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GOVERNANCE IN TIMES OF SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION – BUSINESS AS USUAL?

GOVERNANÇA EM TEMPOS DE TRANSFORMAÇÃO SUSTENTÁVEL – NEGÓCIOS COMO DE COSTUME?

Ulrike Grabski-KIERON
University of Muenster, Germany
kieron@uni-muenster.de

Abstract

The text takes up current discourses on socio-ecological transformation and places them in the context of issues that are currently arising in the countries of the EU and beyond. They concern implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in spatial development under the paradigm of transformation, comprehended as a critical change of the socio-ecological system and economy. Behind this background the term “sustainable transformation” is deduced. From a spatial and planning science perspective some aspects and development paths of interdisciplinary transformation research are outlined. The importance of governance for the implementation of sustainable transformation in regional development is emphasised. From this background selected elements and work phases of governance are presented. They are submitted to closer view in order to assess whether long established working methods and phases - characteristics of regional governance - also meet the requirements for opening the avenues to transformative regional development in future. Some needs for modification are addressed. The explanations are based on findings of governance research in Germany and on the author's experience, particularly in regional development in Germany and France.

Keywords: Regional governance, transformation, sustainability, regional development

Resumo

O texto retoma os discursos atuais sobre a transformação socioecológica e coloca-os no contexto de questões que estão atualmente a surgir nos países da UE e não só. Dizem respeito à implementação dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável da ONU no desenvolvimento espacial sob o paradigma da transformação, entendida como uma mudança crítica do sistema socioecológico e da economia. Por detrás deste pano de fundo deduz-se o termo “transformação sustentável”. Numa perspetiva de ciência espacial e de planeamento, são delineados alguns aspetos e caminhos de desenvolvimento da investigação de transformação interdisciplinar. É enfatizada a importância da governação para a implementação da transformação sustentável no desenvolvimento regional. A partir deste contexto são apresentados elementos selecionados e fases de trabalho da governação. São sujeitas a uma análise mais detalhada para avaliar se os métodos e fases de trabalho há muito estabelecidos - características da governação regional - também cumprem os requisitos para abrir caminhos para o desenvolvimento regional transformador no futuro. Algumas necessidades de modificação são abordadas. As explicações baseiam-se nas descobertas da investigação sobre a governação na Alemanha e na experiência do autor, particularmente no desenvolvimento regional na Alemanha e em França.

Palavras-chave: Governação regional, transformação, sustentabilidade, desenvolvimento regional

1- Introduction – Rethinking sustainability

The manifold socio-economic and ecological crises of the present as well as visible current changes in land use patterns - such as expanding urbanisation, increasing energy production on farm

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land or the mining of precious natural resources fostered on a global scale and many others are fuelling new thinking about sustainable future development. Under the regimes of a globalized economy, migration and other megatrends like energy transition and digitalisation, current spatial development is characterized by ongoing changes of urban-rural connectedness and interdependencies. At the same time enhanced territorially differentiated development paths become obvious. Territorial potentials and their acknowledgement are more and more reevaluated in accordance with aspects of resilience and sustainability. Established development paradigms and models of spatial development are called into question and are confronted with discourses on alternative designs. All these phenomena raise questions whether the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs), which are internationally accepted and governed since the UN Conference of Rio de Janeiro 1992 (UN 1992) and underlined by the UN Agenda 2030 (UN 2015), can actually (still) be achieved.

In recent years, critical discourses have questioned the validity of these to date unmodified goals and have increasingly led to approaches which address sustainability only through a profound and comprehensive socio-ecological transformation. This concerns all spheres of living, working, consumption, mobility etc.. It is multi-sectoral in this sense. It challenges local, regional and national development and demands new impetus to international and global policies. This transformation is no longer aiming at the sole question of an ecological modernisation of the development of prosperity, but is fostering the need of an all-pervading structural-socio-ecological upheaval. For both, strict standards are applied deduced from the limitations of natural ecosystems and resources as well as from generally accepted values of socio-ecological justice and global participation. Conceptual approaches such as "Sufficiency as a Strategy of Enough" (SRU 2024), Degrowth or Post-growth (Koch, Frambach 2024) or the “Ökonomie der Großzügigkeit” (Economy of Generosity) (Luks 2023) are just a few examples of these to agree with current debates.

However the socio-ecological transformation" is less about "the big bang". Rather, it is more about diverse, interconnected, small-scale and system-penetrating transformations, which affect spatial development at all levels. These small-scaled transformations are determined by their own socio-ecological settings and generate their own fields of action, demanding new approaches to deal with upcoming structural and functional changes. These can be configured within the following seven arenas of transformation (Schneidewind 2019): “prosperity and consumption, energy, resources, mobility, nutrition, urban development and industry”. At present critical turning points towards an overall need for transformation are inherent in each of them (Schneidewind 2019).

