SHAPE discussion paper

SDG-aligned futures and the governance of transformation to sustainability: reconsidering governance perspectives on the futures we aspire to

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The paper the (im)possibility of governance of the transformation to sustainability (T2S). It starts by synthesizing the academic debate on transformation that has re-emerged with intensity due to it increasingly being linked to the discourse on sustainability. One important thread of this transformation–sustainability nexus is the role of governance in determining the (successful) outcome of the transformation process, among other things. This discussion paper explores how an integrated conceptualisation of the governance of T2S can shed light on the necessary puzzle parts that various disciplinary perspectives can contribute, not only in helping to see the bigger picture, but also in understanding possible meanings when operationalised to solve problems on the ground.

The first step taken by this paper is to present an integrated approach in understanding the governance of T2S by bringing together perspectives from sociology, political science and economics (and their sub-disciplines) as puzzle parts. Connecting the different puzzle parts contributed by the different disciplines, this paper conceptualises the four types of resources needed to make governance conducive to T2S: *vision, performance, social cohesion and resilience*. The next step for this paper is to use puzzle parts to form a framework to introduce three sets of scenarios for sustainable futures, the "*SDG-aligned futures*". The three pathways leading to these SDG-aligned futures are *political-transition-driven (or strong), societal-transition-driven (or cohesive)* and *economic-transition-driven (or efficient).*

The three scenarios for SDG-aligned futures serve on one hand as the basis for the contextualisation of transformation for a more strategic application of appropriate solutions by focusing on what governance structures, levels, processes and scales are conducive to T2S. At the same time, this approach resolves the "ahistoricity" dilemma in many concepts of T2S by highlighting possible multiple entry points for each country resulting from the country's (1) historical experience (e.g. colonialism) and (2) national discourse (e.g. debate on the sustainable energy transition). As countries utilise the potentials of their already existing governance structures and implement policy reforms that occur within existing institutional and politico–legal structures as well as through social upheavals and fundamental changes (hence, resilience is fundamental to T2S), these pathways are aligned by the Sustainable Development Goals, leading to coherent societal priorities and policy mixes.

Within the SHAPE project, this discussion paper was published by the German Development Institute/ Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)in continual exchange with lead members of the Integrated Assessment Modeling community (PIK, IIASA and University of Utrecht) and other experts in sustainability science and governance (SRC and IASS) and industrial ecology (NTNU).

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