



The barriers to govern long-term care innovations: The paradoxical role of subsidies in a transition program



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ABSTRACT

This study deals with the governance of a transition program (2007–2011) that tried to radically change a fragmented, supply-driven long-term care system into an integrated, demand-driven system to deal with an aging population. The transition program was subsidized by the healthcare ministry and enabled 26 projects throughout the Netherlands. The idea was to first experiment with innovative long-term care practices outside the system and then to scale-up these innovations to change the system. However, previous research does not highlight examples of long-term care innovations that scaled-up. Hence, the goal is to explore the barriers to govern the scaling-up of the long-term care innovations. The barriers were identified by participating in the program and interviewing ministry, program and project actors. The core barrier was the lack of commitment to the empowerment. It resulted from the subsidy focus of the projects and the lack of protection of the innovations, and from conflicts of interests and power struggles on the ministry-level. A transition program requires more than providing a subsidy. Policymakers have to learn from innovations outside the system in order to change it. Simultaneously, projects should not be entirely subsidized, otherwise there are no incentives to scale-up the innovations.

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1. Introduction

Today, policymaking plays a crucial role in shaping future long-term care delivery practices. Even though the challenges such as an aging population, reducing costs and improving the quality of care are widely conferred, they continue to puzzle developed countries long-term care systems [1,2]. Governments around the world initiate new care policies and programs to develop innovations that deal with the aforementioned challenges [3]. Examples are new community care policies in Germany, Japan [3] and Israel

[4], as well as health and social care improvement programs in the Netherlands [5] and telehealth experiments in the United Kingdom [6].

However, new policies and innovation programs that allow networks to innovate within the existing system merely result in incremental advancements of the care system without being able to actually solve the above-mentioned problems [1,2]. Niche-innovations are needed to enable a transition from our current system toward a new and sustainable system that is able to deal with today's challenges [1]. Niches are protected spaces outside the existing system which allow networks to experiment with radical innovations, e.g. innovations that break with the rules of the system [7]. It is necessary that policymakers learn from these niches in order to question and change the rules of the system [8].

Nevertheless, little is known about the use of niche-innovations in long-term care [1,9]. Therefore, we study

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the governance of a Dutch transition program for long-term care to provide new insights for policymakers and future policy programs. There is an increasing need to change the long-term care system [10,11]. The Netherlands has one of the most expensive long-term care systems in Europe [12]. The system has to change which means moving away from its fragmented, supply-driven toward an integrated, demand-driven long-term care system [13–16]. Patients have to get used to self-determination and deal with the responsibilities while care providers have to get used to communicate with, and listen to, patients. A problem to implement such an approach is the misalignment of long-term care policies and long-term care delivery [15]. A well-intended policy does not necessarily lead to good long-term care delivery. In the end, neither policies nor care providers on *their own* will be able to change the system [16]. A transition program is needed to jointly change it.

Van den Bosch [1] provides first insights into the subsidization and support of the transition program that initiated 26 niche-innovation projects between 2007 and 2008. However, we do neither know how lessons learned in a transition program help to enhance policymaking nor how to govern the change of a system [8]. In fact, many previous transition programs actually failed to change systems [7,17–19]. Hence, research on the scaling-up of niche-innovations is needed [8]. Smith and Raven refer to the scaling-up as the *empowerment* of niche-innovations which is the increasing structuration of niche-innovations such that these can change systems [8]. The goal is to identify the barriers to govern the empowerment of niche-innovations. If policymakers do not know what hinders the empowerment, any future transition program is bound to fail. The research question is: *What are the barriers to govern the empowerment of niche-innovations that aim at changing the long-term care system?*

Next, the theoretical background of sustainability transitions is outlined. Then, a case description, the data collection methods and data analysis procedures are highlighted. Subsequently, the results are illustrated followed by the discussion section. Finally, a conclusion is derived.

2. Theoretical background

To change the long-term care system, the rules of the system have to be changed. A *socioeconomic system*, can be described as “a dynamic concept [of] rules (regulative, normative, and cognitive), embedded in human actors [...]” [17, p. 31]. “Examples of regulative rules are regulations, standards, laws. Examples of normative rules are role relationships, values, behavioral norms. Examples of cognitive rules are belief systems, innovation agendas, problem definitions, guiding principles, search heuristics” [20, p. 403]. Owing to external pressures (e.g. aging population) the socioeconomic system (e.g. long-term care system) slowly destabilizes and “creates windows of opportunities for niche-innovations” which in turn can change the system [20, p. 400]. To do so, niche-innovations need to be empowered [8].

Smith and Raven [8] distinguish between two kinds of empowerment. The first is called *fit and conform* and the second is called *stretch and transform* empowerment [8]. The former fits the niche-innovation into the system and conforms to the rules, trying to be able to change the rules from the inside. The latter is trying to stretch the niche-innovation to enable a parallel system and then transform and replace the existing system to end up with a new system with new rules [8]. It is emphasized that *institutional reforms* are needed to change a system and *political capacity* is needed to spread niche-innovations so that the system becomes sustainable [8].

According to literatures [7,8,21,22] there are five important building blocks for niche-innovations: the various *visions and expectations* of key actors about their roles and responsibilities and the development of the niche-innovation, the *network* which needs to be formed to promote and articulate the requirements of the niche, setting up *experiments* and to *learn* from the experiments to sharpen the vision and adapt the expectations based on what is learned. Learning has to be divided into *first-order learning* which is learning about the innovation in the local context, and *second-order learning* which is learning on the systems-level questioning the existing rules [23].

2.1. Protection–power–people

Protectionism is important for developing niche-innovations. Niches have to be protected through, for instance, subsidies [7]. Otherwise they would be at the mercy of the system with only slight chances of being selected due to their early stage of the development [8]. Yet niche actors can be inclined to use subsidies as a competitive advantage over rivals if the protection is kept for too long [8]. Then, niche actors have no incentive to empower niche-innovations as they want to keep the benefits of the subsidies [8]. Likewise, system actors can protect their system by trying to reinforce the existing rules that favor their modes of operating [8].

Studies are needed that focus on the individual actors involved since these have been ignored in previous transition research [1,24,25]. Oliver et al. emphasize the importance of individuals to policymaking since they decide “how, where and what evidence is used” [2, p. 102]. Thereby, the themes *power* and *people* need to be studied to understand how transitions work [26]. Different niche and system actors have different *interests* leading to controversial debates and disputes [25]. Yet *consensus* and a *shared recognition* between niche and system actors are needed to empower niche-innovations [25]. In that sense, “empowerment is a political process” in which the different actors inherited different levels of power [8]. Thereby, *lobbying* and *promoting* the niche-innovations are necessary to manage expectations and create commitment to change the rules of the system [8]. Empirical research is needed to understand the different interests of actors involved and to find what hinders the empowerment [8].

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