

Who runs this place? Unpacking local governance

This document is the first of the series of five Transition Reads that will present the questions and answers related to accelerating sustainability transitions on the local level. Transition Reads are published as part of the ARTS project, an EU-funded research project which aims to benefit theory, policy and practice related to accelerating sustainability transitions.

Cities as laboratories of sustainability transitions

Our cities are changing. Citizen-owned renewable energy installations, urban farms, bike-sharing systems and time banks are no longer the stuff of environmentalists' dreams but a reality in many cities across Europe. In search of solutions that respond to local problems and needs while being sustainable, communities experiment and create alternatives. Driven by a concern for the planet or their immediate surroundings and community, scared into action by the looming prospects of financial, environmental and social crises or simply motivated by the neighbours, communities are taking matters into their own hands. The ARTS project analyzes how the change towards more sustainable cities can be initiated, supported and driven by transition initiatives and how this process of change can be accelerated.

What is a sustainability transition?

Transitions are radical innovations in structures, mindsets and practices that involve actors from different sectors, domains and scale levels. Transitions cannot be planned nor controlled but they can be initiated, supported and accelerated.

In the ARTS project we are focusing on sustainability transitions in the urban context. To this end transitions can be understood as long-term processes of fundamental change in how various goods or services, including e.g. food, energy and mobility, are produced, delivered and consumed. Coupled with radical shifts in structures, mindsets and practices towards greater sustainability, these processes bring new ways of thinking, new ways of doing things, as well as new forms of (self-) organisation. With an entry focus on environmental sustainability, we search for transition initiatives that contribute to social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability in cities.

Sustainability transitions in the urban context are long-term processes of fundamental change in how basic goods and services are produced, delivered and consumed.

