

Paper proposal for:

## **Politics and Governance in Sustainable socio-technical transitions**

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### **Making democratic sense of socio-technical transitions for sustainability**

*This paper presents a case study of how actors experience and interpret the relationship between systems innovation and democracy. It speaks to all three core themes of the conference, particularly theme B, on participation and legitimacy.*

#### **Abstract:**

In the face of persistent and complex policy problems, such as climate change many states are examining ways to reform to their production and consumption systems. The Dutch government, for example, has recently committed millions of Euros to transforming the practices and institutions of its agriculture, health, transportation, and energy systems. Central to these reforms is a new mode of network coordination – *transition management* – which attempts to create long-term change in large socio-technical systems by encouraging actors to innovate and experiment with new institutions and practices. Substantial intellectual effort is now being focussed on how to facilitate socio-technological transitions, and measure their effect on improved policy outcomes such as sustainability. But the broader democratic implications of these systems innovations remain unclear. In particular, how do these systems innovations operate in the context of existing institutions and norms of representative democracy?

This paper offers some empirical insights to this question by presenting an interpretive study of how actors understand and experience socio-technical transitions in a democratic context. The work presented here builds on a previous paper, in which I examined the inclusivity of collaborative arrangements associated with the Dutch energy transition program. My analysis of participants suggests that to date partnerships have been limited to the involvement of a select group of business, industry and government elites, and they exclude many. I concluded that at least in the case of energy transitions, the Dutch administration's attempt to steer networks and promote reform towards sustainability has been more concerned with fulfilling entrepreneurial and epistemic goals, than democratic ones.

In the proposed paper, I explore these issues further from the perspective of actors practising transition management. In particular I ask: how do those involved in transition programs conceptualise and experience system innovation in a democratic context? Drawing on extensive interviews with over 25 policy actors associated with energy reforms in the Netherlands, I characterise the key democratic perspectives put forward. I then relate these narratives to conventional norms of representative democracy, such as legitimacy (eg. input, output) and representation (eg. principal-agent, descriptive).

In the final section of the paper, I reflect on how these empirical insights inform ongoing debates on the governance of socio-technical transitions. On one level, the case study suggests that democratic matters should receive greater attention in discussions of socio-technical transitions than they have to date. On a broader level, the case highlights that to make ‘democratic’ sense of socio-technical transitions we need to move beyond conventional democratic norms, and consider more appropriate conceptualisations of democracy that appreciate the networked and fractured nature of contemporary politics (eg. Latour, Young). While this shift in democratic thought is consistent with recent debates on network governance, I argue that socio-technical transitions pose some particular challenges.