as an unstable economic system, climate change and lasting poverty. There are no straightforward solutions, rather these challenges ask for fundamental societal changes, that is, sustainability transitions. Faced with the question of how these challenges can be understood and dealt with, we argue for action research as a promising approach. Focusing on their localized manifestations, we ask whether and how action research can support understanding and addressing societal challenges and making sustainability meaningful locally. We tackle this question on the basis of two case studies in local communities based on principles of transition management. Our main finding is that societal challenges, sustainability and sustainability transitions acquire meaning through practice and interactions in the local context. Action research can offer a space in which alternative ideas (e.g., knowledge, future visions), practices (e.g., practical experiments, transformative action) and social relations (e.g., new actors) can emerge to further a sustainability transition.

Keywords: action research; sustainability transition; societal challenges; sustainability; transition management

Extended Abstract

Today's society must face numerous challenges, including climate change, the public debt crisis, an unstable financial and economic system, an ageing population, poverty and work migration flows. No straightforward solutions exist, as these challenges are disputed, normative, context-dependent and long-term, and involve multiple actors (Rittel and Webber 1973, Hisschemöller 1993). Following Grin et al. (2010), these challenges are symptomatic of or represent more fundamental persistent problems, which can only be resolved by a systemic shift, a transition. Although of a global nature, it is at the local scale – in urban neighborhoods, communities, towns, cities and regions – that we most noticeably interact with

these challenges. Here, they are contested, deconstructed and reconstructed, thereby becoming ‘indigenized’ (Appadurai 1990). How then, given their intrinsic diversity, can these challenges be understood and dealt with?

To answer this question, we propose a twofold approach: on the one hand, we relate societal challenges to debates about a desired future, that is, sustainability. On the other hand, we relate them to a process of change, that is, a transition. Combining these two concepts, Grin et al. (2010, p. 1) propose an understanding of sustainability transitions as ‘a radical transformation towards a sustainable society as a response to a number of persistent problems confronting contemporary modern societies’. There is a growing body of research analyzing these transitions as long-term radical changes of societal systems (Van den Bergh et al. 2011, Markard et al. 2012). While many transition scholars focus on the global scale, we aim to explore local manifestations. In doing so, we propose to use an action research approach, which seeks to put ‘social research to use for democratic social change’ (Greenwood and Levin 2007, p. 5).

The main aim of this article is to explore whether and how action research can support communities in understanding and addressing societal challenges and making sustainability meaningful locally. In addressing this question, we discuss the benefits and dilemmas of an action research approach. We draw upon our experiences as action researchers in two European communities, Rotterdam–Carnisse (the Netherlands) and Finkenstein (Austria). The former is a neighborhood often portrayed as impoverished and is inhabited by residents who feel stigmatized and powerless in improving their living environment. The latter is a rural community of high potential, due to its geographical, natural and cultural setting, and heritage. This has, however, been hampered by low participation, lacking social cohesion and conflicting interests between geographically dispersed community members. Action research helped us to create and maintain a space for interaction between all involved. Both societal challenges and sustainability acquire meaning in such an interactive space and become grounded in a specific location and context. We suggest that alternative ideas, practices and social relations can emerge from these spaces to address societal challenges. In consequence, intra-personal and systemic change are addressed in an interlinked way.

In Section 2, we begin by introducing the core concepts: sustainability linked to societal challenges, sustainability transitions as a change process to address these challenges and action research as a practice to combine understanding and addressing societal challenges. In Section 3, we introduce the specific action research approach we used, the community arena, before analyzing its practice in Finkenstein and Rotterdam–Carnisse in Section 4. We then discuss contextualized meanings of sustainability, the importance of interactive and geographical space in sustainability transitions and the role of the action researcher.