Building the Future of EU Sustainability Governance

A critical self-reflexive approach to a participatory Technology Assessment exercise

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World Wide Views

1. Lay Citizens
2. Information
3. Deliberation
4. Vote
5. Thank You
6. Global Results

Source: Danish Board of Technology Foundation
EU Wide Views on sustainable consumption
Expected outcomes

Address a « grand societal challenge »: sustainability in consumption
“From EU Citizens to policy-makers”

- “Citizens are strongly in favor of policy-makers taking ambitious steps in order to foster a more sustainable consumption in society, and want to personally take action in this process” (PACITA Policy Report, 2015)

- 9 policy recommendations
Technology Assessment (TA)

• First institutionalized TA bodies in early 1970s

• Production of **anticipatory knowledge** to support decision-making (*policy-oriented TA*) and to stimulate debates on science and technology in society (*participatory TA*)

• No particular cross-breeding with foresight or future studies

• (Some) common origins and stronger links with Science and Technology Studies (STS)
TA and normativity

- Better technologies in better societies (Schot and Rip 1997:256)

- TA suffers from a « normative deficit » (Grünwald 1999)

- Inconsistency with its own founding normative principles
Making invisible normativities visible

- TA aims at improving the process of political decision-making (*meta-normativity*), i.e. striving for sustainability or citizens’ involvement

- TA activities are imbued with the values, norms and morality of both participants and TA practitioners (*in-normativity*) (Lucivero et al. in preparation)

- How can future studies contribute to address invisible normativities and their implications?
Dystopia

• Dark future based on the systematic amplification of current trends, depicted as having *already* happened

• Cognitive AND pragmative effects, « anticipation-in-action » (Rip 2006)
  • Anticipatory knowledge
  • Action-oriented: empowering political communities, restoring a sense of possibilities, making *alternative pathways* possible

• Featured in fiction AND non-fiction alike

• Not alony a dark vision but a *posture*
The PACITA team as dystopists

Implicit/unconscious “in-normative” dystopian posture adopted by the PACITA team and/or induced by the sustainability framing of the consultation:

Definition of sustainable development:
“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Brundtland Commission, quoted in the information brochure)
[More precisely: a broadened scope “to include social, environmental and economic sustainability: (...) the people, the planet and profit”]

Definition of sustainable consumption:
“The use of services and related products, which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations.” (Norwegian Ministry of Environment, Oslo Symposium, 1994, quoted in the information brochure)

“Why is sustainable consumption so important”:
“As it stands, the Earth’s resources will not be able to support the current level of human production and consumption indefinitely. If current consumption patterns continue, by 2030, we would need another planet to keep up.” (information brochure)
Philippe Lamberts (MEP, Group of the Greens) speaker at the Walloon EWView Meeting:

“We live in a time of unprecedented challenges because we need to handle two time bombs: fast growing social inequalities in Europe and an ecological footprint that overcomes the planet’s capacities. What is at stake is no less than the survival of humankind. The answers to both problems require our society to take a new direction, and the recourse to democratic processes such as this one are an important way forward.”
The PACITA team as dystopists (II)

Underlying dystopian motive/rationale:
“IF we continue/stick to the same patterns... something terrible is going to happen – is already happening”

Implied norms and values: the (apocalyptic) trend scenario is, by design, unsustainable
Limited time horizon (2030) => induces a sense of urgency, a state of watchfulness

Opening up possibilities/alternatives: the dystopian posture doesn’t imply anything in terms of specific, concrete actions to be taken
“Three possible paths”, one best way: the policymakers’ stance

**In theory**, many alternatives exist: “There is no single solution to achieving more sustainable consumption” (information brochure).

=> **Three possible paths:**

“The first is to move towards more sustainable consumption patterns. This encourages a balance between what and how people consume and the pressures consumption places on the planet’s resources, economies and societies.”

“The second route we’ll look at is reducing the level of consumption.”

“Finally, social, environmental and economic pressures caused by consumption can also be reduced by cutting back on the amount of waste consumption creates.”
“Three possible paths”, one best way: the policymakers’ stance (II)

≠ in practise: the first path is always presented as the most desirable way for the Policymakers:

“From a policymaker’s point of view, the best solutions don’t entail any trade-offs. Ideally, a policy leads to improvement without removing choice or adversely affecting other areas” (information brochure)

// (bland) definition of sustainable consumption:
“Sustainable consumption is consumption that can be carried on indefinitely. It doesn’t exhaust resources. Nor does it create social or economic imbalances.”
Response from the citizens’ empowerment

66% of the participants think citizens « should take the main responsibility in striving for a more sustainable consumption »

Walloon citizens want to be fully in charge of the future.

European citizens in general are overwhelmingly satisfied with their participatory experience:
97% of the citizens think that there should be more European dialogue processes like the Europe Wide Views in the future.
78% believe that the Europe Wide Views has generated valuable knowledge for politicians and policymakers.
88% say that they would participate in a citizen consultation again.

These results are in line with the meta-normative implicit posture of the TA process: enhance participation and strive for sustainability
Beyond the « middle way » of sustainable consumption:

78% of the citizens want the EU to strive for an economy in which no waste is produced. One half of these citizens want a zero-waste economy by 2050 *whatever it takes*. Walloons are ahead of that trend (59%). Many Walloon citizens wanted more room for other pathways, such as degrowth or even an exit from capitalism:

This is also consistent with the dystopian rationale: dystopias are designed to open up possibilities
“I have a problem with the title of the event. ‘Sustainable consumption’, these are two antithetical terms.” (Participant, table 2)

“What came out of our discussions is that the capitalist frame doesn’t rhyme with sustainable consumption. To imagine sustainable consumption is to imagine it in another system than the one we know now. A paradigm shift, to go toward something else. Here, in the end, we are asked to think up something else, but within the existing frame, with all the excesses that we know. It is a bit like Coca-Cola sending green soda cans. I would have liked some kind of exit from the frame, to reflect in other terms than capitalism and neoliberalism as it now conceived.” (Participant, table 14)
Visions of sustainable consumption

- Dystopian used as a foil for scientists
- Sustainability horizon (= path 1) desirable for policy-makers/practioners
- Reducing consumption (path 2)
- Reducing waste (path 3)
- Utopian not envisaged for citizens
Conclusion: Framing / Overflow

Framing: citizens’ responses were consistent
  * with the nature and expected effects of the dystopian posture/framing
  * with the meta-normative posture of the TA process

Overflow: The scientists/TA practitioners were not consistent with their own implicit norms:
  * dystopia opened up alternative pathways that were preferably closed down by the consultation framework

=> A self-reflexive approach is necessary to acknowledge the normative assumptions implied by the TA process
Thank you for your attention!

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