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Transitions to Sustainability - Introduction

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Introduction

François Mancebo

This book considers the conditions of transition to sustainability: how to take into consideration new global phenomena such as and of the dimension of climate change, the depletion of natural resources, financial crises, demographic dynamics, migrations and mobility, while bearing in mind short-term or local place-based issues, such as social justice or quality of life. The Millennium Declaration proclaimed the “collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level.” Of course, but how to go beyond lip service and do it concretely?

In 2000, Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer stated that we have entered, since the beginning of nineteenth century and the Industrial Revolution in Europe, a new period of the Earth’s history, which they called anthropocene.¹ A period when human activity becomes the main factor that determines the state of the planet, from its biosphere to its land, from its climate to its seas. Indeed, since 2009, a working group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy is considering making the anthropocene officially a geological epoch. How to better highlight the responsibility of human societies toward the “spaceship Earth,” to use an expression first employed by Kenneth Boulding?²

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¹Crutzen P. J., Soermer E. F., 2000, “The Anthropocene,” *Global Change Newsletter*, n° 41, pp. 17–18, IGBP.

²Boulding K., 1966, “The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth”, *Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy*, Boulding K. et al. eds., pp. 3–14, John Hopkins University Press.

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Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) of 1992 in Rio, when “sustainable development”—defined in *Our Common Future*³—was given an operational framework, the notion of sustainable development successfully spread in the political world and more largely within the civil society. So much so that, when another Earth Summit was organized again in Rio 20 years after—in 2012—its new name was “United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development”.

These last 20 years, the conscience of the environmental, economic and social challenges of our planet and its inhabitants has greatly evolved, while the geographical and political context changed dramatically. Besides, new actors emerged on the sustainability policy scene—firms and companies, NGOs, local communities, etc.—alongside the traditional institutional actors such as states and international organizations. The current institutional framework for sustainability is not really able to take charge of this new configuration. It is not an accident that one of the two major topics of Rio+20 was “the institutional framework for sustainable development.” What could be a new policy framework to foster efficient transitions to sustainability? Indeed, the recurring issue of coordination mechanisms—be it at local, national, regional or global level—is a crucial one. One thing is already obvious: transition to sustainability demands serious changes in the way humans do business with each other and with the earth, in the face of a fractured, unequal world.

Thus, one question that need a clear and complete answer is: How to link social justice with sustainability policies? What governance tools to do so? Engaging which parties? Many environmental problems—climate change, land degradation, urban sprawl or loss of biological diversity, to list just a few very different issues—receive first inefficient answers under the double pressure of the divergent political agendas of the different actors and of the lobbying, and then knee-jerk panic reaction treating symptoms not disease, when the public opinion start demanding immediate action. But this way of doing—especially its panic component—is very poor policy. For example, the systematic recourse to environmental technologies to meet with sustainability issues is typical of such final knee-jerk reactions. Like a deceiving Promethean promise, it trades the hope to combining successfully environmental improvement with economic growth, against huge unforeseen real environmental and social side effects. Solutions to problems can create problems of their own.

If there is often critical need for rapid transition to sustainability in different matters, urgency itself brings a risk of short-termism and inappropriate reaction. In 2000, the Millennium Declaration proclaimed: “We recognize that, in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level.” Today, on the verge of a new cycle, where Sustainable Development Goals will replace the former Millennium Development Goals, it is crucial to go beyond the mantra and ask: how to link practically long-term and short-term priorities, place-based and global approaches, traditional institutional actors and local communities interests? Meeting this challenge requires an inclusive approach of sustainability,

³WCED, 1987, *Our Common Future*. Oxford University Press.

where the societal processes of change related to the emergence of new actors, the adoption of new collective behaviors and the definition of new social representations—socially shared meanings—are of considerable importance.

The challenge, here is introducing social innovation as a key factor for a sound transition to sustainability: In other words, it is a matter of designing a new social contract that includes—in the footsteps of regretted professor Elinor Ostrom—communities of interest, neighborhood communities and groups of individuals forming voluntary associations, among the main stakeholders of sustainable development. Determining the conditions and the form of this new social contract is crucial, since it has a lot to do with defining what a “good” environment means. Transition to sustainability requires more than developing the right markets, institutions and metrics. It requires social momentum—a social movement for change. In this sense, transition to sustainability can be conceived as a long-term democratic project, taking place simultaneously in its social, environmental and spatial dimension. Which kind of society do we want to live in? Who decides on necessary compromises? What control and validation methods are possible? Which compromises between the goals and interests of the different groups? What linkage between one decision-making level and the other? These questions are major issues to design sound transitions to sustainability. To try bringing an answer, the book is organized in three parts.

