

# Transitions in farming: the conceptual framework

## Introduction

Transitions are about radical, not marginal, change. In FarmPath we analyzed case studies that have the potential to contribute to transitions towards sustainability in farming. To analyze the case studies, we used the 'multi-level perspective'. While applying it to the farming context, a number of conceptual challenges were identified, especially linked to the diversity of farms and the multifunctional nature of farming.

The analysis of the case studies showed that it is important to take a territorial approach which allows taking into account the interactions between niches linked to food, energy and recreation. The analysis needs to identify regional networks that may span several sectors, or might include both niche actors and actors who formally belong to regime institutions, but are sympathetic to the cause of the niche.

## The 'multi-level perspective'

The multi-level perspective was developed by René Kemp and Arie Rip, and further refined by Frank Geels and Johan Schot (see Grin et al., 2010)<sup>1</sup>. This approach views transitions as processes that result from the alignment of developments at three analytical levels:

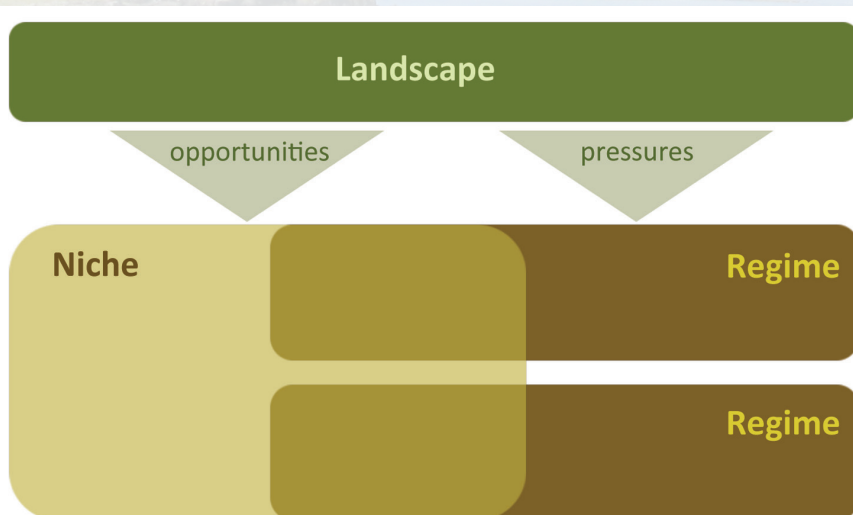
- The socio-technical landscape, which designates the long-term trends in society, e.g. demographic trends, political ideologies, societal values, climate change. On the short- to medium-term, actors cannot influence these broad trends.
- The regime, which is the societal system that is radically changed in a transition. It includes tangible aspects (e.g. infrastructure, regulations, consumption patterns) as well as intangible aspects (e.g. beliefs, routines, policy paradigms, lifestyle expectations). A regime is usually fairly stable as various processes reinforce each other. The regime

does change over time to adapt to new technological developments or economic opportunities, but the changes are marginal and reinforce the current trajectory, often creating a 'lock-in' situation.

- The niche, which is where a group of actors develops a radical innovation. The niche proposes a fundamentally different way to fulfill a societal need. As its proposal is so different, it is usually not compatible with the structures and values of the regime.

A transition may occur if the current regime practices lead to undesirable 'side-effects'

(e.g. environmental pollution through intensive agricultural practices; reduced social cohesion when there are fewer, larger farms that rely on mechanization). Over time the socio-technical landscape will exert pressure on the regime to address the persistent problem. However, because the regime is 'locked-in', it can only implement marginal changes, addressing some of the symptoms. This provides a 'window of opportunity' to niche actors to promote their innovation as having the potential to solve the underlying problem through radically new practices building on new ways to frame issues and different values.



The landscape exerts pressure on the regime(s) and offers opportunities for the niche. To initiate a transition, the niche may link to actors of a regime that are sympathetic to its approach (indicated by the overlap between the niche and a regime). Sometimes the innovation proposed by the niche may link two previously separate regimes (e.g. agriculture and energy)

<sup>1</sup> J. Grin, J. Rotmans and J. Schot (Eds.) (2010). Transitions to sustainable development. New directions in the study of long term transformative change. New York: Routledge.

## Power: resisting transitions

As a transition leads to new technologies, social practices, norms and policies, it necessarily involves disrupting established personal networks and the (economic) dominance of powerful regime actors. Formal organizations that are part of the regime thus either ignore or actively suppress the emergence of niches. Indeed, regime actors often resist transitions, as they tend to perceive them as a loss of power and influence.

