

International workshop:

‘Transitions to sustainable development: complexity, co-evolution and governance’

Background

Sustainability requires structural change at the level of systems of provision for human needs, e.g. in the realms of energy, mobility, water, food, shelter, health care, materials. Such a transition or system innovation provides a context for more specific innovations at the level of particular artefacts, institutions, ideas, and practices to diffuse and prosper. The concept of transition is one through which government, business, science and civil society acknowledge that sustainability demands radical change at a system level

A growing research community is studying the phenomenon of transitions from various scientific perspectives: complex systems science, innovation studies, ecosystem science, social theory and governance analysis. This emerging multidisciplinary field of science is characterised by a great deal of heterogeneity in approaches to the analysis, description and explanation of transitions and system innovations. Sustainable development forms a normative orientation for system innovation research, touching upon the key values in our lives: a balance between social-cultural, economic and ecological values.

In this rapidly evolving context several research groups from different countries have taken the initiative of organising a series of international workshops on ‘system innovations for sustainable development’. The objective of this series of workshops is to further explore the content of this new field of science and to make a significant contribution to the inter-disciplinary dialogue evolving around transitions and system innovations: to analyse overarching concepts, to discuss theoretical building blocks, to study the empirical material that is available, to draw lessons from transition research to date and to identify key issues for future research.

Aims of workshop

The first workshop will be organized around the themes of “Complexity, evolution and governance of transitions and system innovations”. The overall objectives of this workshop are

- (i) to provide a state-of-the-art conceptual overview of different, but potentially complementary scientific approaches for investigating transitions;
- (ii) to help bridging the gaps between these scientific disciplines in order to create a new research field ‘transition science’;
- (iii) to move towards a breakthrough in synthesising relevant parts of complex systems science and social theory and its application to transitions and system innovations.

In the workshop, top researchers in complex systems science, ecosystem science, social theory, post-normal science and governance will share their recent scientific progress with each other and with senior and junior researchers. The very idea is that experts in each of these fields present basic concepts from their work and discuss them extensively in interaction with experts from other disciplines. The challenge is to explore whether and in what manner these concepts can be interlinked with each other, and how they can be applied in practical case-studies. As outcome of this high-level workshop we intend to publish the advances of the workshop in a special issue of a suitable journal or an edited book volume.

The special issue or edited volume will consist of 6 papers or chapters integrating the state of the art, the opportunities for breakthroughs and directions for integrative research as well as a concluding paper written by the 6 key note speakers, identifying and presenting the potential and the challenges associated with the breakthroughs. This concluding paper or chapter presents the conclusions as the result of the intensive interaction in the workshop.

Workshop approach / format

We plan to assemble a group of around 10 leading top researchers, 10 senior researchers accompanied by around 10 promising junior researcher for a one-week intensive collaborative workshop. As organizing format for the workshop we propose a 'Dahlem-type' of workshop: very intense with a selective group of experts from various disciplines, aimed at producing a state-of-the-art conceptual overview of a new field emerging: transition science. Few presentations but intense discussions and interactions between participants will be the appropriate design to allow for a balance of creative and structured workflow. In order to make this happen, we will ask keynote speakers from the 5 scientific fields mentioned to prepare papers to be presented at the workshop. These papers present a state of the art of the field in relation to complexity science and social theory. Based on these papers other senior researchers in the respective fields will elaborate on this and present the outline of a research agenda aiming to achieve a breakthrough. And junior researchers are invited to come up with ideas and directions for integrative research to force the breakthrough, responding to the ideas in the form of commentaries to the papers produced by the leading researchers.

Papers and presentations, prepared in collaboration well in advance of the workshop, will be used to structure and guide the interaction in the workshop. In the workshop less than one third of the time will be used on presentations and the main focus will be on the interaction and discussion. Junior researchers will play a prominent role as they are expected to come up with new ideas to force the breakthrough.

Organization

The workshop will be organized from **20-24 November 2006**, in Egmond aan Zee along the coast in the Netherlands. Travel and accommodation costs will be reimbursed. For those who are invited to write a paper a fee will be available.

On behalf of the organization committee we would like to invite you for this exclusive and challenging workshop. This invitation is strictly personal and cannot be passed on to colleagues.

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