

MANAGING THE DIRECTION OF SOCIETAL CHANGE

Sustainable development in practice

BY CAROLINE VAN LEENDERS

► For sustainable development fundamental changes in society are necessary changes that can only be brought about by joining forces. For firms, public services, and authorities alike, these transitions mean engaging in a development trajectory in co-ordination with their stakeholders, in which processes, product portfolios, management practices and decision processes are adjusted to meet the demands of the new society (Triple P) and the 'new' consumer. NIDO, the Dutch National Initiative for Sustainable Development, facilitates these collaboration processes between all stakeholders in order to meet the challenge of transitions for sustainable development in practice.

THE CHALLENGE

If future generations are to have the same options to satisfy their needs as our current generation has now, mechanisms ensuring this have to be built into our current practice. This is stressed in the fourth National Environmental Policy Plan (NMP4). The NMP4 mentions transitions to a sustainable energy system, a sustainable use of natural resources and a sustainable agriculture. Scientific and technological innovations are vital to make these transitions possible. But technological innovations alone are not sufficient. To achieve real sustainability a more widespread social transition process is necessary. This requires a complex and fundamental process of changes in the community structure. The NMP4 calls these 'transitions' or 'system-innovations for sustainability'.

The changes required for the transition to a sustainable society can only be brought about if the process meets certain aspects such as the involvement of different actors or 'multi-actor' (i.e. firms, NGOs, government, knowledge institutes), multi-scale (i.e. local, regional, national) and multi-level (changes should happen on micro-, meso- and macro-level). It thus means joining forces, analysing the system, setting an ambition and engaging in a dialogue. It has to be a social learning process in which the roles of all parties concerned co-develop. This is the challenge of sustainable development.

NIDO: BRINGING PARTIES TOGETHER

NIDO was initiated by the government in 1999 to facilitate transition processes in practice by bringing various parties together towards concerted action. NIDO is positioned as an independent organisation, with no other interest than the progress towards sustainable development. NIDO involves industry, government, science, and societal organisations in collaborative processes to realise the implementation of sustainable practices. Areas presently addressed by NIDO include CSR (corporate social responsibility), logistics, sustainable product marketing, water management and sustainable outsourcing.



Photo: Ulla Loew

Intermediate organisations like NIDO help to get these processes off the ground. In the processes that NIDO supervises, depending on the definition of the problem and the environment, different relevant parties are brought together. Parties join forces in initiatives championed by individual players, such as firms or civil service organisations. They are stimulated to find new solutions through new forms of co-operation and dialogue. Science and technology supply important ingredients for these new solutions; knowledge and transfer of knowledge are always an important element in these processes. The combined energy of parties involved in these projects also help to define the desired role of societal institutions.

NIDO also serves as a structural interface between fundamental knowledge development, competence development and real-life experimentation and thus catalyses the transition towards a sustainable (Dutch) society and provides high quality (knowledge) support for policymaking and business.

The initial results of this approach indicate that NIDO's facilitation successfully deals with the complexity of the issue and that it leads to structural implementation of sustainable practices in business processes; all parties involved in processes supervised by NIDO gradually learn to effectively meet the challenge of sustainable development.

The main challenges for the practitioners guiding the NIDO programmes involve:

- The utilisation of scientific transition knowledge to execute their own tasks more effectively, and to develop competences of all players involved
- The effective dealing with the context of each individual player: frames of reference, stakeholder influences, use of language, routines, (organisational) cultures
- The transfer of ownership of the transition to structural players

- The establishment of synergy between the individual transition and the overall transition towards a sustainable society

The activities of the practitioners can be described by three 'phases':

1. Analysis: identify opportunities and involve essential societal players
2. Intervention: organise reflection, learning, alignment and continuity of effort between these players
3. Output: ensure output for individual players as well as helpful contextual change

THE OUTPUT

NIDO's activities/programmes deliver output for individual players (micro-level) as well as for their contexts (meso-level). These two realms should change simultaneously (multi-level) to make a system innovation reality. For the individual players this means they will gain:

- New visions and strategies for the future
- A change of criteria for decision making (involving triple P and multiple scale levels and time scales)

For example: in the programme 'Marketing opportunities for sustainable consumer products' niche players learn new marketing strategies (from 'technical to emotional marketing') and major brand companies learn how to work together with NGOs and how to implement the results of a multi-stakeholder dialogue in the decision-making process. Another example comes from the programme 'From financial to sustainable profit', where two projects on CSR were formulated; one with strategic managers and one with communication managers. They met monthly to discuss the progress and problems of their internal projects on CSR and found out what CSR implies for their company (sector-specific) and how to organise internal communication on CSR.

Outcomes on contextual level are found in many different NIDO-programmes. Examples:

- New (commercial and/or public) value propositions
→ New values of water in the city in the programme 'Values of Water' or new guidelines for reporting on CSR
- Novel organisational arrangements and collaborations
→ Set-up of a regional working group of companies on logistics in the programme 'Bundling for sustainability'
- Value chain restructuring
→ The new programme 'CSR in an international context' targets the structure of the value chain in trade between developed and developing countries
- Alternative use of space and other resources
→ Containers used as temporary land in the harbour of Rotterdam in the programme 'Sustainable outsourcing'
- Combination of functions
→ The value of existing buildings in the programme 'Sustainable urban regeneration'
- Development and implementation of new technologies
→ Customer oriented implementation of domotics in the programme 'Sustainable housing for the elderly'
- New formal/informal routines, rules and institutions
→ See the examples before

On meta- or macro-level NIDO extracts meaning by reflecting (with scientists) on experiences, hereby making use of and expanding scientific knowledge. Outcomes:

- Transition management
→ a scientific description of the competencies necessary for transition management
- Fundamental research
→ new insights, concepts, models and theories
- Practice-oriented research
→ new instruments and concepts for practical use
- Research supporting real-life experimentation
→ direct knowledge support in context
- Real-life experimentation
→ reflected experience and competence development
- Dynamic mutual influence between activities and actors (scientists and practitioners)
→ dynamic, non-linear, knowledge generation process

With regard to real-life experimentation the observation is that transitions towards a more sustainable society involve an *aligned* effort of a *diversity* of societal players, e.g. business, civil service, public service, (local) authorities, consumers, citizens, scientists, NGOs.

CONCLUSIONS

NIDO takes its starting point by taking stock of what science knows about transition processes and moves forward by organising conditions under which shared learning takes place across companies and other players in order to understand the complex learning challenges which are posed by sustainability. For this 'action research' NIDO works 'cross-organisationally' and 'cross-sectorly'. Participants join voluntarily and the programmes develop in an interactive and reflexive process, making use of distinctive tools (e.g. dialogue). Structures, practices and methodologies emerge gradually.



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