

Speed talk Sessions

[J11] Extreme regional habitats for sustainability experimentation and social learning in Europe

Harm van den Heiligenberg [Netherlands]¹, Gaston Heimeriks [Netherlands]², Marko Hekkert [Netherlands]², Rob Raven [Netherlands]², Jifke Sol [Netherlands]³

Utrecht university¹, Utrecht University², Wageningen University³

Research question

Sustainability is probably the most important societal challenge of our times. The local and regional scale seems important for experimenting and learning with sustainability innovations in regional networks. On this scale, the so-called habitat contains success factors for experiments in their contribution to a longer-term regime change. In earlier research (van den Heiligenberg et. al., 2016) we found some indications that various types of experiments have distinctive favourite habitats. In addition to local/regional habitat factors, social learning and the transfer of learning experiences seems to be an essential factor. Social learning is however a big challenge. The diversity of actors is high, with different interests, perspectives, cultures and values. Currently, little is known on how different habitats may shape learning and transfer of learning experiences in different ways. We could argue that learning and the transfer of learning experiences is constituted through different mechanisms in for instance a campus milieu versus, let's say, a grassroots milieu.

Hence, this paper is concerned with addressing the relationship between the distinctive habitat factors and the role of learning in distinctive habitats. Our research question is: What are the success factors for upscaling of sustainability experiments and transferring learning experiences in very contrasting regional habitats?

We hypothesise that for upscaling and learning it is very relevant to make a distinction along two dimensions. First, we hypothesise that there is much contrast between "guided" and "grassroots" experiments. Second, we hypothesise that experiments with technological innovation are different from experiments primarily focused on social innovation. With these two dimensions four contrasting regional habitats may be constructed, each with distinctive success factors and social learning dynamics.

Theory

For this research, we use insights from three disciplines:

- Transition studies (the multi-level perspective and the geography of transitions);
- Regional innovation systems (social learning in regional networks, various forms of knowledge with various degrees of transferability)
- Social and transformative learning (the role of reflexivity and trust in complex learning environments)

Interesting to note is that in transition studies the assumption is made that sustainability experiments need protective spaces, i.e. a closed habitat. On the other hand, in the regional innovation systems literature a core assumption is that innovations need global pipelines, i.e. an open habitat.

Method

We need a better insight in the success factors for upscaling and learning. We do so through a comparative case study in a limited number of very contrasting habitats in Europe. We chose to analyse 4 cases, along the dimensions of our analytical framework.

In each case we analysed:

- about 5 sustainability experiments, based on semi-open interviews with project leaders. We asked questions on the experiment, success factors, the ability to influence these factors, upscaling, learning, and the distinct advantages of the region
- the local and regional habitat, based on semi-open interviews with regional scientific and policy experts. We asked questions on the regional context, the experiments carried out in the region, success factors, upscaling and learning

In a final group meeting with the interviewees we asked feedback on our analysis, and we executed a small action research activity, focused on taking a next step towards joint activities and towards strengthening a regional sustainability network.

Finally, we compared the cases on the following aspects: their position in the conceptual framework, success factors, openness of the region, learning processes and upscaling trajectories.

Results

We have finished the first case study. This was dealing with grassroots social innovations, focused on agri-food initiatives in the city-region on Budapest. Our preliminary conclusions are:

- In the Budapest region, a lot of grassroots food initiatives have been started in the past few years. Examples are initiatives for regionalised food systems, vertical farming and urban gardening. These initiatives are rooted in a deeper underlying increased food awareness, which started about 10 years ago, and maybe in much older systems such as the Kitchen Gardens.
- The identified five most important success factors for upscaling of the initiatives are: (i) the availability of funding, (ii) trust, (iii) recognised good examples, (iv) room for experimentation and (v) a regional platform or network. These factors are almost all regional habitat factors.

We identified possibilities to influence them in a positive way. This often can be achieved by the regional stakeholders.

- Learning is needed and occurs in various ways. First of all, learning takes place on the level of individuals engaged in an initiative. Secondly, learning takes place at the level of the initiative. Thirdly, learning takes place between food-initiatives in the region. This type of learning is called social multi-actor learning at the level of a regional network. The fourth dimension of learning would be the transregional learning between EU-regions.
- The Budapest region has some favourable conditions for regional expansion and international replication of grassroots food experiments. Budapest is a Hungarian food hub, it has existing international networks on the crossroads of Central Europe. However, the actual upscaling is limited to replication towards other districts in the city and towards other cities in Hungary.
- The creation of a platform or network where the different food related initiatives can meet and exchange knowledge and ideas is seen as very important. Also, this platform can foster the growth of different initiatives. Such a network needs a leader, a meeting place, a virtual platform and seed money. Through and by the platform hubs and trainings can be developed. The role of the platform is to engage partners, to execute experiments in pilot projects and to develop regional, national and international networks.

(Other cases will be added in the full paper)
