

Changing Governance and Governing Change

Research Program of the Public Administration and Policy Group

The Public Administration and Policy group is an enthusiastic, diverse and ambitious group within the Department of Social Sciences at Wageningen University. Our mission is to study the public governance of sustainability transformations in the interrelated domains of water, climate, environment, food and agriculture. We do so under the header "Changing governance, Governing change". The group aims to contribute to scientific progress, to societal debates, and to improved governance practices.

Background

Societies and ecosystems are facing multiple interconnected sustainability challenges, including sea level rise, water shortages, biodiversity loss, and the declining resilience of food systems. Impacts are distributed unevenly across the world, and affect different segments of societies in divergent ways, raising questions about fairness and justice. These challenges can be understood as “wicked problems”, as they involve complex social-ecological systems that behave unpredictably and in uncertain ways, while much disagreement exists about how they should be addressed, when and by whom. Moreover, addressing these sustainability challenges requires transformative change across multiple jurisdictions at an unprecedented pace, while powerful societal actors and vested interests constrain opportunities for systemic governance interventions.

Our work is premised on the understanding that the role of public governance in sustainability transformations is key. We argue that many sustainability crises can be described as “governance crises” – suggesting that the current depth, scope and pace of attempts to address them are falling short. Although sustainability transformations are taking place in different sectors of society, they are often not sufficiently supported by public authorities: instruments and tools to trigger or invoke transformations are not used, unsustainable incentives are maintained, and institutional and political obstacles within government continue to exist. To better understand and address this situation, we developed the research program “Changing Governance and Governing Change”. We study whether, when and how innovative governance strategies and arrangements can be introduced that help realize the necessary sustainability transformations. We aim to understand these transformations across different geographical, temporal and jurisdictional contexts, as such problematizing public governance questions and challenges from different perspectives. By leveraging our disciplinary and interdisciplinary expertise, we aim to make inspiring and innovative

contributions to both science and practice in the fields of water, climate, environmental, food and agricultural governance.

Mission and objectives

Our mission is to analyze how actors, embedded in institutions, attempt to govern sustainability transformations, and to use the generated insights to help develop or co-design public governance interventions, governance arrangements that are conducive to transformations in society, or to remove current governance obstacles to societal initiatives in this direction.

Our objectives are to (1) achieve scientific quality through making world-leading contributions to public governance theories in disciplinary and interdisciplinary scientific debates; (2) realize policy impact by contributing to critical reflection on, and actionable recommendations for the improvement of governance practices; and (3) contribute to reflexive societal debates about the public governance of sustainability transformations with colleagues, societal actors, and students around the globe.

Domains and collaborations across disciplines

We mainly work in the fields of water, climate, environment, food and agriculture, as well as the connections between these. In our work, we draw on public administration and public policy concepts and theories, as well as broader social science theorization. We apply a diverse range of methods guided by our research questions and are open to diverse perspectives and approaches. Some of the methods we use are qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), serious gaming, transdisciplinary research in living labs, and more recently artificial intelligence and big data as a means to get insights into policy development and implementation at previously impossible scales.

The PAP group actively collaborates with neighboring groups in the Wageningen Centre for Sustainability Governance (WCSG), which employs more than 100 researchers and is at the forefront of global discussions on sustainability transformations. The WCSG was recently assessed and was found to do "excellent, impact-driven and ample research", and to be "in an eminent position to meet the demand for innovation in governance related to sustainability issues". Additionally, we actively participate in pioneering interdisciplinary research endeavors spanning the breadth of the life sciences, fostering dynamic collaborations with experts in animal science, plant science, environmental science, as well as land and water management.

Research lines

The research program comprises three distinct research lines, each exploring a facet of public governance in sustainability transformations: i) Dynamics and directions of change in governance; ii) Between fragmentation and connectivity; iii) Conflict and contestation. These lines not only converse with each other but also draw upon foundational concepts from the field of Public Administration and Policy, extending beyond its traditional boundaries.

1) Dynamics and directions of change in governance

This research line conceptualizes and analyses continuity and change in policies, polity, and politics, and in turn how these enable and constrain the dynamics and directions of societal change in different contexts. Because of the wicked nature of the challenges facing governance actors in the fields of climate, water, environment, food and agriculture, it is very important that policy systems respond to new insights, and do not become locked-in into old problem definitions and understandings. Policy and institutional change towards transformation is of paramount importance, but is hard to create because policies and institutions are often deeply entrenched, surrounded by constituencies that benefit from them, and because of existing power constellations.

This research line aims to capture the mechanisms that drive or inhibit policy and institutional dynamics in the direction of societally desired sustainability outcomes. Change dynamics can occur because of policy oriented learning, experimentation, evaluation, public dialogue, but also because of political power play, compliance with international norms, diffusion, path dependency, or sensemaking. Societal change that emanates from these dynamics is often characterized in the literature as either transformational or incremental, but our research has shown that it helps to distinguish between the depth, scope and pace of change, and that change can be continuous and transformational through accumulating small wins. That is why we pay extensive attention to the conceptual, methodological and empirical challenges of tracking (policy) change, and the influence of underlying mechanisms that make it possible to describe and analyze patterns of stasis and change. Moreover, interdisciplinary collaborations allow for assessing the extent to which change contributes to more sustainable outcomes, such as a circular food system and economy. Insights in the mechanisms and directions of change are used to identify the levers for change in designing new governance arrangements to manage wicked problems.

