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The need for transition management in Project Management Development

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Modern society is developing into a network society in which a growing number of problems emerge that seem impossible to solve with traditional approaches and instruments or through existing institutions (Rotmans et al. 2001). The process of modernization in the industrialized world has produced these 'symptoms of unsustainability' as a side-effect of economic development, technological progress and the continuing increase in wealth. Examples of these unsustainability symptoms on a global scale are the over-consumption of natural resources, social and economic inequalities, loss of biodiversity and climate change problems.

At a local level, these symptoms may have a very negative and concrete impact on people's lives: flooding, starvation, poor air and water quality, conflicts and in general a negative impact on welfare, efficiency and development. In the western and industrialized world, the unsustainability symptoms transitie-promotie. Beside direct environmental impacts, which are more or less 'managed' through environmental policies, manifestations of unsustainability are traffic jams, power shortages, poor food quality, loss of space, pollution etc. These problems of unsustainability can be directly linked to problems at the global scale; the industrialized world has in a sense exported its problems through import of resources and export of environmental load. Beside the local unsustainability problems industrialized countries are experiencing, they also carry the responsibility for problems elsewhere (e.g. Third World countries), now and in the future. Sustainable development and in general a responsible society should therefore be concerned with local problems as well as with global issues and their interrelations.

This can only be done by reflecting on the foundations of our society and its development and looking beyond the perceived symptoms. We use the term 'symptoms' because they form the signals of how our society and its structures have developed and are organized. Driven by technological, economic and social progress, the industrialized world has developed a culture, supporting structures and individual practices that together form social systems with high adverse environmental and social impacts – not only a profound impact in and on our own society, but on an increasingly global scale. These perverse effects of modernization challenge our society to try to deal with these problems effectively so that our society will be able to make the transition to a sustainable society in which negative impacts elsewhere and in the future are minimized or largely reduced. Such a form of reflexive modernization needs to be translated to fundamentally new practices, structures and culture. In studying transitions to sustainable development, the focus in this thesis is on industrialized economies with the Netherlands in the European context as example. The Dutch society is a modern, highly developed and egalitarian society. It is a country with a relatively high population density, an effective bureaucracy and a democratic political culture. It is in a development stage similar to many Western European countries: population growth is stagnating after a period of wealth and population growth. The dominant paradigm of efficiency, growth and globalization is increasingly challenged by alternative visions and ideas on all sides of the political and social spectrum and by a growing dissatisfaction with the functioning of our societal systems (e.g. energy, agriculture, health-care, education, housing-and-building, spatial planning and mobility).

The problems of unsustainability our society is faced with, are characterized by large complexity, high uncertainty, many actors involved with different perspectives and values (Dirven et al. 2002). The way our societal systems areorganized can be considered to be unsustainable from a long-term perspective: there are only limited resources, there is limited space, the economic feasibility is under pressure or there are not any possibilities for growth anymore. It is clear that in the long-term these systems will need to go through structural change in order to achieve better levels of performance and solve the unsustainability problems we are now facing. This can not only be considered to be a necessity for survival but it can also be seen as a desirable and ethical next step in human evolution: to organize our society in such a way that it is more in balance with our natural environment, based on principles of democracy, equity and justice. These issues cannot be resolved through traditional approaches transitie-promotie. and processes, because they are so deeply embedded into the structures of our society. The fundamental question is obviously how the major transitions that are necessary could unfold; perhaps an even more interesting question is where they should lead to.

The future development of our society is an area of continuing battle through debate: between progressive and neo-conservative, between globalist and antiglobalist, between environmentalist and liberalist, between democratic and authoritarian forces and movements. Different actors perceive the contemporary problems of this world so differently that any form of agreement on solutions is virtually absent. Whether the topic is climate change, development aid or even the best strategy to combat pollution, fundamental differences in goals, interests and strategy often prevent cooperation, consensus or shared solutions. This type of problems is often called ‘wicked’ or ‘unstructured’ in the literature, referring to the fact the different actors define these problems differently. However besides being defined and perceived differently by different actors, the problems of sustainability also originate from patterns of thinking and acting that have rooted deeply within existing institutions and structures. Ultimately this means that they cannot be solved by traditional means and approaches. We therefore use the term ‘persistent problems’ as a specific type of unstructured problems. By using a complex systems perspective, we can define the deeper-lying roots of such problems, and thereby explain the reasons why they are so difficult to deal with. These reasons are: that they occur (differently) on different levels of scale; that a variety of actors with different perspectives is involved; that they are highly uncertain in terms of future developments; that they can only be dealt with on the long term; that they are hard to ‘manage’ in a traditional sense; that they are rooted in different societal domains. Persistent problems can be seen in sectors such as agriculture, mobility, housing and energy-supply and water management. In order to properly address the complexity of the processes of change needed in these sectors, new policy- or governance-approaches need to be developed which take into account the inherent conflicts of interest, opinion and value. These new governance approaches will have to start from the complexity, interdependency and uncertainty that are characteristic of our society. The diversity of perspectives on what a persistent problem is and what solution is preferred, can be understood when one takes into account that single actors only see parts of the whole society. Their perspective depends on their own history, roles, interests, knowledge, activities and so on but also on their specific place in a system, the level of scale they operate at and the time-horizon they work upon. We will try to illustrate this with a simple example of the Dutch agricultural sector. At the local level a single farmer is concerned with taking care of his family and will therefore be mostly focused on the harvest and purchase.

