Steering transformations? Pathways, power and politics

‘Can transformations toward desired futures be facilitated, steered or managed?

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Challenges for transformation

Building transformational pathways towards sustainability, integrating:

- Ecological integrity
- Social equality
- Human rights, well-being and security

Green and just transformations
Multiple possible pathways
Plural transformations

Possibilities within the safe and just space:
diverse pathways, alternative directions and varying distributional outcomes

Source: Leach, Raworth and Rockström
2013
Three Ds

• What directions are different pathways headed in?
• What goals, values, interests, power relations are driving particular pathways – and how might they be re-oriented?

• Is there a sufficient diversity of approaches?
• Are pathways diverse enough to resist powerful processes of lock-in, builds resilience in the face of uncertainty, and respond to a variety of contexts and values?

• What are the implications for distribution?
• Who stands to gain or lose from current or proposed pathways, or alternatives? How will choosing between different pathways affect inequalities of wealth, power, resource use, and opportunity?

• Need to attend to contestations and trade-offs....
Politicising the directions of transformation

Possibilities within the safe and just space: diverse pathways, alternative directions and varying distributional outcomes

Whose boundaries? Whose safety?

Which pathways? Choosing and shaping interlocked with power

Who gains, who loses? Planetary boundaries as power grab, undermining justice and democracy?

Unsafe pathway breaching planetary boundaries

Unjust pathway undermining human rights

Whose goals? Sustainability and resilience of what for whom?

Alternative safe and just pathways
Emphases of a pathways approach

System:
Social, institutional, ecological and technological elements interacting in dynamic ways

Pathways: particular directions in which systems change over time
Integrating knowledge and values: Framing

**Framings**: Different ways of understanding or representing a system and its relevant environment

Dimensions of framing:
- Scale
- Boundaries
- Key elements and relationships
- Dynamics in play
- Outputs

- Perspectives
- Interests
- Goals
- Values
- Notions of relevant experience
Narratives

Framings often become part of narratives – underlying storylines

- Produced by people and institutions
- Beginning – a system, framed
- Middle – a set of envisaged actions
- Towards particular futures (desired, averting what is feared, possibilities, values, goals?)
Creating narratives: Practices

- imagining futures
- stating goals
- setting agendas
- posing questions
- deciding context
- discounting time
- handling uncertainties
- constituting ‘proof’
- expressing desires
- highlighting values
- defining problems
- prioritizing issues
- setting baselines
- choosing methods
- recruiting expertise
- exploring sensitivities
- highlighting ways of being
- assigning cause
- characterising options
- formulating criteria
- drawing boundaries
- including disciplines
- commissioning research
- interpreting results
Different narratives, different pathways, different distributional implications

Alternative sustainable food futures

- small-scale farmer livelihoods
- participatory breeding
- Biochar and climate-smart agriculture
- industrial hybrids
- transgenics
Tackling epidemics

‘Outbreaks are threatening humanity. They need to be controlled through effective surveillance and large-scale roll out of technological solutions’

‘Underlying causes need to be addressed, requiring a rethink of development approaches and diverse social, cultural and ecological relations’
Pathways and power

• Narratives and pathways co-constructed with power and politics
• Shape which come to dominate, and which remain marginalised

*Often leads to ‘lock-in’ to particular powerful narrative and associated pathway, to the exclusion of others*

*Dangers of power grabs, riding roughshod over justice*

• Alternative narratives, hidden narratives, exclusions....
• Constructing pathways to sustainability requires recognition and deliberation amongst multiple narratives and possible pathways
The politics of ‘closing down’
Towards singular narratives and pathways
Towards preserving stability and control

- **Stability**
- **Resilience**
- **Power Dynamics**
- **Robustness**

- **Shock** (transient disruption)
- **Temporality of change**
- **Stress** (enduring shift)

- **Control**
- **Response**

**Style of action**
Power-laden pressures towards closing down

- Incumbent institutions tend to favour strategies which preserve the status quo – and uphold political interests
- Deeply rooted ideas about equilibrium
- Institutionalisation of routine responses
- Imperatives for control – institutional, market or technological fixes
- Financial and economic backing – political economy
- Professional, disciplinary and cognitive pressures
- Media and popular knowledge
- Disciplining and transformation of subjectivities

Diverse social science perspectives can help unravel these...
Appreciating diverse pathways and drivers

Transformative alliances – novel relationships between state, market and societal actors that challenge and rework political, economic and social structures

Ecological agriculture

Zero carbon energy
Citizen pathways – building from grassroots innovation, mobilisation and collective action, scaling up through networks

Food sovereignty and agroecology

Slum and shack dwellers’ networks
**Emergent pathways** – involving alignments in diverse bottom-up marginal interests, pursuing contending – even unknown – ends
From closing down to opening up: Towards a transformational politics for sustainability

*Challenging unsustainable and unjust pathways, appreciating alternatives, facilitating transformational pathways*

**Culturing** change, not (just) steering from the front  
**Multi-scale** – across global, national, regional, local settings  
**Plural** – to respect and respond to diverse perspectives and contexts  
**Deliberative** – fostering inclusive, democratic debate around goals, and means to get there  
**Adaptive** – to respond to complexity, uncertainty and dynamics in social, ecological, political and economic systems  
**Networked and alliance-based** – combining formal and informal processes, planning and mobilisation, leadership and distributed action  
**Politically-engaged** – challenging and shifting political-economic structures; influencing policy processes; mobilising  
**Reflexive** knowledge and political engagements - in which we take our positionality seriously, and encourage this in others