International Organisations and the Governance of Deep Transitions

The case of a transition towards a circular economy

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DEEP
TRANSITIONS

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1. Introduction

1. Introduction

Deep transitions: Emergence, acceleration, stabilization and directionality

Johan Schot[a,*], Laur Kanger[a,b]

> ➢ Aim: further theoretically develop and empirically test this proposition, focusing on **the role of international organisations in shaping meta-rules**

Starting point: proposition by Schot and Kanger (2018: 1054):

"Further facilitating and accelerating the creation of between-system links is the **aggregation and intermediation work of inter- and transnational organizations** […]. This aggregation work is purposeful, geared towards homogenization and standardization".

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1. Introduction

– much of the existing work on the governance of transitions analyses the role of national policy makers (Hendriks, 2008; Smith et al., 2005; Tukker and Butter, 2007) or local/urban actors (Ehnert et al., 2017). For a recent review, see Köhler et al 2019.

– Almost no work in the sustainability transitions literature focuses specifically on the role of international organisations in (deep) transitions

– some work on international expert networks promoting particular innovations (e.g. Fuenfschilling and Truffer 2014)

→ **Substantive and long standing literature in IR on the role of international organisations→ make use of this lit to further develop proposition 5**

2. Analytical Framework

Conceptualising the role of International Organisations and expert networks

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2. International Relations research on the role of IOs and expert networks

International Organisations

(Barnett & Finnemore 2004)

- IOs as bureaucracies that excercise authority

- IOs are purposive actors who can act independently from member states

- Authority based on external perception of serving a "legitimate social purpose […] in an impartial and technocratic way" → role of expertise critical in obtaining and maintaining an IOs authority

Epistemic Communities

(Haas 1992)

- Networks of recognized experts (from academia, NGOs and businesses)

- Help states to identify interests

- Frame issues for debate

- Propose specific policies

Concept refined by Dunlop (2015), Demortain (2017) and others
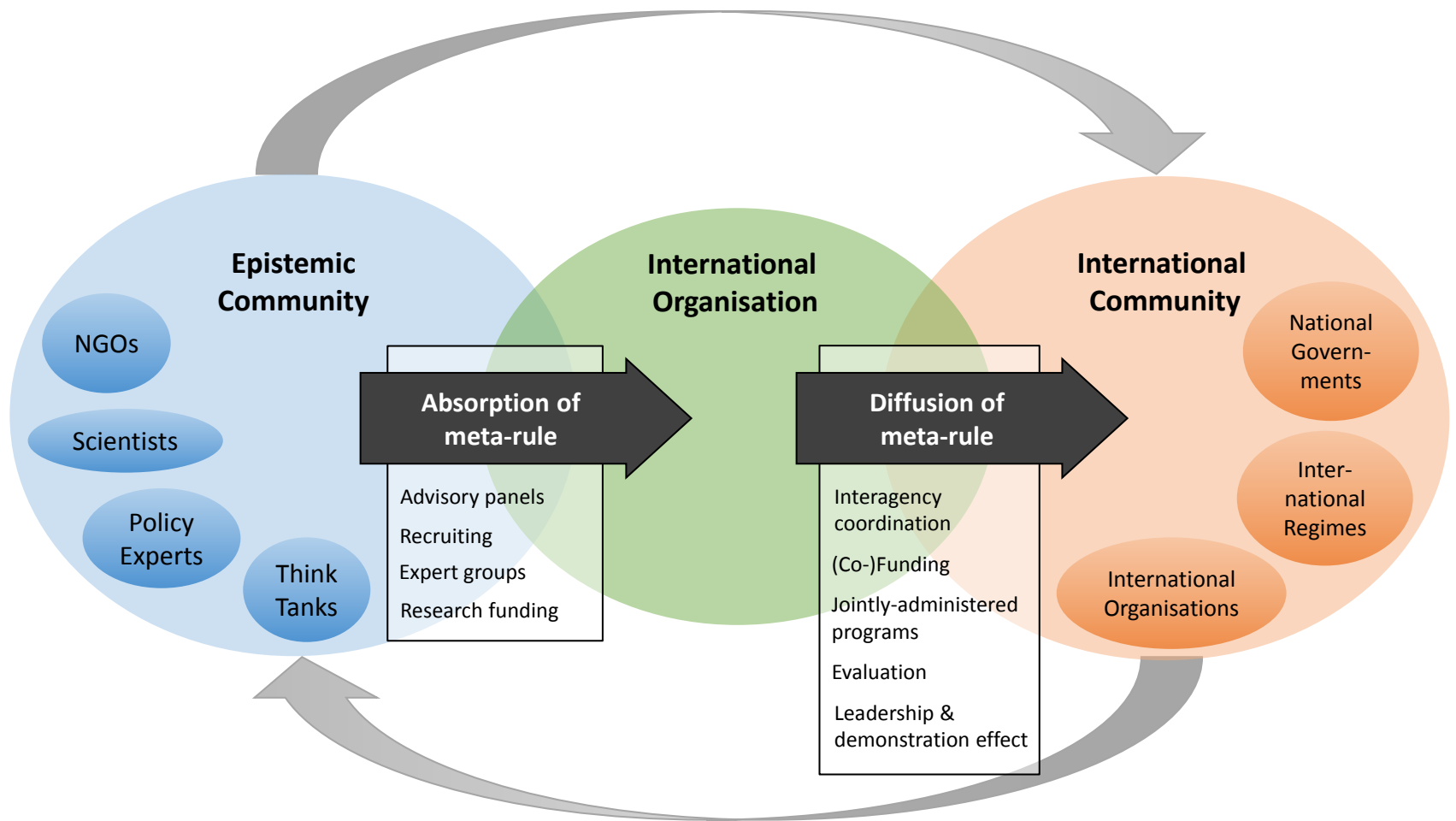
2. Central aspects for analysing Deep Transitions

