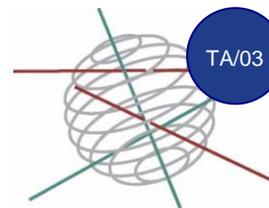


CONSENTSUS - Results



Construction of Scenarios and Exploration of Transition Pathways for Sustainable Consumption Patterns

DURATION OF THE PROJECT
15/12/2066 - 30/04/2011

BUDGET
790.035 €

KEYWORDS

Sustainable consumption, transition management, system innovations, scenarios, governance, niche, local food systems

CONTEXT

Within the policy and science community concerned with sustainable development, it is widely accepted that the first decades of the 21st century are a crucial turning point for the world community. Widespread poverty, growing inequality between and within a lot of countries, increasing pressures on vital ecosystems and ecosystem services combined with an intensive process of economic and cultural globalisation present enormous challenges for a world which aims for some form of sustainable development. Policy-makers, civil society organisations and scientists alike are looking for tools, concepts, approaches, theories... which can help in orienting policy in a way that a more sustainable development would become possible. It could be that the challenges of sustainable development are translated into equally important challenges with regard to the governance of sustainable development. Transition approaches - and among them 'Transition management' (TM) - have been increasingly popular alternative 'tools' in Northern Europe to conceive such shift in the governance of sustainable development.

CONSENTSUS ("CONstruction of ScENarios and exploration of Transition pathways for SUSTainable consumption patterns") focuses on 2 crucial aspects - and moments - of TM approaches:

- Phase 1 was dedicated to an exploration of the significance and the conduct of scenario constructions identifying and discussing alternatives to the current food consumption regime. Phase 1 allowed - via a case study in the realm of food consumption - to identify and order the avenues towards a sustainable consumption mode of our societies;
- during Phase 2, we worked on one of these prospectively identified transition pathways and tried to understand the mechanics, dynamics and governance of a specific 'niche' of food consumption patterns. The objective was, once that a particular transition pathway was identified, to comprehend how alternative consumption behaviour could be "up-scaled" (i.e. generalized).

Objectives

The objective of the first phase (2007-2008) of the Consensus project was to investigate and experiment how scenarios can be developed, applied and validated within the issue-domain of sustainable consumption, more particularly of sustainable food consumption.

During this phase, three scenarios were collaboratively built during a series of participatory workshops with representatives of the main food regime stakeholders.

Each of the scenarios was linked to one amongst three strategies for a sustainable consumption, namely the "eco-efficiency" (reducing the ecological load per unit of consumption), "decommodification" (reducing the weight of market forces in the determination of consumption) and "sufficiency" (reducing the weight of consumerism) strategies.

The originally proposed phase 2 (2009-2011) of the CONSENTSUS project was oriented towards an exploration of "transition management" as a governance approach by performing a further case study (implementing an agenda of action research). Work Package 5 (WP5) was to analyse "transition management" as a concept and set up an experimental "transition arena" to develop a detailed backcasting exercise (i.e. specifying precise "transition pathways") for the particular consumption theme (i.e. food consumption). WP6 would model the transitions developed in WP5. WP7 would investigate whether "transition management" could be applied in the Belgian governance context and WP8 would analyse the potentials of ICT-techniques in participatory processes needed within "transition management"-practice, amongst other things through a moderated internet forum.

During phase 1 of the project, our insights in the field of TM - and the field itself - have evolved. We pointed out some of the major underdeveloped areas in the field such as the role of consumption and consumers (some of these items are discussed in Paredis 2008). We also made contacts with the European and Dutch networks of transition scientists. Finally, a very first literature base on the relationships between TM and consumption emerged (see for instance, Smith, 2005, Shove & Walker, 2007 ; 2010, Seyfang & Smith, 2007 ; 2009, Spaargaren *et al.*, 2011, Grin, 2011). Consequently, all this has led the research team to conclude that some changes of accent were necessary for phase 2. Very synthetically, the change could be characterised as replacing "transition management" as central theme to the second phase of CONSENTSUS with "system innovation and governance for system innovation". The project concentrated during phase 2 hence on the exploration and analysis of system innovations in household consumption patterns. As an operational starting point the project oriented its exploration onto the level of what could be termed being existing 'niches of systemic socio-technical innovation in consumption', i.e. with a case study on one particular niche: local food networks.



