

Translating system innovation and new forms of governance to a ‘pristine’ policy context. Flemish experiences and a research agenda.

Erik Paredis – Ghent University (Centrum voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling/Centre for Sustainable Development)

In its Environmental Policy Plan 2003-2007, the Flemish government recognised the need to start studying the policy potentials and implications of concepts such as resource management, environmental space, system innovation and transition management. This led during 2004 and 2005 to the start of two experiments with transition management in the field of ‘sustainable living and building’ and ‘sustainable management of materials’. In 2006, the Flemish government adopted its first Strategy for Sustainable Development. In the context of this strategy the government finances a new Policy Research Centre, made up of research groups from different universities, with the aim of contributing to a scientific basis for its sustainable development policy. One of the selected research themes is system innovation for sustainable consumption and production, and new governance approaches (such as transition management) to encourage system innovation.

The paper will analyse some typical characteristics of the first Flemish experiences with system innovation and transition management and discuss possible approaches to orientate research in the next years.

One of the characteristics – related to the theme of ‘institutions and change’ – is that the transition experiments are initiated and coordinated by the Flemish environmental administration, an administration that has usually followed traditional approaches to environmental policy. The paper will analyse the dynamics underlying the origins of the new approach, the manner in which it has been translated institutionally and which constraints have been encountered. A particular field of interest is how this new approach is evaluated by the different actors involved and how they try to influence the process and results. Are actors willing to participate in an exercise, steered by the environmental administration, that aims at ‘disturbing the balance’ in the socio-technical regime they are involved in? why? and under which conditions?

A second characteristic in the Flemish context is the very limited systematic research and knowledge base (as well on system innovation as on new approaches to governance in field of sustainable consumption and production) on which the experiments have to build. Consequently, the first experiment (‘Sustainable Living and Building’) has largely used Dutch expertise, implementing the Dutch methodology of transition management in a Flemish policy environment. The paper will draw on this experience to dwell amongst other things on aspects of translating discourses on system innovation and new forms of governance to an almost ‘pristine’ policy context, and asking questions on how these discourses can gain legitimacy in such a context.

Building on the first experiments and keeping in mind the limited resources available for this kind of research in Flanders, the paper will propose a research agenda for the next years. The importance of linking to European networks and the expertise available will be discussed.