



# Societal transformations: Objects, driving forces and potential to govern them

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## Overview:

- **Introduction / background of the paper**
- **What are societal transformations?**
- **Objects of transformations**
- **Driving forces of transformations**
- **Potentials to govern transformations**
- **Contribution to a theory of Governance of transformation**

# Introduction: “Visions for a Sustainable Society”

- “‘Grand Design’ – How do we want to live in the future? Concepts and communication processes for a ‘Grand Design’ of the German Sustainability Strategy from an environmental policy perspective” project commissioned by Federal Environment Protection Agency (UBA) and Environmental Ministry (BMUB)
- Perception of the need for a comprehensive transformation of the political system, the economy and society to meet the challenges of sustainable development
- Different understandings of what transformations are, if they can be governed or at least given some direction and if so, with what kinds of instruments
- Method: literature review
- Aim: Understanding transformations and making a contribution to a governance theory of transformation

# What are societal transformations?

- Common characteristics:
  - passage from one societal equilibrium state to another
  - ‘new’ and ‘old’ coexist next to each other
  - Co-evolution of developments > change processes in different subsystems influence (reinforce or lessen) each other
  - Overall direction of societal development is open
  - Turning points / tipping points in this relationship are characterized by the build-up of a critical mass of innovators that challenge the co-existence of ‘old’ and ‘new’
  - ‘result’ of a transformation: a new configuration of institutions, technologies and culture.

# Objects of transformations:

The term transformation is used and understood ambiguously in the literature – thus for example with regard to the objects of transformation (“what is being transformed”)

- **Entire societal system** (e.g. Polanyi’s “Great Transformation” > only two transformations so far: Neolithic and Industrial revolution)
- **Individual states**, e.g. changes in middle and eastern European countries from socialist to capitalist societies after 1989
- **Change in the economic and financial system**: e.g. Industrial revolution or socialist economies
- **Resource base of an economy**: e.g. wood to coal to oil, fossil to renewables
- **Ecosystems**: e.g. deforestation, land-use change
- **Technologies / socio-technical systems**: change in socio-technical system, e.g. housing, nutrition, mobility
- **Organisations**: restructuring or reconfiguration of businesses and organisations
- **Culture and lifestyles**: e.g. importance of critical consumer for transformation towards sustainability

# Driving forces of transformations:

Some objects of transformation reappear here also as drivers of transformations > both *are being* transformed but they also *drive* changes in a certain direction

- **Environment / landscape:** public opinion, actions by governments, the structure of markets or demographic changes; again e.g. Middle and Eastern Europe after 1990
- **Ecosystems:** climate change, overfishing of the oceans as a driver for changes in fishing practices and peoples' diets
- **Co-Evolution:** sub-systems that influence each other
- **Innovation and niches:** technological, social or cultural innovations
- **Actors and actor networks:** politicians, scientists, business leaders, representatives of civil society as well as consumers > propagating certain narratives and ideals, develop innovative technologies and accelerate their diffusion in society
- **Ideas and principles:** ideas and principles shape markets, regulations, infrastructures and usage patterns and thereby influence the diffusion of innovations
- **Institutions and the political culture:** they institutionalise rules and norms and thus enable or hinder certain changes

# Governance of transformation processes (I):

- A transformation in Polanyi's sense of the word is an emergent phenomenon resulting of different change processes, that take place at the same time in different areas of society (no „great plan“ for the Neolithic Revolution) → governance not possible
- Governance in subsystems however is possible, e.g. economic sectors, socio-technological systems
  
- **Which level of governance?** World regions, international, national, sub national
- **Who should govern?** States, civil society, businesses

# Governance of transformation processes (II):

## Governance mechanisms and instruments

- **Regulatory and structural policy:** policy mix, promoting new technologies and burden old ones
- **Discourse / persuasion / information:** necessity of behavioral change
- **Innovation:** e.g. public procurement, R&D, dynamic regulatory standards
- **Infrastructures:** long-term nature, costs and its indirect effects on other technologies
- **Compensation of negative external effects:** to preserve the necessary societal acceptance for the transformation it is necessary to have compensatory measures
- **Coherence / Integration:** all impacts and side effects of policies are to be taken into account



# Contribution to a theory of Governance of transformation:

- Results of the analysis: Governance of transformation is possible in subsystems
- Central notion: co-evolution
- A transformative policy uses ‘regular’ policy instruments but promotes synergies between different change processes in subsystems which influence each other in a co-evolutionary manner and give a direction to the overall societal developments
- Aims at supporting pioneers and experiments, at institutionalizing those experiments that were successful and finally at promoting their diffusion.

**Thank you very much for your attention**