

CONFERENCE BRIEF

Signposts for future transformative research at the International Sustainability Transitions Conference 2015

International scientific conferences that bring together scholars on the same field to share and deepen dialogues and exchanges can be overwhelming and intense. With this Conference Brief, the DRIFT research team offers reflections and messages to take on board for the future steps in research from the International Sustainability Transitions Conference held in Brighton, August 25-28 2015.

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Title:

Signposts for future transformative research at the International Sustainability Transitions Conference

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transformative
social innovation
theory

by the ARTS project
Accelerating Transitions

TRAPESES

It is the annual Sustainability Transitions moment!

It is the IST conference again! Our annual reunion with transition scholars from all around the world to discuss, debate, share and plan for what makes, what it takes and what we know about wider transformative change. As DRIFT team, we enter the academic debate from different angles and with a great diversity of conceptual lenses and empirical insights.

With the keynote speeches aiming to inspire discussions and bringing new perspectives to on-going debates on the wider transformative changes and the way research interacts with them, we came to a diversity of reflections and messages to take home.

As DRIFT research team, we stand critical and sceptical to entrenched and unquestioned territories – be them theoretical or empirical- and with a strong transdisciplinary focus on our research, the messages to take home may signpost possible future research pathways.

International
Sustainability
Transitions
Conference **2015**

**Sustainability transitions
and wider transformative
change: historical roots and
future pathways**



From our reflections and critical summary notes, we gather six key messages:

- *Message #1: Towards Theoretical Plurality! As sustainability transitions scholars we already benefit from new theoretical frameworks that go beyond the multi-level perspective, and consider dynamics, agency and politics as starting points.*
- *Message #2: Look out for stalemates! While the whole field is searching for fast-pacing dynamics of transformative change, it may be also worth investigating what is not transitioning.*
- *Message #3: Show me the innovation! With a focus on fitting or disruptive innovations for sustainability transitions, the new focus areas should be on the transformative impact rather than the outreach innovations achieve.*
- *Message #4: Transitions and the City! Cities as empirical grounds to go beyond sectoral transitions and look closer at cross-sectoral and scale dynamics.*
- *Message #5: Experimenting as the means to instigate sustainability transitions!*
- *Message #6: Check your tools! Methodological issues, methods, concepts and frameworks and how they come together in sustainability transitions' research was a core topic of discussion during the small group sessions of the research agenda. Co-creation as a mode of engagement and operation!*

★ Jonas Torrens favorited



Flor Avelino @FlorAvelino · Sep 3

(1/7) @smithadrianpaul: transition research is not a machine rather a bunch of people asking & trying to answer profound questions #IST2015

Message #1: Towards Theoretical Plurality! As sustainability transitions scholars we already benefit from new theoretical frameworks that go beyond the multi-level perspective, and consider dynamics, agency and politics as starting points.

With a plethora of sessions still related to the multi-level perspective, discussions and debates also focused on:

- The ways regimes get destabilised, ways discourses and politics are examined and how to make sense of the complexity of transitions in the making. Appealing was the discussion on whether we can identify hotspots of friction (sessions D2 and L4), different types of struggle and conflict across phases (session I6), and the invigorating normative aspects of innovation.
- Andy Stirling and Saurabh Arora (session E5) presented different ‘flat’ models! Andy presented a scale-free perspective on streams during transitions, as an alternative to the MLP. It sounded a lot more correct, although it also presented a level of analysis akin to actor-network theory, as well as the associated challenges of operationalising the perspective. In that regard, by the way, the paper by Fjalar and Jan actually echoes many of the ideas voiced by Andy and Saurabh, while actually being more straightforward to apply.
- Is there an inherent tension between grappling with complexity and explanatory power of transition frameworks? (MLP vs Rhizomic approach; session E5). The question on the table is: Does more complexity mean less clarity?
- Conceptualising transitions in terms of interactions between different types of actors. This warrants discussions of different types of actors (e.g. civil society, entrepreneurs), actor roles and highlights issues of learning, power, strategies and social innovations. Actors and agency have been an increasing focus during the IST2015. Jan Rotmans defined transitions in his keynote as relating to the interactions between different types of actors – a view that resonated with several presentations across sessions that focus on actors and their interactions as the main drivers of transitions and governance. There have been calls for bringing different actors together in learning processes. Within different pillars of the transition research field, scholars focus on the role of entrepreneurs in niches, the role of civil society in transition processes as well as of the government in governance processes to navigate a transition.



In the session on the roles of civil society in sustainability transitions, it was presented that numerous ways we can understand and approach civil society’s role and impact in sustainability transitions. From the perspective of how it challenges policy space, how it can fill-in when and where the state retreats due to austerity or to policy change, or how civil society can be instrumentalised by neo-liberal agendas and lifestyle promoters were discussed. With a cascade of Pecha Kucha presentations from 6 female researchers from the projects of ARTS, TESS, PATHWAYS, TRANSIT and GLAMURS the session received multiple questions, comments and tweets.