The first one—Meeting the Challenges of the Anthropocene: Back to planning?—aims at identifying new form of planning, which could foster transition to sustainability. Christian Comelieu considers that this planning should be designed as a political process rather than just a technical or economic program, since what is at stake here is nothing less than the type of society we are going to promote in the long run. Ladislau Dowbor, who addresses a new form of planning in Brazil—which he calls economic democracy—develops this approach in a place-based context. Meanwhile, at the international level, Ignacy Sachs proposes the elaboration of a 15-year world development plan for the period of 2016–2030. But Jon Marco Church reminds us that the international system is anarchical. It may be somewhat premature to imagine right now an efficient world development plan. According to him, at this stage the question still is: Can sustainability planning be considered as an emerging norm at the international level?

Indeed, norms embody values and ideals. Thus their emergence may also promote a new social contract. Thus, defining a new form of planning fits into a larger picture, which is the subject of the second part of this book named “Towards a New Social Contract”. According to Carlos Lopes, a collective law embodied in a social contract makes a lot of sense when addressing transition to sustainability. According to him, the main aspect of this contract is that present generations are held accountable by future generations. How to do this? How to design a more sustainable future? Peter Haas considers two strategies: Harnessing shared norms and causal beliefs behind a direct sustainability agenda, or aggregating different agreements out of the hope that the whole will be larger than the sum of its parts and will give rise to a second order sustainable transformations. But whatever the strategy, how to determine if an adopted pathway to sustainability is successful or not? What indicators should be considered? Arthur Dahl proposes indicators of well being,

including material, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of human progress that would highlight disadvantaged minorities, gender and class differences, and other priority needs of specific populations. In the same spirit, François Mancebo addresses in his chapter—Insights for a Better Future in an Unfair World—one the more challenging aspects of transition to sustainability: combining sustainability policies with social justice. Since sustainability programs may turn out to be completely out of touch with the needs and expectations of the populations concerned, he proposes to address the social process of decision-making itself by promoting people’s place-based appropriation of sustainability policies.

The third part—Some Governance Issues—addresses global energy governance, multi-stakeholder governance for sustainable mobility, and territorial governance. Sylvia Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen analyzes the present lack of legitimacy of global energy governance. She demonstrates that strengthening global energy governance is not normative matter but rather a matter of subjective legitimacy in the eyes of governments and other actors. Marc Dijk champions a not so different position on the subject of sustainable mobility. The nature of mobility issues—multi-faceted, involving social, economic, and ecological as well as technical aspects—requires multi-stakeholder governance. In both cases two questions may emerge: Who is invited to the “governance party,” and on what geographical and temporal scales? This is what Bernard Pecqueur and Paolo Vieira strive to address with the notion of *territorial governance*, which supposes policies built by multi-actor panels exterior to the classical politico-administrative structures. The point is empowering local communities, so as to create a real change in their perceptions, attitudes and behaviors. The third part ends with a declaration—Rheims Sustainability Vision—made at the 3rd *Rencontres Internationales de Reims on Sustainability Studies*, as a contribution to the open working group on Sustainable Development Goals.

This book is based on the debates and the outputs of the last three *Rencontres Internationales de Reims on Sustainability Studies*, and international conference organized annually by the IRCS (International Research Center on Sustainability—www.sustainability-studies.org) at Rheims University. The IRCS is engaged—together with other research centers around the world—in sustainability science: An emerging field of research, which objectives are to generate useful knowledge to support a transition to sustainability.⁴ Sustainability science considers the interplay and dynamic evolution of social, economic and natural systems, on an integrated and long-term perspective at different geographical scales, from global to local.⁵

⁴Clark W. C., 2007, “Sustainability Science: A Room of its Own”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 104, n° 6, pp. 1737–1738

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⁵Swart R. J., Raskin P., Robinson J., 2004, The Problem of the Future: Sustainability Science and Scenario Analysis”, *Global Environmental Change*, n° 14, pp. 137–146