Key publications in this research line:

[Transformational change: governance interventions for climate change adaptation from a continuous change perspective](#)

[Mechanisms for policy \(dis\)integration: Explaining food policy and climate change adaptation policy in the Netherlands](#)

[More than peanuts: Transformation towards a circular economy through a small-wins governance framework](#)

2) Between fragmentation and connectivity

Governance systems are typically organized along specialized units, according to distinct competences, and specific time frames. However, sustainability transformations require cutting across these boundaries between temporal, spatial and jurisdictional scales, between public and private spheres, and between science, policy and society. Sustainability challenges need to be addressed by polycentric governance arrangements, which are characterized by complex interactions across scales and actor configurations. Whether or not and why arrangements operate as a connected system, or disaggregate into a fragmented constellation is not clear. This research line develops an understanding of (1) how actors construct and operate across boundaries and to what effect and (2) which institutions (including norms, rules and beliefs) foster interconnectivity across these boundaries (e.g. through boundary objects, collaborative networks and participatory governance, or procedural instruments), or pose constraints.

Our contributions extend to crafting a comprehensive framework for dissecting the institutionalization of policy integration across diverse sectors grappling with cross-cutting challenges. Additionally, we delve into the intricate dynamics of navigating multiple scales within sustainability transformations through the politics of scale and scale framing. Moreover, our research sheds light on decision-making processes geared towards fostering long-term sustainability considerations in infrastructure projects. Recently, the research line has evolved to include interest in the role of information technology, big data and social media in understanding societal transformations, and their potential use for analyzing efforts at governing them. Data science methods are a means to study the way actors organize and connect across boundaries, or actually introduce new boundaries.

Key publications in this research line:

[*The governance challenge of implementing long-term sustainability objectives with present-day investment decisions*](#)

[*Polycentric energy governance: Under what conditions do energy communities scale?*](#)

[*Tensions between global-scale and national-scale governance: The strategic use of scale frames to promote sustainable palm oil production in Indonesia*](#)

3) Conflict and contestation

This research line focuses on the role of values and contestation in the design, process and outcome of the governance of sustainability transformations. It analyses what is seen as “good” governance of transformations in terms of effectiveness, legitimacy, accountability, sovereignty, or justice - both in a normative sense and empirically across various contexts and stakeholders. Recently, this research line has also come to include analyses of the ‘dark side’ of sustainability transformations, as potential negative or unintended consequences – such as loss of cultural heritage, displacement of communities or the exacerbation of power imbalances – may arise from attempts at fostering transformative change. Recognizing and addressing the dark side of transformative change is essential for ensuring that sustainability transformations are truly beneficial and equitable.

This research line further strives to understand the relevance and implications of observed value conflicts and varying risk perceptions for governing transformations. For this purpose, we use framing and discourse analysis, deliberative governance methods, valuation methods, and action-research methodologies to study how different values play out in policymaking and governance. Studying the role and contestation of values in practice and relating these to different normative governance theories enables us to engage in a reflexive manner in debates on evaluation of existing and emerging policy making and governance arrangements and in processes of co-creating new ones.

Key publications in this research line:

[*Legitimacy in an Era of Fragmentation: The Case of Global Climate Governance*](#)

[*Conceptualizing controversies in the EU circular bioeconomy transition*](#)

Interactions between the research lines

When taken together, the research lines offer a cohesive and comprehensive approach to the study and practice of the governance of sustainability transformations. Sustainability transformations require radical change in governance structures and policies, and countless “lock-ins” in governance systems need to be opened up so that public policy can become a factor that helps attain more sustainable and just futures. Such radical change must however be premised on a holistic understanding of the issues, and the capabilities of society at large. Finally, in any properly functioning democracy conflict and contestation have a place in addressing sustainability issues, for instance by finding the weak spots in proposed interventions, by making disagreements visible, and by debating the proper values underpinning decisions.

We see the three research lines as closely related and are actively interested in the interaction between the various themes – asking questions, for instance, about how conflict and contestation can be made productive in enhancing the direction of sustainability transformations, or ways in which conflicts can be addressed by designing more holistic solutions. By paying attention to the interactions between the three lines we aim to develop holistic governance solutions that are adaptive, collaborative, and responsive to diverse stakeholder values and needs, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and legitimacy of sustainability governance.

Scientific quality assurance

Our group makes optimal use of its unique position as a public administration group in an internationally oriented life-science university by focusing on the governance of wicked sustainability problems. We developed the following principles to guarantee scientific quality and develop a recognizable niche:

1. Research based on strong disciplinary foundations of public administration, public policy and political science, combined with interdisciplinary insights on the governance of particularly water, climate, environment, food and agriculture;
2. The deliberate use of a variety of methods (multi-method) and theories (theoretical multiplicity);

3. Strong methodological approaches for revealing comparative insights within and across various research projects (including data science, AI) and for working with stakeholders to enhance reflexivity.

Societal impact

We intensively engage stakeholders in our research in various ways, varying from collaborative action research to multi-stakeholder workshops, consultancy and membership in science-policy institutions. This has resulted in leading positions in large-scale action research programs with intensive collaboration with various societal stakeholders. Examples include the [AquaConnect](#), [TRANSPATH](#), [Plan'Eat](#) and [Red&Blue](#) projects. Through long-term relationships with stakeholders, we go beyond written recommendations and make a difference in policy practices. For more information, see the [collaboration page](#) on our website.