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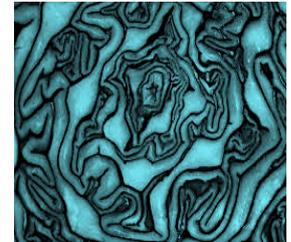
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Proposal for a new STRN Thematic Group

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Seeding Scope

In connection with current local and global sustainability challenges scholars, policy makers and actors need to deal with socio-technical dynamics that are increasingly gaining attention in society and in policy circles. Any transition to sustainability will require a high level of social / cultural change, linked with a similar high level of technological change. In a general sense, the concept of system innovation (Geels et al., 2004) is defined as a complete transformative change in the way societal functions are fulfilled, such as food production and consumption, energy use and supply, transportation, etc., targeting a sustainability transition (Geels, 2010) and a related transformative policy mix (Edmondson et al., 2019). Such major changes typically involve a co-evolution of a number of related elements, including technology, infrastructures, symbolic meanings, governance structures, scientific knowledge, industry and related institutions, etc. Moreover those transformations also request withdrawal of technological fix and significant disruption in incumbent regime that are more or less governed.

This is also the case for the agro-food area that will be addressed specifically in this Thematic Group. Over the past 10 years, the initiators have organised various activities on this topic under the name SISA: System Innovation for Sustainable Agriculture. By turning this initiative into an STRN thematic group we seek to achieve an influx of new people and thus increase exchange between people that are active in this area.

The need for system innovations that lead to more sustainable development paths has been recognized in research programs and some transformative policies (Grin et al., 2010). Over the past decade, this has rendered a host of insights in innovation processes as well as practical experiences on attempts to stimulate system innovation towards sustainable agri-food chains (Peppe et al. 2009; Spaargaren et al. 2012, Barbier & Elzen, 2012) and on related issues like innovation brokering (Klerkx et al. 2009), systemic intermediation (van Lente et al., 2003) and innovation design (Elzen et al., 2012), all this in a context of redefining farming systems research (Darnhofer et al., 2012), questioning the use of land in the anthropocentric turn (Vanwallegghem et al., 2017) and redefining food practice and food provision systems (Spaargaren et al., 2013).

However, the recently published ‘agenda for sustainability transitions research’ indicates that, although much insight has been gained in recent years, a better scientific understanding of the required sustainability pathways is much needed (Köhler et al., 2019). This also heavily concerns research on farming systems and food provision and consumption, knowledge regimes, innovation and design practices in and around the agricultural sector, acknowledging that a major shift is needed in our research communities to avoid a sectorial definition of our object and practices of enquiry.

The present thematic group seeks to foster and congregate scholars that are theoretically and practically involved in the studies of ‘transitions in the making’ within agricultural production (food, feed, fibres, fuel) and agri-food provision systems from farm to fork that are currently presenting major sustainability challenges in terms of climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental protection and health. Here, we use the term ‘transitions’ with hesitation, as we cannot actually know upfront whether these activities will indeed contribute to a transition process. Claiming for an open-ended approach that leaves open the political, social and inclusive conception of sustainability objectives (Stirling, 2011) is an epistemological characteristic of our scope.

But they do feature a number of characteristics that are necessary preconditions for transitions, i.e. to tinker with new ways of sustainable farming paying attention to soil fertility, biodiversity, ecological aspects, new agri-food practices and chain management from farm to fork, also addressing territorial welfare and new food provision systems, including reconnection and digital settings. These possible transitions in the making deviate in a significant way from the incumbent agro-food system that we inherited from the post-war modernization regime. Key are the exploration of situated attempts to induce sustainability transitions in relation to political action, larger sociotechnical visions and the manufacture of futures, while they also address major challenges like climate change or emerging technological promises such as the digitization of agriculture and food system provision. Analysing such changes occurring at multiple scales will contribute to a reflexive understanding of shifts in knowledge regimes and design practices. This thematic group seeks to lay the foundations for such an endeavour, in terms of analysis as well as in terms of governance and participatory research frameworks.

The creation of the STRNetwork will facilitate further exchange between scholars who are active in this field that will lead to new ideas and new activities. This group can build further on the ground work from the SISA initiative and stimulate a new research dynamic in the area of transition studies of agriculture and agri-food chains. This STRN group is committed deeply to the importance of studying this nexus that has gained considerable importance in the climate change and biodiversity debate, far beyond the “nourishing the world” objective. We envision the necessity to deliver analysis, evidence-based knowledge and transformative frameworks to trigger **joint efforts between European researchers, policy makers, strategic actors and innovation brokers in agri-food systems. It seems therefore** is of crucial importance to reflect, compare and design elements of the roadmap towards sustainability transitions in agriculture, aligning science and innovation policy, sectorial or non-sectorial policy-mix and problem-driven situated transitions in practices.

Light Governance

This initiative builds further on a series of International workshops (held in 2010, 2014 and 2018) under the name SISA, standing for “System Innovation towards Sustainable Agriculture”, that brought together over 80 persons (researchers and policy makers) from across Europe. The contributions have been published in the format of @book that are available on line under a Creative Commons policy (Barbier and Elzen, 2012; Elzen et al. 2017, Barbier et al., expected 2020) and downloadable from a website (<https://sisacop.wixsite.com/mysite>). This initiative is one among others to explore the possibilities to foster a distributive research capacity on the agri-food theme, either based on informal research groups or on more institutionalised initiatives in research organisations or European research clusters.

One aim is to hold regular international workshops (for example each two or three years), organized by members of the group to facilitate in-depth exchange of research results and joint

learning, in addition to regular contributions to the IST conferences and STRN activities. Such an international workshop could be coupled with doctoral / postdoctoral students as was been fruitfully experienced in Riga 2018, with a joined event between SISA and the Winter School of the European Rural Sociology Association.

The basic organizational features of this thematic group would then be these two types of key driving events: the IST conference and international workshops

Activities

Foundational Round table at 2020 IST Conference to establish the group in an opened approach (based on a call)

Planning the contribution to 2021 IST Conference with a specific track

Opening the possibility of a special issue or a foundational collective paper to delineate the thematic of the group in a programmatic way within the STRN scope.

Opening a Wiki-like-Pages on the thematic within the STRN web-site to share and circulate scientific production, events announcements, networking information, etc.

Preparation of international workshop, planned for 2021/22.

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