In this context, the term “transformation” is not only monopolized by social, environmental and spatial sciences (Bauriedl et.al 2021). Becoming an interdisciplinary major scientific issue since the 1990s, when discourses on sustainability gained importance, different approaches of research, also in economics and political sciences, have been followed since then. The fact that the term “transformation” itself has roots in economic sciences of the mid 1940s (Polanyi (orig.: 1944) 2024) is sometimes forced onto the sidelines. Overall objectives of modern transformation research are to elaborate fundamental theories, to analyse and evaluate concepts, and to give impetus to innovative practices.

Since the1990s approaches under the term of “transition research” have attracted major interest in spatial and environmental sciences. They can be traced back to the research school on sustainability in the Netherlands at that time: Here the conceptual research framework led to approaches and discourses that focussed strongly on transformative development processes in a multi-level perspective (Sommer 2024). Research followed the objectives to analyse and explain the inherent driving forces and interdependencies, which were interpreted as different spheres of influence such as technologies, actors, institutions etc. (Avelino et.al 2016). These approaches have maintained their importance until the present. There is no doubt that they have contributed to the comprehension of socio-ecological transformation in terms of its key elements, driving forces and mechanism (Held 2022). Finally, this field of research has enlarged the knowledge base in order to find pathways to future transformative development processes.

In recent years impulses from environmental sociology have also influenced the understanding of transformation by pointing out that the paradigm of socio-ecological transformation ultimately leads to new social “relations to nature” (Hummel et. al. 2024, 18). These are expressed in new social debates about the ecosystemic foundations of life, about their values and about new patterns of social interaction, behaviour and socio-cultural practices, as at present can already be seen in the struggle for new mobility, alternative energy production or new regional or local food systems. Socio-ecological transformation therefore refers to the totality of these substantial and systemic upheavals, and in this respect it reaches beyond the concept of sustainability of the 1990s. Sustainability is now being reinterpreted in terms of this transformation aiming at systemic change. The term "sustainable transformation" enters the arena.

The actual understanding of this transformation includes a new balance, or rather a new relationship of responsibility, between civil society, business, politics and science. What this means for transformation research, its task and positioning in such transformation processes and ultimately for the self-image of researchers themselves has now been explained in many ways (UBA 2017, WBGU 2011, Maikemper et. al 2022, Howaldt, Schwarz 2024, Kopfmüller et.al 2024).

The UN's Sustainability Goals of Agenda 21 (UN 1992) and Agenda 2030 (UN 2015) remain an important basic framework for this transformation. They primarily provide "normative orientation" (Henkel et. al. 2023, p. 11). The experience gained since the 1990s in implementing these goals on one hand and the associated action agendas on different levels on the other are the base on which future transformative development can be built. However there is a dilemma: Our experiences in practical implementation have revealed numerous failures such as inconsistencies, conflicts of objectives and values, a lack of conceptual clarity or obstacles due to different understandings, interests or competence deficits of involved actors (Henkel et. al. 2023, Klepp, Hein 2024). Against this background, some scientists rightly demand that a further step towards a sustainable transformation is only possible with critical reflection, analysis and explanation of these critical aspects. The time is now, when the fossil fuel era is phasing out (Bauriedl et. al. 2021) and the demand for profound changes in all spheres of living and economy to the point of “generating something new” gets more and more obvious.

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2- Governance – imperative for transformative spatial development

Sustainable transformation is a process of steering, decision-making, implementing and evaluation. In terms of regional and local development, this bundle of assignments becoming apparent requires governance. In democratic societies this is understood as a joint management task in which public and non-public actors are assigned competences to participate in development processes and also to take on responsibilities in realising measures and projects (Grabski-Kieron 2024). However it has to be stated, that in different EU countries governance practices differ according to different socio-cultural and historically evolved planning cultures. There is no doubt that EU policy by its political guidelines and funding programmes for spatial development has over time contributed to the significance of governance within national planning systems. Last but not least, the Sustainability Goals of UN Agenda 21 (UN 1992, UN 2015) have provided a wide range of impetus for governance processes at local, regional, national and international level. In parallel governance research has made profound progress. The local and, moreover, the regional level offer the ideal framing for transformative spatial development: They allow people to identify themselves with their surroundings, to find their particular fields of social interaction and communication. Last but not least measures taken in local or regional development have a direct spatial impact and become visible. The emphasis on regional and local governance may not push aside the fact that governance is not restricted to non-statutory planning only. It comprehends both: non-statutory and statutory spatial planning. The latter, becoming apparent e.g. in regional planning, is embedded in a specific national legal framework. It defines the set of planning instruments as well the given institutional environment. Statutory regional planning opens the avenue to comprehensive adjustments between public and private interests. In future, certain demands on critical infrastructures will constitute a planning concern of increasing importance. Thus, spatial development also asks for statutory planning in order to safeguard the concern and to integrate it in a conflict-minimized spatial development in the long term. The future supply of drinking water of good quality, as it is defined in the UN Sustainable Goals (UN 1992, UN 2015), is among others such a major issue in regional development and may serve as an illustrative example for it.