However, as a result of persistent problems becoming obvious, societal discourses shift. New expectations are generated and the performance of the regime is questioned. Discussions are held about whether resources are used in the most efficient way, and which problems need to be addressed. If a niche is successful in mobilizing support, in influencing agendas and re-directing investments, it can lead to shifts in societal priorities and changes in power relations.

## Transitions in farming

The case studies in FarmPath showed that analyzing emerging transitions in farming pose several conceptual challenges:

- Farms are very diverse, both within a region and between various regions in Europe. Indeed, farms differ in size, activity-mix and market orientation. This makes it difficult to identify a transition, which is often conceptualized as a shift from a homogeneous set of practices 'A' to a radically different, but also homogeneous set of practices 'B'.

- Farming practices are influenced by spatial configurations, e.g. how close a farm is to an urban center or whether the landscape in an area is perceived to be attractive. It is thus unlikely that a whole region will change uniformly. Rather, various areas will face different opportunities and pressures (e.g. farmer markets, lifestyle farming). This makes it unlikely that there is one clearly defined transition in the whole region.

- In Europe, agriculture is usually understood as being 'multifunctional'. This implies that farms may be involved in several regimes, e.g. food production, energy production and recreation. If the analysis focuses on the transformation of one regime, important effects in other regimes might be missed.

## Lessons learned

The case studies in FarmPath have showed that when applying the multi-level perspective of transition studies in a farming context, much care must be used to clearly define the various elements. This includes questions such as: what exactly is the niche that is analyzed? In what way is the novelty it proposes radically different from the current regime? What regime does it aim to transform? Does it build bridges between two previously distinct regimes?

The case studies showed the importance of building networks. This might take the form of 'tandems' where e.g. farmers and consumers, or wine makers and the tourism sector, pair up to co-develop and promote an alternative. Or it might take the form of actors from the niche who team up with sympathetic regime actors, creating a

'hybrid' network. In both configurations, the activities of the network create a new regional dynamic, which over time can enable a regional transition to sustainability.

The case studies also showed that it is important to assess how a variety of niches that are active in a region collectively transform agriculture. Indeed, it might be that the sum of the changes initiated by the individual niches leads to transformative change, rather than the activities of one individual niche. As such it is important to avoid a sectoral approach to studying transitions, especially considering the territorial and multifunctional nature of agriculture. Transitions in farming might be initiated by the synergies in the activities of niches linked to food, energy and recreation that are active in a region.

### Contact

**Ika Darnhofer,**

University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna  
ika.darnhofer@boku.ac.at

FarmPath project web-site:

**[www.farmpath.eu](http://www.farmpath.eu)**

L.-A. Sutherland, I. Darnhofer, L. Zagata and G.A. Wilson (Eds.) (2014). *Transition pathways towards sustainability in European agriculture*. Wallingford: CABI.

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Universität für Bodenkultur Wien  
University of Natural Resources  
and Life Sciences, Vienna



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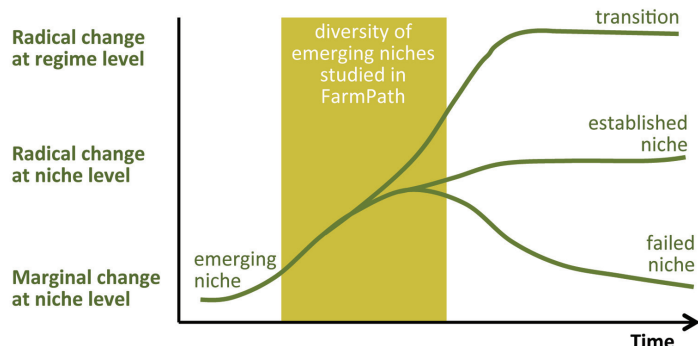
Craigiebuckler  
Aberdeen AB15 8QH  
Scotland UK

### Dundee

Invergowrie  
Dundee DD2 5DA  
Scotland UK

Tel: +44 (0)844 928 5428  
Fax: +44 (0)844 928 5429

info@hutton.ac.uk  
[www.hutton.ac.uk](http://www.hutton.ac.uk)



The emerging niches that were studied in FarmPath were very diverse, not least in their ambition to transform the regime. Some niches had no ambition to transform the current regime. They aimed mostly to establish themselves, sometimes putting particular emphasis on retaining their autonomy by purposively not engaging with regime actors.