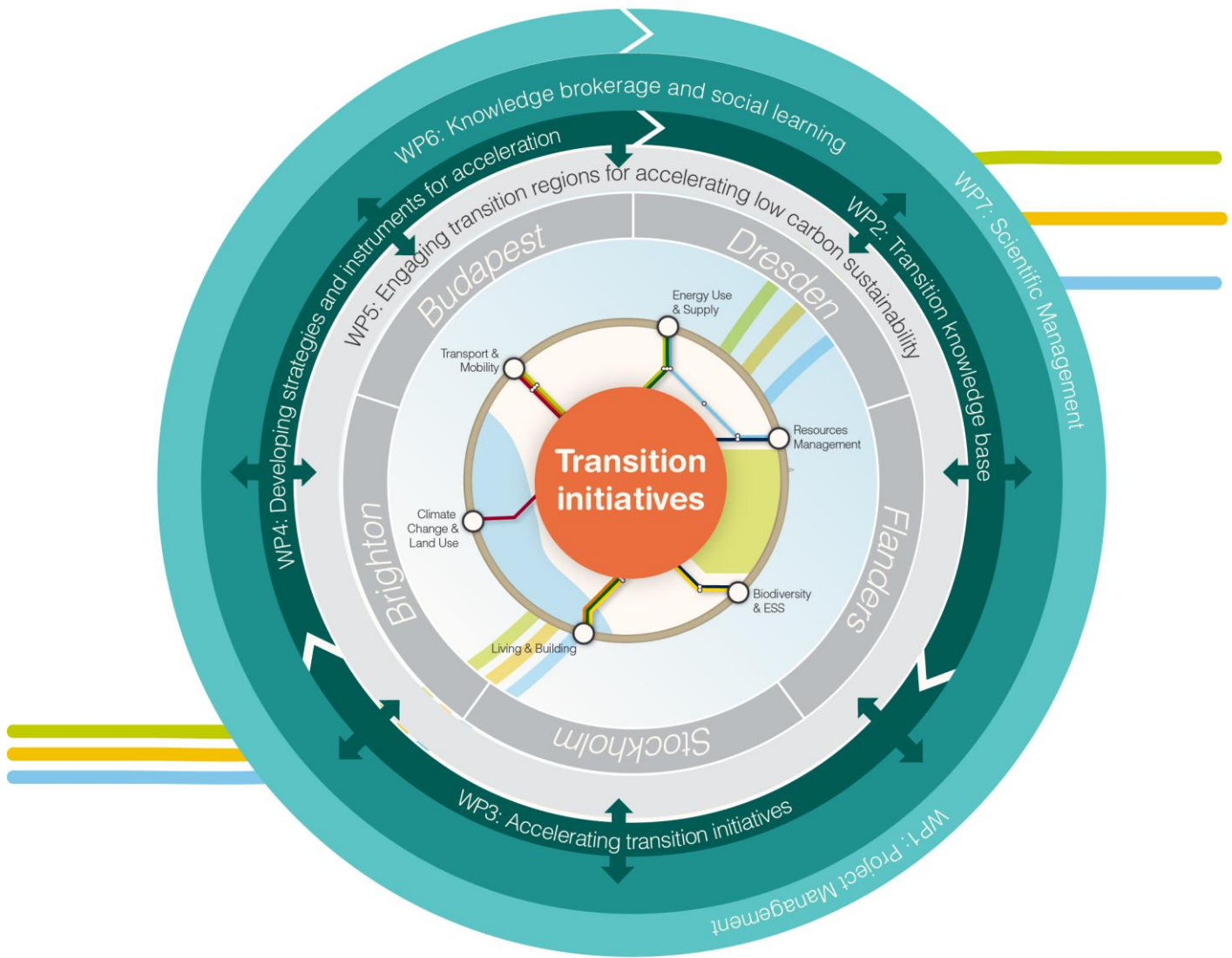


Figure 1: The city-regions and research flow structure of the ARTS project.

Can transition be achieved with current models of governance?

Unsustainability challenges not only have multiple causes and consequences, they also involve a range of domains, actors and scale levels. Yet, our governance models, characterized by domain focus and fragmentation, are unable to effectively deal with such complex issues. Many municipalities in Europe still rely exclusively on traditional command and control instruments, downplaying the importance of fast changing social, economic and environmental context. However, the days of simple plan-do-check systems are over, if we are to go beyond incremental change and techno fixes. To start, foster and implement transitions, we need creative and innovative solutions that rarely flourish in top-down administrative structures.



Driven by different types of actors, transition initiatives aim to transform the way that our basic needs are defined and met.



What are transition initiatives?

It takes more than just a good idea to radically change established routines and perceptions. Cities play host to a multitude of small and larger initiatives, driven by different types of actors (e.g. bottom-up, grassroots community initiatives as well as multi-actor partnerships) and motivated by a range of issues in multiple domains such as energy, food or the built environment. Driven by people that live or work in the city-region, transition initiatives aim to transform the way that our basic needs are defined and met. This transformation is triggered and achieved through working with a whole set of interconnected elements, including infrastructures and technologies, rules and norms, routines and practices. Translating abstract sustainability ideas into tangible actions, transition initiatives are the pulse of transformative change in cities.

Why look at transition initiatives?

Transition initiatives offer interesting starting points for sustainable development of the city-region since they aim to, or often have already implemented, alternative practices that contribute to environmental sustainability. The increasing awareness of sustainability challenges along with the availability of feasible and matured alternatives, has led to the emergence of numerous transition initiatives in cities and regions and vice versa: by experimenting, transition initiatives test how available sustainability alternatives can deal with local challenges. Those initiatives vary in terms of domains covered, spatial and cultural contexts, as well as the type of actors that drive them. However, while embedded in a certain local and regional context, the transition initiatives respond to the impacts of global sustainability problems. Local initiatives can therefore be the driving force to transform practices, perceptions and expectations as well as ways of organisation towards more sustainable ones and in this way accelerate transitions to sustainability.

How to accelerate sustainability transitions?

In the ARTS project we will examine how transition initiatives contribute to the acceleration of sustainability transitions, by examining the way they operate in the context of the city-region, how they interact with other initiatives especially in building coalitions, extending networks, mobilising resources, as well as demonstrating the legitimacy of sustainable alternatives, practices and configurations. We will learn from the transition initiatives how to create momentum for accelerating sustainability transitions in cities while scrutinizing their actions along the following three questions:

- How to achieve synergy, and yet maintain diversity?
- How to leverage acceleration, and yet ensure inclusivity?
- How to exploit scalar relations, and yet remain context-sensitive?

Our goal is to understand and facilitate conditions under which the transition initiatives related to basic human needs, such as energy, food, shelter or mobility, can be coupled, rescaled and consequently accelerated.



Transition initiatives and city-region governance

Local transition initiatives cannot alone bear the weight of steering city-regions away from unsustainability. Instead, multiple actors need to get involved, including those beyond the local level. Therefore, another research focus will be on the influence of the different city-regional governance patterns.

All five cases are embedded in different subnational/national contexts (Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Sweden and United Kingdom), while they share the same European context. Hence a focus of our research is to investigate the influence of the different governance levels on the local sustainability transition initiatives, from subnational/national to global.

In order to tap into the transformative potential and capital of local initiatives, governance processes need to marry the bottom-up lessons and insights with the top-down directions and regulations. As such new governance models are needed to fit the context dynamics and to enable learning from and about the local transition initiatives. This research will focus on existing policy targets, visions, programs, instruments and legal frameworks.

If the questions we are posing resonate with you as well, please get in touch with us at arts@drift.eur.nl. Whether you are a researcher, local government representative or an activist, we are happy to hear about your experience, ideas and plans related to accelerating local transitions to sustainability.

We are currently present in the following regions



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