

3. Addressing the political nature of agricultural sustainability transitions: lessons for governance

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Abstract

Agriculture is facing increasing challenges as a result of climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and demographic change. Yet, at the same time, currently dominant agricultural practices contribute to exacerbate these challenges. It is therefore widely recognized that there is a need for an agricultural sustainability transition. However, what this transition should look like and how it should be brought about is a value-based, normative judgement with differing implications for different people, making transition processes inherently political. In order to govern these processes in a way that recognizes the ethical implications of the political nature of agricultural transitions, we need to understand all the components that influence, and are influenced by, transition processes, interactions across societal levels, and the normative and power dynamics that come together to shape the direction and outcomes of transition processes. In addition, we need insights into what aspects people consider when they build their perceptions of the legitimacy and justice of an agricultural transition. In this paper we draw together overarching lessons learned from extensive reviews of dominant transition, legitimacy, and justice theories, interviews with stakeholder organisations, and a survey of 400 English adults.

Keywords: agricultural transition, perceived justice, perceived legitimacy, sustainability

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that there is a need for an agricultural sustainability transition (El Bilali, 2020). However, transitions are inherently disruptive as the old system that we are transitioning away from needs to be considerably altered if not destructed altogether (Kivimaa *et al.*, 2021), and the consequences of this will vary for different people (Leach *et al.*, 2007). Transitions are also inherently normative. In as far as transitions happen deliberately, society has a choice as to what the transition should look like both in terms of the ideal end-state we want to reach and the path to reach it. Yet, because people will experience and value certain pathways and end-states differently, the desirability of a certain transition is a value based, normative judgement (Meadowcroft, 2011). Due to this disruptive and normative nature of transitions, the agricultural transition process forms a contested arena where differing interests compete over influence on the direction and manner in which the agricultural sector develops, making the transition itself inherently political (De Boon *et al.*, 2021).

In order to govern the agricultural sustainability transition process in a way that recognizes the ethical implications of its political nature, we need to understand all the components that influence and are influenced by the transition process, interactions across societal levels, and the normative and power dynamics that come together to shape the direction and outcomes of the transition (Leach *et al.*, 2007; Ostrom, 2009). This also includes developing an understanding of what aspects people consider when they build their perceptions of the legitimacy and justice of an agricultural transition, as these are essential elements for the successful implementation and long-term social sustainability of the transition

(Rothmund *et al.*, 2016). The wider literature on the governance of sustainability transitions has often been criticised for neglecting the role of power and political nature of transitions (Avelino *et al.*, 2016; Meadowcroft, 2011), and whilst over the past ten years efforts have been made to address this critique (Avelino and Wittemayer, 2016), a recent review of literature on sustainability transitions still speaks of ‘a moral vacuum in transition research’ (Köhler *et al.*, 2019, p. 16). Likewise, in the specific context of agricultural sustainability transitions, recent articles have highlighted that more attention needs to be paid to the (social) justice aspects related to these kind of transitions (e.g. Blattner, 2020; Hebinck *et al.*, 2021). It is our aim to address this research gap by exploring the components of the agricultural transition process and the way in which people shape their perceptions of the transition and to draw lessons from these insights that can support the governance of these processes.

Methods

To accomplish our study aim we connect key findings from three literature reviews with semi-structured interviews with stakeholder organisations in the post-Brexit agricultural transition context and results of a survey of 400 English adults. This case study context was chosen because it presents a crucial case of abrupt policy change in which normative and political dynamics will be amplified in comparison to the more common incremental processes of policy change (Kern and Howlett, 2009). The first literature review focussed on key system components of agricultural innovation and the governance of agricultural innovation processes (see De Boon *et al.* (2021) for more details). The second literature review examined literature on legitimacy, addressing both normative and sociological approaches to legitimacy. This review was further complemented with empirical data from 14 interviews. Interviewees included stakeholder organisations with either a social, environmental, economic, or farming/forestry/landowner interest and with differing degrees of involvement in the agricultural transition process (see De Boon *et al.* (2022) for more details). The third literature review focussed on the concept of justice and the underlying structures and interconnected dimensions that are generally used to make normative claims of justice. For this review we targeted literature from the fields of political philosophy, social psychology, environmental justice, food justice, and social justice as all these fields come together within the governance of agricultural transitions. Findings from this review were used to build a survey to measure the underlying structures of justice perceptions in relation to agricultural transitions.