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By changing the accent of CONSENTSUS, the workplan for phase 2 was adapted as follows:

WP5 focused on the implications of 'system innovations' on everyday life, i.e. at the individual consumer level. Due to a complete lack of quantitative data about the existing consumption niches in Belgium, the foreseen modelling effort of WP6 was adapted towards a much more fundamental construction of qualitative-quantitative knowledge (i.e. data) on the dynamics and representations of existing consumption niches in the area of the project, i.e. on local food networks. WP7 explored the 'governance of system innovation', with 'consumption niches' being the empirical material used. The focus of WP7 was to explore the current governance of (what was identified as) existing system innovations in the realm of consumption; i.e. the governance of a consumption niche. Questions of importance were: can alternative consumption niches be influenced and steered by a range of societal actors, amongst which governments? Which policy tools and instruments are deployable? How are these fitting to the Belgian context? Similarly to the focus in WP5, WP7 focused on the question of how governance approaches to niches can be applied to consumers and consumption. As a consequence of this change in focus, the original WP8 was abandoned. WP8 - aiming at developing and using procedural techniques for participation at the level of small-scale group interaction - had been elaborated mainly in order to inform the participation within the "transition arenas", and was thus not relevant anymore. In order to be able to link up with the research network on TM, and discuss results from the CONSENTSUS project, the original idea in WP8 - organizing an internet forum - is replaced by a face-to-face seminar with a small group of international researchers. The forthcoming initiative (+/- April 2011) will be formally hooked on to WP7, and gives subsequently rise to a (requested) project extension until end of April 2011.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of phase 1 show that the scenarios and the deduced consumer perspectives primarily aim at generating learning effects more specifically by stimulating debate in research, stakeholder and mainstream arenas. Framing alternative food consumption practices through structured and discourse-based scenario construction can potentially support bridging the gap between academic research and political debate and/or introduce consumption policy to a more encompassing socio-cultural perspective on the issue. The analysis on the consumer perspectives shows that consumer identity consists of more than merely consumer choice, as is often implied in academic research or public campaigning addressing consumption.

The normative discourse approach – in this project generated by means of the decomposition analysis – provides a formal (yet not inclusive) ground to communicate on the relationship between current food consumption behaviour and sustainability goals. The normative discourse methodology could be further tested using different 'applications', i.e. re-doing the scenario exercise with other themes and different groups. The method could for instance be applied in an educational setting, aiming at introducing sustainability principles. Or, the other way around, the robustness of the principles as such could be tested through scenario development. Such kind of endeavors can yield a basis to connect normative and empirical dimensions in research in Habermasian terms.

Scenario exercises harbor potential to streamline a more deepened debate and the potential transformative changes in future governance. However as long as the intrinsic processes of democratic structures remain dictated by short term electoral and economic goals the qualitative system changes as they proposed and understood in the scenarios cannot be straightforwardly considered.

Among the explored scenarios, phase 1 identified a preferred scenario among stakeholders: decommodification, which we took as the overarching starting point for Phase 2 of Consentsus. Decommodification can be synthesized as a reinvention of structures and habits of exchange of goods and services, or - in other terms – as a reinvention of our current prevalent market practices in consumption.

Phase 2 focused on a specific case study: Belgian food teams. Food teams are operationalisations of alternative food consumption systems in which groups of consumers co-construct an alternative, collective system to organize their food provision. Food teams are in relatively close contact with groups of producers, and insist particularly on the active promotion of sustainable (local and in most cases organic) agriculture. For this double characteristic, i.e. collective re-organisations of an economic supply-demand relationship, those local food systems can be interpreted as being 'sustainable experimentations' which operationalize a programme of 'decommodification'. Local Food Systems/Networks are 'niches', which could be exemplary of the sort of systemic transitions that need to be imagined to render more sustainable the wider food system. Chapter I of the report defines 'alternative food networks' and 'local food systems', draws the state-of-the-art in the field and presents more particularly the system of food teams, especially in Belgium. Chapter II examines the internal mechanics which are operating in the selected 'niche', and more particularly practices and discourses within Belgian food teams, based on two case studies.

The first case study investigates the consumers of Flemish food teams (*Voedselteam*) through a "practice approach". It shows how the practice of being member of a *Voedselteam* is a dynamic process in which the connections between agency, material-functional structure and socio-cultural structure are still unstable.

The second case study analyses the dynamics within and between the Walloon and Brussels food teams, based on two surveys. These underline common attitudes towards food teams as well as more specific profiles of participants in these groups.

Chapter III explores the external linkages between the niche and its regime, by focusing on the relationships between Belgian food teams and their institutional environment in a governance perspective. Obstacles and opportunities for the development of food teams were identified in the institutional context in which food teams interact (through both public and private actors), with some differences between the three regional systems.



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As a way of conclusion and formulation of policy recommendations, Chapter IV presents a preliminary integration of the results of the internal and external mechanics. The integration is organized around an attempt to construct prospective – forward-looking - elements with regard to the evolution of food teams in Belgium and of the current food provisioning system. These prospective elements present to a certain extent the main challenges for the transition of the food provisioning and consumption systems in Belgium. Let's develop further the main conclusion.

