Employing a transition management approach to reorient business strategies for sustainability and resilience: the case of the cycle shops

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Abstract

‘Cycle shops’ sell mainly used goods donated by members of the public; these goods can be furniture, clothes,... Typically, these shops are non-profit social enterprizes and they represent a vital link in product reuse in Flanders. They collect used products, repair them if needed and put them up for sale again. By offering employment for unskilled personnel and goods at low prices, they play an important role in the local social economy. However, recent reorientations on the national and international level may impact the external working conditions of the recycling shops. In addition, new concepts such as cradle to cradle and circular economy approaches highlight potential tensions between ‘reuse of products’ and ‘recycling of materials’. For instance, used clothing can be resold as secondhand clothing or can be processed into new products such as carpets, bags etc. Subsequently, these changing dynamics at macro and micro scale influence the business model of the recycling shops. It is in this light that the recycling shops of the province of Limburg, Belgium, initiated a research project to ‘discover their new role in a low carbon society’. The involved research team employed the transition management framework to guide the process of discovering the recycling shop’s new role since the TM framework is characterized by long-term thinking, considers multiple domains and different actors, and focuses on learning and on system innovation (Rotmans et al., 2001). Furthermore, the TM framework underpins the guiding/influencing of drastic change processes for sustainability (Grin et al. 2010). Thereby, it includes a combination of mutually reinforcing steps and associated activities: analyzing the system, envisioning, exploring pathways and experimenting. The process is guided by a ‘transition-tean’ that co-designs the process and feeds in relevant information to the local transition ‘arena’. The arena is the actual initial incubator of visionary and systemic change (Nevens et al. 2012). In this presentation, we outline the approach and results of the project and reflect upon three research questions:

- Is the transition management framework a workable approach to discover a new role for the social enprrize ‘cycle shops’ in a region aiming at climate neutrality and did it deliver the objectives?

- Did the TM approach contribute to the development of new business models more focused on sustainability and resilience for the social enterprize ‘recycling shops’?

- Did the TM approach contribute to transformative and constitutive power?

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