Results and discussion

The components that we identified as central to an agricultural transition include the macro context, the foundation on which the transition is built, the innovation process, and the governance system. We address each in turn.

Macro context

The macro context constitutes grand macro societal and ecological structures such as macro-political and economic developments, demography, biodiversity, and climate. Whilst the average individual has no, or at most very limited, influence over these structures (Geels and Schot, 2007), alterations in these structures, or in our perception of them, form direct and indirect drivers of change and provide motivational forces for the transition. This is also the place where the first political dynamics of the transition arise: when are alterations in the macro context of such a nature that they require a transition, what should the end-goal of the transition be (i.e. new acceptable state of the macro context), and who decides this? These questions constitute the first anchoring points based on which people form their perceptions of the legitimacy and justice of the transition. In terms of perceived legitimacy of the transition, this relates to the extent to which the prioritization of problems that should be addressed through the transition and aimed for end goal are perceived to reflect the interests of the people or are

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regarded as being in the wider interest of society (Scharpf, 1999; Suchman, 1995). It also includes whether those who wish to have a say in these decisions feel like they have been meaningfully included in this decision-making process (Steffek, 2019; Suchman, 1995). In terms of perceived justice of the transition, this relates to perceptions of whether or not stakeholders have been involved in decision-making to the right degree, regardless of whether or not the person forming this perception is a stakeholder themselves, as well as perceptions on the principle that is used to distribute influence within the decision-making process (Kaljonen *et al.*, 2021). In addition, it relates to perceptions on whether the right kind of stakeholders, at the right geographical scale, were considered when developing the problem prioritization and goal formulation and whether, in the identification of (the source of) the problem, the right type of knowledge was used (Bennet *et al.*, 2019; Martin *et al.*, 2016).

Foundation

The foundation encompasses the meso- and micro structures within which the transition process occurs. They influence the ease or difficulty with which a specific transition can be implemented, as well as how the consequences of the transition impact individuals. Simultaneously, however, these are also the structures that must be altered or disrupted for the transition to take place (Kivimaa *et al.*, 2021). The meso structure, or immediate context, is formed by the local natural environment, physical infrastructure, the market, formal and informal institutions and organisations, and their respective innovative and adaptive capacity (Pigford *et al.*, 2018). The micro structure of the foundation constitutes the innovative and adaptive capacity of individuals as well as their psychosocial factors, or willingness to adapt, to the transition. The innovative and adaptive capacity influence whether an individual has the capability to respond to the transition in a successful manner or even affect the transition process and its outcome, whilst the willingness to adapt highlights the normative orientation of the individual in relation to the transition. The foundation forms the second platform of power contestation and consequently another anchoring point around which people form their perceptions of the legitimacy and justice of the transition. The power dynamic at play here shows itself through how the structure of the immediate context empowers some to benefit from the transition whilst putting others out of the power to adapt (De Boon *et al.*, 2021). In terms of the perceived justice of the transition, this is reflected in perceptions on the distribution of the costs and benefits related to bringing about the transition across the foundation. Specifically, are the principles that are used to decide who should bring up the costs to make the transition happen and who should benefit from the changes regarded as just (Bennett *et al.*, 2019; Rasinski, 1987)? In terms of the perceived legitimacy of the transition, this relates to whether people perceive that the goals of the transition are achievable given the specific foundational structure (Scharpf, 1999; Suchman, 1995).

