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Sustainability Evaluations in the Context of Long-Term Strategizing. Crossing Insights from Urban Development and Transition Management

Confronted with increasing socio-environmental uncertainties coupled to a socio-political inertia to anticipate and adapt to challenges in the domain of Sustainable Development (SD), public authorities re-emphasize since years the importance of Planning and Strategizing (P&S) activities. More recently, some innovative P&S exercises saw their time horizons extended from the typical 5 years to 30 years (and more), partially in order to cope with the obvious long-term challenges in SD such as climate change, biodiversity loss, global urbanization, adaptation of consumption patterns... While these P&S activities are very different from traditional P&S (even from the typical SD-Strategy), a series of innovative approaches in the public domain have transcended recently, based notably on new interpretations of the interactions between stakeholders and public authorities. We propose to discuss in this paper the widely ignored relationship between such innovative long term P&S and Sustainability Evaluations (SE) on the hand of two different contexts: strategic planning in urban development (SP-UD) and transition management (TM).

The generic nature of evaluations in the context of P&S is at least quadruple: 1) monitor real-world evolutions with regard to the desired and conceptualized pathways; 2) assess given P&S activities in order to adapt them to emerging realities and new challenges; 3) question given P&S processes for their effectiveness, efficiency...; 4) consider the adequacy of P&S instruments in comparison to other public policy instruments which allow to integrate the (very) long term.

More particularly, because these new forms of P&S intend to participate to SD, the assigned evaluations should be discussed with reference to SE-principles and –criteria. The discussed P&S contexts present both challenges and constraints in this regard, for instance the time dimension becomes increasingly challenging as a longer term is set as a reference: issues that have traditionally been addressed in sustainability-oriented evaluations might gain momentum (e.g. accounting for intra-generational equity) or require innovations on the cognitive side (e.g. deal with uncertainty).

Strategic planning in urban development (SP-UD) and transition management (TM) are fundamentally different P&S activities in domain, scope and scale. However, while UD has traditionally been dominated by planning and is currently undergoing a transformation towards new ways of coping with SD and the long-term challenges, TM has been transposed from innovation management onto social, SD-innovation. SP-UD forces planning practices to adapt over time, in particular to the rapidly changing conditions of contemporary globalization. while TM has been specifically configured to cope with SD-challenges. Both are highly adaptable, flexible, participative, procedural... approaches to P&S, which makes them very relevant for SD policy-making and a perfect ground to apply SE-principles and –criteria.

On the basis of case study analyses, we propose for the present paper to scrutinize both forms of P&S approaches for their evaluation-practice and -moments, then to critically discuss these elements with respect to criteria and principles of Sustainability Evaluations. In a second step, both analyses (on TM and on SP-UD) will be confronted in order to cross-fertilize a series of recommendations for a better integration of SE into such P&S approaches.