

Examining discourses of grassroots initiatives for sustainability in Utrecht

Do grassroots initiatives in Utrecht share a common discourse of sustainability and social justice?

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Research group: Environmental Governance

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Project description

Background and societal rationale

The AndersUtrecht project (www.andersutrecht.nl) is a network created in 2020 by UU scholars affiliated to the Department of Geosciences, the Utrecht School of Governance and the Department of Media and Cultural Studies. It aims to give visibility and strengthen the cooperation between, and the effectiveness of the numerous grassroots initiatives working towards ecological sustainability and social change in the Utrecht Region. Today it counts 14 grassroots organizations active on issues related to agricultural sustainability (VOKO, Tuin Kansrijk), food waste (Taste Before You Waste), social inclusion (Villa Vrede, StadsPodiumUtrecht), the circular economy (Repair Café, De Weggeefwinkel), environmental protection (Amelisweerd Niet Geasfalteerd, Miliecentrum Utrecht, Utrecht Natuurlijk), among others. Since its emergence, the network engaged in efforts to bridge between the University and these civil society actors through the organization of workshops and the creation of a podcast series hosting conversations between network members and researchers and sharing narratives of social change and stories of sustainability transformation.

While some of these organizations were connected in loose networks in the past, AndersUtrecht aims to catalyze the potential for strengthening existing coalitions, expanding them, and/or for forging new ones around or across thematic issues, modes of action (e.g., protests, campaigns, festivals, exhibitions), and/or organizational principles and values (e.g., social justice, care, sufficiency, cooperation).

Academic rationale and aims

As part of AndersUtrecht, the Bright Minds Assistant will investigate existing discourses of a sustainable Utrecht held by grassroots initiatives such as citizens associations, alternative cultural centres, social movements, social enterprises and neighborhood initiatives.

Discourses mobilized by civil society are important to study because civil society has emerged as a key actor in sustainability transitions (Frantzeskaki et al. 2016). It is important to understand grassroots initiatives' discourses and the way they frame the challenges, strategies and actions related to sustainability because differences, similarities and complementarities among discourses influence the

ability of the civil society to come together in effective manners, to establish coalitions and act jointly (Ingram et al. 2015), and thus to partake, or even lead sustainability transitions. , it remains unclear to what extent those grassroots initiatives actually share common understandings and visions of sustainability, social justice, autonomy and partnership, among others.

Research questions

- 1) How do these grassroots discursively construct their vision of a sustainable Utrecht?
- 2) How do they discursively construct their own and other key actors' role (strategies and challenges) in the transition towards a more sustainable and socially just city?
- 3) How can their discursive constructions of sustainability and transition be articulated to further civil society alliances for a transformation towards a more sustainable and socially just city?

The Bright Minds Assistant will explore these questions by analyzing seven podcast episodes produced by AndersUtrecht as part of a new podcast series that is being released between October 2021 and March 2022 (<https://soundcloud.com/utrechtuniversity/sets/andersutrecht>). Each episode, which is up to 60 minutes, hosted network members and an academic on a specific sustainability theme. In total 12 organizations shared their perspective on sustainability transformation concerning the domain they operate in such as food, natural environment and art/culture, among others. Additional data will be collected from the organizations' websites and other relevant online sources (in blog posts, interviews in the media etc.) where they addressed sustainability questions and issues in order to complement the analysis. The analysis of this dataset will enable uncovering similarities and differences, as well as (in)compatibilities and complementarities among the discourses of sustainability and social justice put forward by a sample of grassroots initiatives in Utrecht. In turn, the discourse analysis will allow to discuss the potential for strengthening, enlarging or creating new networks and alliances among grassroots initiatives in Utrecht.

Specifically, the Bright Minds Assistant will engage in the following research activities in collaboration with the supervisor and the AndersUtrecht research team:

1. Familiarize her/himself with relevant literature such as that on social movements, grassroots-led sustainability transitions and transformations, and discourse analysis.
2. Fine-tuning of the discourse analytic theoretical framework.
3. Data analysis:
 - a. Data preparation (transcription, organization)
 - b. Coding
 - c. Analysis of coded material
4. Focus group with members of AndersUtrecht for presentation of preliminary findings to be discussed and validated
5. Contribution to writing up of:
 - a. Journal article (co-authorship) to be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal (e.g., *Social Movement Studies*, *Environment and Planning C*, or *Community Development Journal*)
 - b. Short, non-academic output for AndersUtrecht website
6. Presentation of findings to the members of AndersUtrecht

Project proposal Bright Minds Assistantships September 2022

Thus, this Bright Minds Assistantship will contribute to the emerging research agenda (e.g., Kothari et al. 2014; Escobar 2015; Luederitz et al. 2017; Beling et al. 2017; Feola and Jaworska, 2019) that aims to unravel how different discourses can be articulated to foster a global socio–ecological transition to sustainability.

I will work closely with the Bright Minds Assistant through (bi)weekly meetings. There will also be support from the rest of the research team, which includes Dr Ozan Alakavuklar, Dr Yousra Rahmouni Elidrissi and Prof Patrizia Zanoni (School of Governance) and Dr Dan Hassler-Forest (Department of Media and Cultural Studies).

This assistantship will not be affected by any Covid-19 related restrictions, because it does not require fieldwork. Flexible work arrangements combining home and office work (at the Uithof campus) are possible.

For any enquiries about this position, send an email to g.feola@uu.nl

Job requirements

I am looking for a highly motivated and talented student with attention to detail. A strong interest in the topic of grassroots/civil society/community-led sustainability initiatives is a must, along with an affinity to an interdisciplinary approach to research at the intersection between environmental governance (especially autonomous governance), sustainability transitions and transformations, and social movement studies. The ideal candidate has strong organizational and communication skills in intercultural settings, is proficient in the use of MS Office, and has excellent English communication skills. Previous experience with discourse analysis and the use of the software NVivo is a strong plus.