Innovation process

The innovation process relates to the various generic structural stages that every kind of innovation process, including a transition, goes through, albeit on different scales, timelines, etc. These stages include: (1) problem and goal identification; (2) idea generation; (3) concept development; (4) concept testing; (5) implementation; and (6) monitoring and evaluation. They often overlap and feedback loops to previous stages do occur (Kline and Rosenberg, 2010; Sutherland *et al.*, 2012). These stages draw on the macro context and foundation and each of them forms an additional platform of power contestation: who is involved or excluded, whose interests are considered, who makes decisions, and on what grounds (De Boon *et al.*, 2021)? The way in which these stages take shape and how the power contestations manifest themselves at each stage form another anchoring point for the perceived legitimacy and justice of the transition. In terms of the perceived legitimacy of the transition, this relates to perceptions of whether the direction of the transition that is decided on in these stages is

the right direction for society to develop into (Suchman, 1995), whether the mechanisms that are chosen to bring about the transition are effective, fair, and acceptable (Scharpf, 1999), and whether stakeholders have been meaningfully included throughout each stage (Steffek, 2019). In terms of the perceived justice of the transition, this relates to perceptions of how the costs and benefits of each of the stages are distributed, both in terms of the specific mechanisms that are used for the distribution and the underlying principles that are used to decide who carries what portion of the costs and benefits, as well as perceptions on whether the right kind of costs and benefits are taken into account (Bennett *et al.*, 2019; Kaljonen *et al.*, 2021). It also relates to perceptions of whose interests are considered at what geographical and temporal scale in each of the stages, who is actively included and to what degree throughout each of the stages, what type of knowledge is used as input for the decisions in each of the stages, and how the individuals forming these perceptions themselves are impacted by the processes and outcomes of each of these stages (Martin *et al.*, 2016).

Governance system

Finally, the governance system reaches across and connects the macro, meso, and micro level and comprises the structures and procedures of decision making and implementation that are used in interactions between public and private actors involved in actively steering society into a certain direction (Lockwood *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, the governance system shapes all the transition processes and outcomes and thus forms a central platform through which the ethical implications of the political nature of a transition can be addressed and perceptions of legitimacy and justice can be taken into account. However, it is itself also embedded in, and part of, the political dynamics.

Lessons for governance

A preliminary analysis regarding how people form their perceptions of legitimacy and justice across each of the components of an agricultural transition suggest three key lessons for governance in order to address the political nature and resulting ethical challenges of agricultural transitions.

First, it has become evident that agricultural transitions are complex, multi-faceted processes and that the ways people form their perceptions of the legitimacy and justice of these processes are equally multi-dimensional. For governance arrangements to be able to take account of this, it is essential that the decision-making and implementation processes are not closed down or compartmentalized into sub-aspects that are considered in isolation of each other. There needs to be clear communication and cooperation across all governance levels. A decision and the way this decision comes about at one point in the transition process related to one sub-aspect will have implications for all the components of the transition and can influence perceptions of justice and legitimacy not only in that moment but also further down the line. It is therefore key that decision-making does not happen in siloes and that potential consequences of the decision, and the way the decision is made, are explored across all components of the transition.

Second, because perceptions of legitimacy and justice are multi-dimensional and normative themselves (Rasinski, 1987), for a transition to be conducted in an ethical manner that can capture diversity in perceptions, governance needs to allow this diversity to exist. Whilst it is necessary to set some priorities to move a transition forward (Meadowcroft, 2011), where possible, governance should aim to include and recognize diverse framings of the problem(s) that the transition is trying to address, allow for multiple transition pathways to occur, and examine where there is room for multiple goals for the transition to coexist. Where this room does not exist, an assessment of trade-offs between goals needs to be undertaken and win-win alternatives should be sought in a collaborative manner.

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Third, and finally, as a transition is a process that happens across a longer period of time with multiple different stages, perceptions on what is just and legitimate can change over the course of the transition, for example when consequences of earlier decisions become visible that were not anticipated beforehand. Decision-making processes that are perceived as legitimate and just for one stage of the transition may be perceived as illegitimate and unjust for another stage. Governance therefore needs to be flexible and adaptable to change course when perceptions change and perceptions need to be monitored throughout the transition to be able to pick up on changes early on.

Conclusions

To conclude, whilst it is widely acknowledged that there is a need for an agricultural transition, how this transition should look like and be brought about is contested. To capture this political nature of the transition and govern the transition process in an ethical manner governance needs to take account of, and allow for, diversity in perceptions. Taking time to examine differing perceptions, creating room for alternative pathways to coexist, exploring potential consequences of decisions and the way the decisions are made, and being flexible to adjust course when new insights change perceptions are central cornerstones toward socially sustainable agricultural transitions.

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