Control and transformation in sustainable lifestyles

Among the findings of the SLRG '*Civil Society Roles in Transition*' and '*Resilience in Sustainable Food Strategies*' projects undertaken at SPRU, are some general implications for thinking about policy making for transformative change in infrastructures and practices in order to achieve demanding sustainability goals in the food sector. These projects have explored in rich empirical detail, the different ways in which civil society initiatives aimed at promoting more sustainable food systems seek themselves to become resilient and to effect transformative change. The overall picture is one of greater diversity, connectedness and dynamism than is normally acknowledged in policy making. How might this complexity be rendered usefully operational, without possibly damagingly misleading simplification?

Taken together, one cross-cutting outcome of these projects, is the elaboration of a new framework for thinking – and acting – to enable transformation towards Sustainability. This begins by recognising the often-neglected point, that sustainability and transformation are (on the face of it), in tension. This difficulty is exacerbated where it remains (as is often the case) pretty unclear as to exactly what is being 'sustained or 'transformed'? And the problems are further compounded by typically high political and economic stakes and pressures (as in food systems), which can discourage transparency and accountability.

A key to resolving this dilemma lies in recognising that what policy is aiming to sustain are functions: desired rates of development in 'Brundtland qualities' of ecological integrity, social equity and human wellbeing. But what this requires, are typically-radical transformations in the structures intended to deliver these: the infrastructures, institutions and practices of food service provision. Such transformation is often achievable only against significant opposition from incumbent interests. Interventions directed to this end may take the form (alternatively) of proactive efforts at control, or more reactive kinds of response. These in turn need to take advantage of various kinds of shock and stress, that provide key opportunities for change. But these

actions must at the same time also be resilient and robust in the face of these same shocks and stresses.

The framework below summarises relationships between four resulting 'necessary but insufficient' properties of sustainability – as functions of different permutations of shock and stress, control and response. Stability, durability, resilience and robustness are key properties of interest in seeking to maintain positive qualities. But these contrast in crucial ways. And their counterpart properties of transduction, transilience, transition and transformation are equally crucial when attention is directed at policies for shifting the obstacles to progress towards sustainability. These also differ radically.
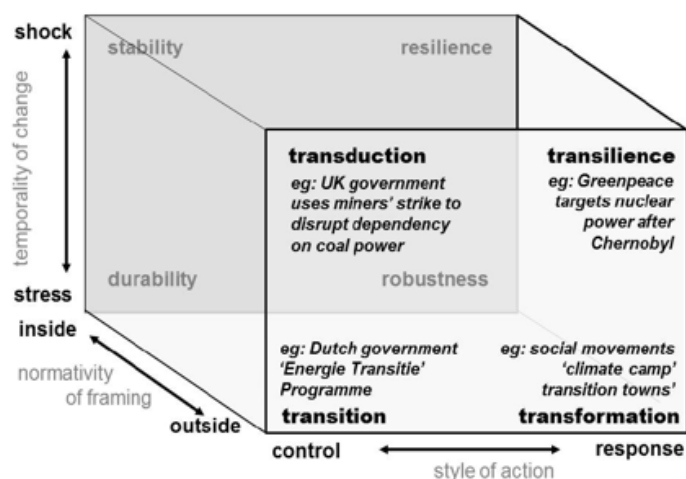

Fig.2 *Additional strategic space for achieving change rather than sustainability (with examples)*

The significance of all this for policy making, is to help move beyond one-size-fits-all 'sustainability policies' in any given area. Taking these issues seriously, helps provoke and enable clearer thinking about the particular ways in which effective policy making is about diverse policy portfolios, offering 'horses for courses'. As exemplified in the 'Resilience' and 'Transition' projects, interventions aimed at stabilizing some desired activity through control in the face of possible shocks, may be very different from policies intended to foster robustness through responsive capacities in the face of stress. This is illustrated by the field in Figure 1 (which forms the rear panel for the more elaborate box in Figure 2).

Likewise, all these strategies will differ even more radically from policies intended to harness shocks in order to achieve 'transilient' change or take advantage of wider stresses in order to effect system transformation. Examples are given in Figure 2 of historical strategies associated with these properties. Each of the corners in the framework summarised below, implies contrasting policies for governing institutions, regulating infrastructures or enabling innovation. What the two SPRU projects offer, among other things, are exploratory analyses of some of some of the practical strategic implications for policy.
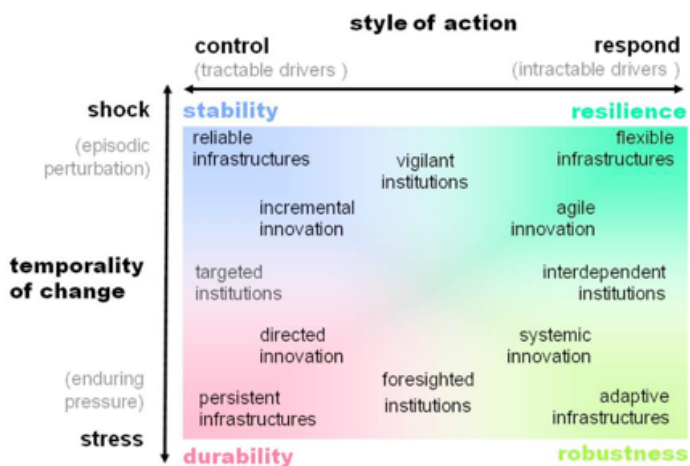

Fig. 1 *Contrasting sustainability strategies for stability, durability, resilience and robustness*

Andy Stirling