What remains is that different questions can be asked on which forms of agency and which roles of agency we need to investigate in sustainability transitions and for doing so, new meso- and meta-theoretical frameworks are needed also going beyond single case study understandings.

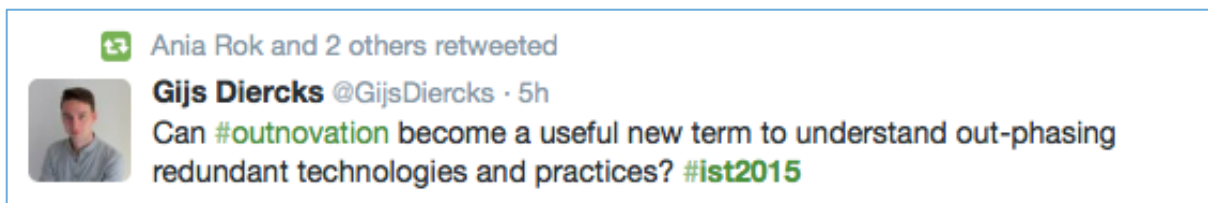
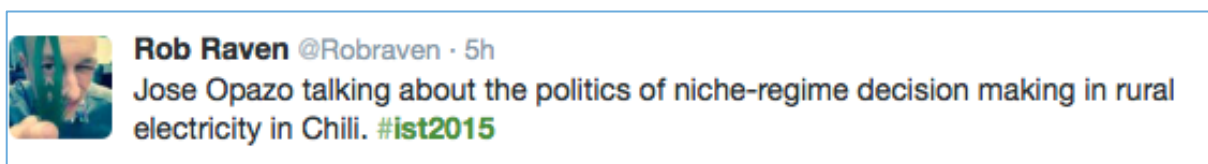


Session Picture: Role of civil society in sustainability transitions.

Overall the transition field moves from sectoral and system-level foci towards recognising more global and higher-level transition patterns. This includes considerations of ecological forces and planetary boundaries (resilience) as well as ‘landscape development’ or ‘game changers’. While the transitions field has implicitly and explicitly called for sustainability transitions against the background of highly unsustainable production and consumption patterns that are produced by lock-ins of socio-technical systems, this discussion is increasingly linked to the consideration of ecological limits and detrimental social, economic and ecological mega-trends. The keynote by Hans Bruyninckx from EEA called upon transition researchers to improve understanding of how sustainability transitions can be achieved to inform EU policymaking. In the discussion of that keynote Derk Loorbach pointed out that the sustainability transition should be more meaningfully framed as inevitable in the sense that our world is experiencing a transition “any way” and that there is the urgency to (try to) play into that.



In response to criticism and the need to link the transition research field to more global and ecological dynamics the dialogue session on “Governance of green growth in the energy sector” tried to link STS and SES thinking through the resilience concept – there are however still challenges to overcome the different frameworks, concepts and ontologies for integration. Additionally, there is a need to develop new frameworks beyond the MLP to understand the types of interactions driving (large-scale) change. The need to link the field up to other types of debates that are better fit to grasp the global discourse on sustainability, planetary boundaries and transformation, the transitions field is also increasingly linked up to questions of equity and developing country contexts.



Message #2: Look out for stalemates! While the whole field is searching for fast-pacing dynamics of transformative change, it may be also worth investigating what is not transitioning.

During the dialogue session on sustainable energy transitions as an object of political economy (D2), quite some interesting points were made. The first one was that the previous energy transitions were mainly *industrial* transitions, which meant that the ones that are not “transitioning” were the ones that were missing out, while the current energy transition is more of a climate induced one, which means that the costs of no transition are dispersed... The speaker (if not mistaken Matthew Lockwood) was pointing that this increases urgency but to my eyes this relates also to a potential reason why the transition is not really taking off. On the same session, Jessica Jewell, suggested that the current energy transition is more of a political transition, involving distributional issues, giving as an example the German case: the power has moved to the hands of the people, while the CO2 numbers have not really decreased.

The Research session on Sustainability transitions and wider transformative change, historical roots and future pathways was quite inspiring! Especially because there was finally some debate going on,

as keynote talks did not allow for this... One of the take home message, is that we should always keep in mind the *transition to what?* question. Johan Schot: Niches are critical but are they productive? To which kind of a transition? Adrian Smith was suggesting that local renewable energy initiatives have the potential to show the injustice of the energy system. An interesting discussion emerged with regards to hiding or not politics, by pointing or not what is sustainable and what not, by selecting our frontrunners etc.

Message #3: Show me the innovation! With a focus on fitting or disruptive innovations for sustainability transitions, the new focus areas should be on the transformative impact rather than the outreach innovations achieve.