A TYPOLOGY OF CONSUMERS WITHIN THE REGIME

On the basis of existing studies of consumer behaviour, motivation and perceptions it is possible to draw a map of the main reasons determining consumer choice with regard to types of shops and products. Generally speaking, it appears that the majority of consumers consider food shopping not as pleasure but mainly as drudgery.

Moreover, counter to the main discourse of the market, it seems that the consumers give more significance to the proximity rather than the prices in their choice of a shop. For food teams their might be a number of conclusions which could be drawn.

First of all, it seems like there is a link between the attitude toward food shopping and the heterogeneity and, in some ways, the frequency of the retailing sectors visited. Those who have a utilitarian relationship to shopping and who see food shopping as drudgery go to few different distributive sectors, once or twice a week .

They value the functionality, the practicality of the shops and the diversity, the low price of the products. The study underlines the volatility of these types of customers: there is more defection, less loyalty towards a particular shop for those who rarely go to the local shops. On the other hand, a hedonistic attitude to food consumption is associated with the increase in the heterogeneity and the frequency of the distributions sectors visited. Food teams participants can most probably be classified in the last category described. It signifies that most of them don't limit themselves to the products bought in food teams and they probably frequent different distribution sectors according to their other needs. In order to raise the importance of the local food networks in the food consumption patterns, it would thus be important to multiply and diversify the products sold in these niches.

Second, it appears that the main challenge for the transition to the regime towards more sustainable patterns of consumptions will be to attract "adepts of mass consumption" and consumers which are deeply "conquered by the hard discount" who are mostly sensitive to the convenience, rapidity of the shopping and their budgets. The importance given to convenience also influences the choice of the products bought, for instance via the increase of the consumption of ready-made dishes.

FOUNDATIONS FOR TRANSITION PATHWAYS.

On top of this refined characteristic of consumers within the regime – even if very partial, because the typology is quite rough – we can suggest possible scenarios of transitions towards more sustainable patterns of consumption. Two (somehow opposite) obvious scenarios can be considered: the adaptation of the niche to some characteristics of the regime, on the one hand; or the adaptation of the regime to some characteristics of the niche, on the other hand.

ADAPTATION OF THE REGIME TO SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NICHE

A possible future scenario to conciliate the regime and the niche would be to adapt the regime to some characteristics of the niche.

Concretely, that would mean keep the characteristics of the products – local, organic, ethical... – within the niche but within the convenience of the structure known in the regime – that is to say the supermarkets. In other words, using the theoretical framework of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), it means enhancing some principles of the niches (trust, locality, fairness) inside the market world and the industrial world..

This scenario is not fictional: there are already organic mini-markets as well as products labelled ethical, organic and local (Belgian) in most supermarkets. However, an important question for our research is to evaluate whether this scenario does really foster wider transition of the sector toward more sustainability? There can be some doubts if we consider, for instance, the criticisms made to organic products sold nowadays in supermarkets: they have all the formal characteristics to be labelled organic, but they do not encompass the food teams' philosophy and cannot be really considered sustainable as they often come from the other side of the world and the packaging is overweening.

ADAPTATION OF THE NICHE TO SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REGIME

This adaptation of the niche to some characteristics of the regime can take two main directions. As explained before, we consider food teams as a kind of de-commodification (de-marketisation) of food consumption. In fine, limiting the influence of markets implies to increase the influence of other alternative systems. The two directions that could be taken in possible future evolution may be either towards the market (multifunctional consumption) or towards the state (i.e. more public support).



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INTERMEDIARY SOLUTION? THE MULTIFUNCTIONALITY OF CONSUMPTION

One of the main specificities of food teams is - using Boltanski and Thévenot concepts - to combine different worlds: the market world but also the domestic world, the political world and the environmental world (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1991). This specificity can be understood as a form of multifunctionality of consumption. To further develop this idea of multifunctional consumption, it is useful to refer to the use of this concept in agriculture – its origin - and its possible link with Transition approaches. In this context, multifunctionality refers to the functions or benefits generated by agriculture beyond the mere production of food (and fiber) that farmers sell in the marketplace.

These benefits typically include contribution to the vitality of rural communities (through maintenance of family farming, rural employment and cultural heritage), biological diversity (even if mainstream agriculture has been identified as the main stressor to biodiversity), recreation and tourism, soil and water health, bio-energy, landscape, food quality and safety, animal welfare... How can this idea of multifunctionality inspire a possible transition pathway towards more sustainable patterns of consumptions through food teams?

We imagined the creation of what we called a « food house », that is to say a shop with all the traditional functionalities of a shop (in this way different from the place where the meetings of the food teams take place), but where it would also be possible to provide other functions such as continuous learning, discussions and solidarity with the local producers, to get skills and learn about the products...

INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND PUBLIC SUPPORT OF FOOD TEAMS.