3- Governance for sustainable transformation – no “business as usual”

As it is described further below, sustainable transformation demands a new relationship of responsibility between civil society, business and public actors. In governance processes, elements and procedural steps are inherent that are valuable for actually implementing transformative spatial development. Since the late 1980s of the twentieth century, when planning culture in the western democratic hemisphere began to change from an overall state-driven planning to an understanding of planning as a comprehensive governance process, a broad range of experiences in these processes exists. Regarding the principles of governance, e.g. participation, integrated and actor-orientated planning, governance offers fundamental opportunities to contribute to sustainable transformation. It opens corridors for empowering the above mentioned new relationship of responsibility between civil

society, business and public actors: The communication of competences, capacity building, exchange of ideas and positioning of objectives and projects are inherent working steps. Moreover governance is on one hand a strategic process which enables actors to conceive visions of future development of their home-region, town or village. On the other hand, it is an operational planning process and, as such, it aims at transferring accepted ideas into measures and projects and to make them real in the development process (Grabski-Kieron, Arens 2024). However the challenge of sustainable transformation puts into question whether established methods, procedures and planning tools need to be readjusted in order to meet future duties and responsibilities. A critical debate may lean on the following aspects.

4- Sustainable transformation emphasizes the need for a balance between strategic and operational planning

All too often today regional development processes are submitted to the pressure of increasing demands of rapid project success and visible measures. Even current funding programmes are orientated at this “philosophy of quick and visible success” due to defined financing and evaluating periods. Long term strategic approaches come off worst, but these are fundamental for a profound systematic change as fundamental key elements of a sustainable transformation.

Strategy development begins with visionary thinking. Visionary work is an essential feature of strategic planning (Wiechmann 2016). It opens up the necessary thinking spaces. Communication between those involved offers the opportunity to move from individual to shared visions. The governance process must offer stakeholders the time and space to creatively and in a visionary way address the future viability of the region. This is also a learning process that includes encouragement to think "outside the box" in terms of visions for the future.

Strategies combine visions of the future with possible corridors of action. Strategy development is based on openness and diversity of perspective. It draws on the different action practices and horizons of experience of those who are involved. At the same time it is a collective and iterative process of exchange and learning, which exactly meets the demand to turn regional development to a transformative change. On the path to consensus, there are loops of feedback, of comparing and filtering. Strategies provide a guideline that a regional development process can follow until the measures and projects are finalised in operational planning.

5- Sustainable transformation requires extended regional management

Regional management can be understood as the totality of all technical and planning tasks and organisational methods required in a regional development process (Bröckling, Olbrich 2023). Regional management supports the actors in fulfilling their responsibility for regional development. Regional management initiates, activates, accompanies, bundles and administers budgets and funding.

In the context of sustainable transformation a broader understanding of regional management is needed: There must be room for manoeuvre in order to open up the above-mentioned thinking spaces

for the stakeholders. It is also up to regional management to show ways in which joint learning can succeed in the regional development process and to help to organise this. The complexity of the topic of sustainable transformation must be broken down and communicated to the stakeholders. This transfer has to be designed in such a way that the involved actors can deal with sustainability in terms of their home-region, understand different explanatory worlds and recognise possible lines of action for the sustainability of the region. Social competence in regional management thus goes beyond "old-style" communication and networking. Co-operation with partners from the education sector is the first option. This must also be organised. In future regional management will therefore assume more than ever the role as a partner of "transformative education" (Koch, Frambach 2024, p. 128). Once governance processes have been initiated, they offer a boost and a great opportunity to advance the necessary "sensitising system knowledge" on the topic of sustainable transformation in the region (ibid. p. 126).