The problem of unsustainable agriculture to the farmer is first of all individual economic survival. At the societal level there are policy makers, interest groups and NGOs that are occupied with pushing issues to the political arena, changing regulation and developing new financial and regulatory schemes by debating and negotiating with other actors. At this level, environmental issues and animal well-being are among the subjects of debate, related to development and implementation of policy measures. This is a totally different problem framing than that of the farmer. At the systems level we observe the decreasing space for transitie-promotie agriculture due to housing, water management and international competition. A decrease in agricultural production leads to a dependency on foreign food supply and to vulnerability on a national level. Here the question is whether agricultural activities have a role to play at all in the future or if we should make ourselves dependent on import of agricultural products and for example focus on specialized agricultural knowledge and technology for export. Hence, at this level, the problem perception is again quite different. At these different levels, different actors operate who hold perspectives that are often conflicting (in this case one could think about

environmental movements, local residents, project developers, lobby groups etc.), which adds even more to the complexity. A debate on the future of the agricultural sector in the Netherlands can therefore be very different at different levels and from different perspectives. Because an overall framework or perspective is lacking, there is no debate about 'the (sustainable) future of agriculture' but there are only rather fragmented debates on new regulations, specific locations or practices, European policies etc. What is lacking in the context of such persistent problems in societal systems, is integration, coherence and systemic thinking. The example illustrates that persistent problems manifest themselves differently at different levels of scale, different actors with different problem perceptions are involved, different speeds of societal change intertwine and different solutions are offered at different levels. In practice, actors are increasingly interacting with other actors at the same and other levels.

The traditional policy process is structured so that the government directs this process and involves stakeholders to develop policies. However, these are the outcome of negotiations and consensus and therefore almost never long-term policies for radical innovation. Although such complex issues could partly be dealt with by using 'regular' approaches and instruments, they require new governance approaches that also take into account the overall systemic dynamics and the associated complexity.

We can support the argument for new approaches by building on Hisschemöllers policy problem-typology (Hisschemöller 1993). This typology distinguishes between four different types of policy problems, which are mapped out in two dimensions; the amount of consensus or dissent on relevant standards and values (relating to the nature of the problem) and in the other dimension the amount of certainty about the kind of knowledge required (relating also to solutions). In this spectrum, simple problems are problems for which solutions are given, while at the other end complex problems are characterized by structural uncertainty and dissent. Problems of unsustainability are problems of the latter category and are by definition about different perspectives, unknown solutions and the absence of consensus on the nature of the problem. Besides participatory processes in which convergence or consensus is sought (in case of unstructured problems), for persistent problems a more fundamental reflection upon dominant values and perspectives is necessary in order to achieve breakthroughs in thinking that enable transition processes. The strength of such a problem typology is that different categories of problems can be linked to different solution strategies or decision making- and policy process. While simple problems require technical solutions (for example building a bridge), complex and unstructured problems require social learning processes. This perspective on societal issues relates well to the changes in policy thinking over the last decade and sociological observations regarding societal structures. In both areas thinking is transitie-promotie more and more dominated by the concept of 'networks'; pluriform, multi-actor systems for which interdependency, self-organization and the absence of overall control are characteristic. However, not all problems that are simple have been solved; it is rather our perception of and perspective on reality that has evolved, making it possible to break down complex problems into 'simpler' problems at a lower level of scale. This process of breaking down problems is at the heart of problem-structuring where complex problems are split up into sub-problems for which more specified approaches and policy processes are effective. Although real life problems are not simply put in only one category, the typology makes clear a gradient of complexity and accordingly the need for a portfolio of policy instruments and approaches that are related to the nature of the problem. Because of the increasing societal complexity, increasingly complex problems are perceived and increasingly complex policy processes are needed.

Our society, however, has been organized hierarchically and in sectors or (policy) domains based on the idea that societal problems can in fact be managed in a top-down and linear fashion by excluding uncertainties and surprises. The current institutions and organizations (governmental as well as industrial, scientific and non-governmental), both in institutional design and in their practices, are not equipped to deal with complexity and uncertainty. From this point of view our society is currently in a lock-in: institutional structures, socio-technical regimes and certain routines and behaviour that stem from decades of technological-economic fixation on growth, specialisation and efficiency are deeply rooted in our society. Problem solving has often been reduced to short-term approaches directed to narrowly defined problems that amount to only incremental and gradual changes. There is not much room for structural change as long as the dominant institutions and structures persist. The current path of development is that of optimization of existing structures instead of innovation and

creation of new structures. However, it might theoretically even be so that because of the ongoing reproduction of existing structures, it becomes increasingly harder to achieve sustainable, structural change on the long term. Conceivably, breakthroughs of different kinds (technological, institutional, behavioural, cultural and other) are needed to deal effectively with the problems of unsustainability in the long term. This requires a fundamentally different way of dealing with social change and the role of governance herein. As Einstein already said: *we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.*

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