The governance analyses of the three food team systems in Belgium shows regional differences as well as the emerging temporal evolutions of each system in terms of their interactions with the public and private actors of the institutional framework. This evolution has been observed at the level of the institutional embeddedness of the food teams.

In terms of future scenarios, we can mention the project of the Brussels municipality of Etterbeek to create a kind of municipal food team. This project illustrates how a public institution, here the municipality, can be involved more directly in the development of food teams. Indeed, this kind of initiative – while being still at a prototypical state - and the institutionalization pathway it represents contains some opportunities and risks.

A factor that could play in favour of more involvement of mainstream institutions is that institutional embeddedness is considered as encouraging the development or scaling up of niches by nurturing them through additional support and resources. In other words, institutional embeddedness allows food teams to gain resources which are useful for their development, i.e. money (subsidies from public authorities), knowledge and skills (experience sharing and practical advices for producers and food teams' members through various meetings), lobbying access (by creating or participating to some workgroups dealing with policy projects or recommendations) and visibility (through communicational tools from public authorities, trade unions and other associations). In terms of accessibility to a wider public, initiatives inspired from food teams and partly organized by a public authority have an interesting development potential. Indeed, while food teams' consumers respond to different socio-economic characteristics, this public is still limited to a well-educated and environmentally-conscious part of society. In this respect, larger supported projects could capture other categories of consumers within the regime and therefore extend niche practices to a wider part of society.

POLICY SUPPORT

System innovations and transitions in the realm of sustainable consumption policies do not emerge automatically from the present socio-political and socio-economic context. And, where some change towards more sustainable consumption patterns occurs, it might not infer the necessary structural systemic innovations, but remain restricted to mere system optimizations/adaptations. Consequently, there are repetitive calls to develop ways to (pro) actively steer transitions, i.e. to develop and implement forms of governance of transitions. These calls have also been repetitively issued in Belgium, be it at federal or regional or local level. The transition "language" has indeed well percolated towards policy makers in Belgium, and has been during the project's duration at the heart of a series of strategic institutional exercises. Right at the beginning of CONSENTSUS, the Federal Planning Bureau has elaborated extensively on transitions in its 4th SD-policy report, and has placed at that occasion a focus on food consumption.

In this study, we explored these issues related to the governance of transitions and elaborate on their application to the relatively unexplored governance of sustainable consumption patterns, more precisely in the field of food consumption.



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The exploration of the institutional governance context shows that an interest for short food chains initiatives is emerging in the current Belgian policy agenda, especially in the Regions and this notably through to their competences in the agricultural field. We repetitively observed that food teams are not proactively managed or steered by public authorities in Belgium, whatever their institutional level. Indeed, food teams are originally created by consumers and farmers in an independent way, without external support; in this sense, food teams are perfect examples of bottom-up – grassroots - approaches..

That does not mean that food teams are not protected from some elements of the regime, for example the non-application of some sanitarian rules, trading rules and official labels. But these mentioned favourable elements do not constitute a voluntary exemption of rules by the state, they are rather linked to a passive laissez-faire or tolerance from the public authorities that allows food teams to act in a grey zone in some respects. We concluded that the current food teams' governance is diluted in the wider governance of short food supply chains and that, when food teams are specifically addressed, governance is spontaneously not very active. Nevertheless, we observed that institutional embeddedness of food teams tends to grow over time.

Considering these elements of the policy context, coupled with the evidence of an inexistent governmental body at federal level, the policy implications of CONSENTSUS are of a more exploratory than policy-supportive nature. Despite this hesitant policy context, there is on the opposite a huge interest within the Food Teams themselves to improve the comprehension of their activities – and to a lesser, but still proactive, level – within the main actors of the food provisioning system. It appears than also logical that CONSENTSUS' pre-results have been repetitively presented and discussed with the stakeholders of the Food Team arena, for instance at a coordination meeting of the Brussels' and Walloon food teams in November 2010 or at the first annual gathering of the French speaking Food Teams in Namur in February 2011. Results of the first phase of the project were presented and discussed at an internal meeting of the federal food industry federation (FEVIA).

VALORISATION AND DISCUSSION WITH PEERS

In order to submit the research results discussion and take part an active part to the new network emerging in the area of transitions approaches to consumption, an international workshop was organized in April 2011. Entitled "Investigating new developments in Transition approaches: Sustainable consumption as niches of innovation?", this final workshop was held the 27th of April 2011 at the University Foundation. Forty persons coming from the diverse horizons, the academic world as well as the politics and the associations, registered to the event showing a real interest for the theme (sustainable consumption) but also the theoretical framework (transition approaches) adopted in the CONSENTSUS research program. The main objective of the workshop was to bring together a series of authors who have in the recent (to very recent) past worked on the potential linkages and applicability of transition studies and transition governance approaches to consumption issues. A roundtable with Belgian stakeholder was organized at the end of the day to link the theory and the practice.

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