6- Communication and networking must be consistently focussed on regionally specific issues of sustainable transformation

This is a logical consequence of the above mentioned aspects. Experience shows that the "jungle" of small-scale projects in regional development often generates the risk that the holistic view of the "system of sustainable transformation" degrades. It is the task of regional management to keep the "red thread" in hand and to constantly communicate it in the network. Addressing new relevant stakeholders and newly introduced digital mediation formats are also parts of this. The high standards must not obscure the fact that selectivity and partiality are inherent dimensions of sustainable transformation. This follows from the fact that strategy work is always influenced by the actors' horizon of experience and that the ability to reach consensus in spatial development presupposes that strands of action are selected in the course of negotiation processes. Regional management faces a difficult double task: On one hand, arrangements for maintaining the relevance of interfaces in the "systemic whole" must be found and kept “alive” for the decision-making process vis-à-vis the stakeholders; simultaneously it must assist in breaking down the illusion that a sustainable transformation in its complexity can be realized "from a single source", e.g. in one funding period (Hesse 2020).

7- Sustainable transformation requires effective interfaces between statutory spatial planning and not-statutory, actor-based development processes

This field of action unfolds between two poles: The first one concerns the integration of strategic actor-based “informal” objectives as results of the stakeholder-driven negotiation process in statutory regional planning; the second one is related to the mandate of spatial planning to safeguard the interests of the common good and the precautionary principle in regional development. Although not all “informal” objectives are relevant to spatial planning, e.g. the development of regional food systems, there are also many objectives that particularly require spatial planning coverage, as e.g. it applies to infrastructural climate adaptation in terms of territorial flood prevention

Spatial planning and informal development follow different logics of action. The orientation towards the common good and the precautionary principle of spatial planning are often neglected. Interfaces between the two spheres are not optimally recognised in terms of synergy potentials. However these synergy potentials are important pillars for sustainable transformation. For Germany it can be stated, that regional development is still far too often characterized by these interface deficits, but as the subject affects the given practices of multi-level- and multi-actor-collaboration inside every single national planning system, the subject should not be generalized. In Germany valuable discourses are going on, which address the future role of cross-sectional spatial planning in the context of post-growth and sustainability. They give rise to the idea of a "collective growth-independent spatial organisation" (Lamker, Dieckhoff 2020, p. 369, Hofmeister et. al 2021). Debates like these can help to minimise existing tensions between private and public stakeholders within the described planning and development processes.

8- Sustainable transformation focusses on integrated planning and action

The management of this interface between statutory spatial planning and stakeholder-led development is already part of integrated planning and action. This aims at tapping synergy potentials for regional development in a co-operative working process. Whereas in earlier integrated development the focus was e.g. on generating regional value chains, at present in the context of sustainable transformation it becomes increasingly important to unlock innovation potential in the region and to ensure the transfer of innovation, e.g. in order to establish structures of an effective circular economy. This requires coordinated planning and action at different levels and in different transformation arenas.

Integrated rural development is nothing new in the development of rural areas in Germany and Europe (Grabski-Kieron 2024). However the interpretation of the term has changed repeatedly over the decades. Nowadays integrated, i.e. cross-sectoral planning can quickly get out of perspective due to sometimes existing dominance of individual topics or of small-scale project funding. In addition some regions are under pressure to become active as it may concern the expansion of alternative energy-production sites appropriate to defined political targets. A major issue like this, well communicated and largely accepted by the civil society, can generate he power to displace integrated approaches in the concerned regional development. Working with and on strategies is ultimately of particular importance in order to avoid it.

9- Sustainable transformation requires consistently aligned funding programmes

Regional development is supported by a wide range of political funding programmes, whether at EU or national level in the member states. The definition of funding programmes, funding conditions, etc. raises questions as to whether these instruments are really suitable for sustainable transformation. A recent study by the University of Oldenburg, which examined not only spatial planning documents but also LEADER funding programs in the period of 2014 -2020 in the Weser-Ems region in Lower Saxony

comes to the conclusion that only a limited number of projects funded by LEADER have real links to the "arenas of transformation" mentioned at the beginning. The "classic" projects for economic regional development, which also correspond to the LEADER approach, dominate. The study points to the potential for sustainable transformation and names possible corridors of action between policy and planning or regional development (Heuer et. al 2024). It can be assumed that this result is not an isolated case. The study points out how research is essential in order to provide a basis for future policy advice for the appropriate revision of funding programmes. Above all political will for sustainable transformation is the essential precondition for it.

10-Conclusion

Transformation and sustainable spatial development are major issues of the present. Discourses on transformation raise questions as to how the global sustainability goals can actually be implemented against the backdrop of the current multi-crises. A gap between theoretical knowledge of transformation on one hand and practices in transformative spatial development on the other become obvious. Governance in regional development offers a suitable framework for action, that enables actors to cooperate on sustainable transformation in the sense of future viability. As a wide range of experiences in governance processes exists, in the meantime questions arise whether transformation generates new demands to modify given practices. The described aspects show that future governance for transformative regional development may not continue in the sense of "business as usual". They can be used to "leverage" the potential inherent in governance structures and processes for the implementation of sustainable transformation.

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