Interesting papers were on the one hand the quite technical “Technology competition and variety: when does it take longer to diffuse?” by George Papachristos (F6), and van den Bergh and then the “Unleashing new entrants versus working with incumbents: a comparative multi-level analysis of the ongoing German and UK low-carbon electricity transitions (1990–2013)” by Geels et al. (A5) and the one on “The political economy of energy transitions: Demand management in Germany and the UK by Caroline Kuzemko” (J3). From the first one the modelling findings suggested that for a *faster* diffusion in high uncertainty, lower range of alternatives is beneficial, and vice versa. Of course a main comment that was made during the discussion of the paper was that faster diffusion leaves out the qualitative aspect, in that, is faster pace the best that we want to get from/for a transition? The author suggested that the market involves anyways some kind of qualitative selection. And from the second two, interesting insights emerged with regards to the difference between the two countries, who drives the transition and what limits the speed of it? (For the UK the existence of a nuclear-military complex was discussed by the second scholar.)

- Normative turn in innovation policy - increasing attention for need to provide direction for innovation, and sometimes even for deliberate lock-out of current products (outnovation), practices (fossilisation, disassociation,) or (sub)systems (sessions A3; J5; H5), observing increasing momentum for work on regime destabilisation.

- Quality of democracy was also addressed as explanatory factor for successful transitions (nuclear power in UK vs Germany; Johnstone & Stirling, session J5).





Another highlight was from the dialogue session on The role of civil society in sustainability transitions (K6) and more specifically Adina Dumitru who suggested reconceptualising lifestyles from a time-use approach: a lifestyle can be thus seen as an outcome of a multitude of decisions about how to use time undertaken at an individual level & a socially-shared symbolic entity which conveys particular meanings and thus enters a “social conversation” (source: an older ppt presentation of hers, as this time, presentations had no words at all, which made the session super powerful but meant that attendants have to dig for additional information!).

Message #4: Transitions and the City! Cities as empirical grounds to go beyond sectoral transitions and look closer at cross-sectoral and scale dynamics.


There have been several sessions on cities in which cities have been framed as a particular driver of (sustainability) transitions, as incubator of innovation and development and interaction between actors. The presentations from the ARTS team (Fransiska Enhert and Kristin Reiss from IOER, Dresden, Leen Gorissen from VITO on the city of Genk and Giorgia Silvestri from DRIFT on the city of Milan) among the many presentations that focused on the inter-tangled sectors under transitions in cities. With the ‘urban’ theme being an interesting ground for sustainability transition researchers since the 2011 Lund conference, we can reflect that urban sustainability transitions is becoming an interesting empirical and conceptual theme within the field.

Message #5: Experimenting as the means to instigate sustainability transitions!

In the session on experimentation with the focus on labs (session A6) as well as on the governance session of sustainability transitions, the same reflection came to mind: experimenting is inherent in the means we design or propose or even examine to have an impact in instigating sustainability transitions.

Franziska Stelzer looked at the starting assumption lies on the new role that science takes, more active and more engaged with societal problems. Conceptualizing the common characteristics of real-world laboratories – creating space for system innovation – experiments as best form of dealing with complexity, solution-oriented and solution-driven, addressed that real-world laboratories packed with expectations on how they play out in local dynamics. John Holmberg from Chalmers University of Technology, showed in his presentation that it is important to evaluate the role of the university in society and how universities can contribute to sustainability – it is important to introduce the students in the system to make change happen. The three key ideas behind structuring the interactions are: idea driven innovation, demand driven innovation and challenge driven innovation. Labs are important since they create safe environment for learning and interaction in the university setting – mainly with students.

Christopher Luediritz from Leuphana University, focused on sustainability transition experiments and how to examine their impact. With the main objective of the research to be to develop a generic evaluative scheme that facilitates appraisal and learning between the labs. The criteria for developing the evaluative scheme are summarised as: (a) generic, widely applicable, (b) comprehensive (lofic model of evaluation) (see Fraser et al 2009; Forrest and Wiek, 2014) (c) operational, defined criteria, illustrative examples, evaluative questions (d) formative, ex-ante evaluation, intermediate evaluation, ex-post evaluation. Processes performed in experiments / inputs= commitment is a very important element and it refers to willingness, promises, attitudes and interests of involved participants to explore intentionally radical change




Flor Avelino @FlorAvelino · Sep 3
 (3/7) Research agenda in small groups => good discussions & great questions: "Is the transition research field eternally emerging?" #IST2015

Message #6: Check your tools! Methodological issues, methods, concepts and frameworks and how they come together in sustainability transitions' research was a core topic of discussion during the small group sessions of the research agenda. Co-creation as a mode of engagement and operation!

On a more self-reflective meta-level, there are on-going discussions about a research agenda for the transitions community and whether or not this would be something desirable. Within these discussions, it was voiced that too little deepening is yet taking place in the research field, which requires one the one hand a taking stock of what has been done (in terms of what questions have been sought to answer and how) and what are the results, or mechanisms that have been found.

We find the need to move on from individual MLP analyses and always ask the question – so what, what are e.g. the implications for governance of/for transitions? (I had this question in the second governance session on Thursday afternoon, in which the presentations were all MLP analyses).



PJ Beers @PJ_Beers · 5h
 Scientific rigour in transition science should be about methods, not methodology. Methodological correctness diminishes relevance #ist2015