International Organisations

(Barnett & Finnemore 2004)

Epistemic Communities

(Haas 1992)

(1) **Contextual conditions** and mechanisms through which an epistemic community's **influence** (developing new meta-rules) is most likely to materialize in an inter- or transnational organization

(2) **Different ways** in which these meta-rules are further **diffused** by the inter- or transnational organisation

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Epistemic Community

NGOs

Scientists

Policy Experts

Think Tanks

International Organisation

International Community

National Govern-ments

Inter-national Regimes

International Organisations

Absorption of meta-rule

Advisory panels
Recruiting
Expert groups
Research funding

Diffusion of meta-rule

Interagency coordination
(Co-)Funding
Jointly-administered programs
Evaluation
Leadership & demonstration effect

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3. Research Design

3. Research Design

Contemporary case study approach:

– Studying the aggregation and intermediation processes in real time

– Testing and further developing theory, not aimed at generalisations

Case selection:

– Circular economy as an emerging meta-regime

– European Commission as an important international player in this field (shaping, adopting and diffusing this set of rules)

→ Analysed through a **literature review** and **semi-structured interviews**

3. Research Design

1. Why and how did the EU **take up** the concept of circular economy emerging in the transnational sphere?

2. How does the EU **disseminate** this emerging meta-regime to states and international or transnational organisations?

4. Case study: Findings

4. Findings: EU & Circular Economy

RQ1: Why and how did the EU take up the concept of circular economy emerging in the transnational sphere?

– **Context and policy problem**: waste problem, unsustainability of resource consumption, ineffectiveness of existing environmental legislation (win-lose-perception), restructuring of Commission, new commissioner

– (Emerging) **epistemic community** involving academics (both self-selected & IO-selected), policy experts (e.g. Potocnik) as well NGOs (esp. Ellen MacArthur Foundation)

– **Absorption:**

  ▪ **Initiated by European Commission:** e.g. High-level European Resource Efficiency Platform, two expert groups between 2011 and 2015, International Resource Panel, Inviting Ellen MacArthur to present to EC

  ▪ **Initiated by external expertise:** Esp. Ellen MacArthur Foundation (in collaboration with business stakeholders)

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4. Findings: EU & Circular Economy

RQ2: How does the EU disseminate this emerging meta-regime to states and other international or transnational organisations?

Towards third countries:

– Memorandum of Understanding between EU and China

– Regional 'Switch Programmes' (supporting policy development, funding projects): 400m € on "propagating Sustainable Consumption and Production, Green Economy and Circular Economy in developing countries."

– 'Circular Economy Missions' (High-level delegations send to third countries): "…to have a policy discussion about circular economy and to see whether the country in question could be interested in interacting with us on circular economy."

– Efforts to include the concept into trade deals

→ **Close link between these "bilateral" activities and more multilateral diffusion:**

*"It actually creates a lot of positive interest and support which **now enables us to insert the circular economy as a sustainable economic model into international processes, be it the G7, be it the G20 or be it the United Nations."***

4. Findings: EU & Circular Economy

Towards inter- or transnational organisations:

– G7 and G20 (organising thematic events showcasing opportunities and challenges)

– UNEP 10 Year Framework on Sustainable Consumption and Production

– UNEP International Resource Panel (IRP) (EU is a co-funder, Potocnik co-chair)

– 4th UN Environmental Assembly Forum (March 2019): "*So now the SCP definition is basically circular economy according to the latest UNEA forum resolution. And that can notionally guide the work of multilateral institutions and open doors to collaborations. So that's practically a very effective way in which the EU has been trying to steer the international agenda towards circular economy.*"

"What the commission is doing in trying to work through the IRP and the G7 and the UN to some extent, is to create a messenger which is trusted."

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5. Discussion

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5. Discussion (I)

– set of key actors influenced the development of CE as a policy concept in the EU: but can they be understood as the **formation of an epistemic community? Significant disagreements** about how to achieve circular economy amongst experts

– EU is playing a **very active role in the development and diffusion of this emerging meta-regime**, by taking up different meta-rules (reduce, reuse, recycle, recover), **aligning and complementing** them under the narrative of a CE and diffusing the language, idea and policy practices behind it

– BUT: The Circular Economy is still in its early stages – esp. regarding implementation – **it is not yet rearranging industrial strategies globally** to majorly reduce environmental impact

– CE is still **competing with other potential meta-regimes** which e.g. focus more on demand/consumption in addressing resource depletion

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5. Discussion (II)

Are the described processes similar to what Schot and Kanger 2018 described as the frenzy phase?

- – Ongoing competition and contestation: **CE is not (yet) *the* dominant meta-regime** advanced by leading countries and from providing directionality across many sociotechnical systems (Schot and Kanger 2018) which is envisaged to happen in the turning point and synergy phase: EU ban on disposable plastics a step in this direction?

- – CE: an emerging set of meta-rules which is gaining traction **without first becoming dominant in a specific socio-technical system?** rather a set of rules which influences niches in various socio-technical systems from waste management, to energy production to business models and consumer practices in the textile industry.

- – **Homogenization and standardization** of the rules of the CE has been happening to some extent, still ongoing process.

- – EU was **very active in the initial development of the set of meta-rules**: creating a powerful framing; now involved in 'filling' this idea with content in terms of how policy, industrial and consumer practices will have to change in order to implement this concept, rather than only sharing established 'best practices'.

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Thank you

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