5. Aim of the study

5.1 Rationale

Transition theory characterise *un*sustainability as a system-wide lock-in of dominant socio-technical relationships where the prevailing norms and modes of thinking effectively exclude alternative sustainability visions and radically different innovations. Sustainable consumption studies show that this lock-in is reflected in individual behavioural trends and that sustainability requires a challenging of deeps-seated ideas about development and growth in order to shift priorities towards fundamentally different visions of sustainability. The role of values and visions is central because in practice it is difficult to distinguish between innovations that lead to incremental or radical change. New research on grassroots innovations ascertains that alternative sustainability visions are key in driving participation in and growth of grassroots initiatives, and that cultural and socio-psychological contexts are critical in understanding how civil society activities spread. Subjectivities are co-constructed in social learning processes which gradually lead to the embedding of new sustainability concepts in social contexts, and as such grassroots innovations are sites for transformation in knowledges and cultures. In light of these observations, I want to examine the ways in which grassroots innovations foster sustainability cultures and worldviews, and how different (radical) visions of sustainability shape the kind of action grassroots initiatives undertake.

In line with strands of transitions theory which take *concepts* and *guiding principles* as its starting point for analysing niche dynamics (see e.g. Hegger et al. 2007 or Raven et al. 2010), and building on current grassroots innovations research which investigates the contextual foundations of social learning processes (Seyfang and Smith 2007), this study seeks to understand the connections between sustainability narratives[1] and socio-material relations[2] in grassroots innovations. This opens up for exploring the cultural and socio-psychological aspect of sustainability initiatives because

> "... identity is always temporal, not only in the simple sense of being located in time and space, but because ethical and political existence discloses itself as sameness over time that can only be established in and through narratives that the actors are telling (Patomaki and Steger 2010, p. 1060)."

It also allows for deeper analysis of both intrinsic and diffusion challenges faced by grassroots innovations by offering insights into *why* people organise around certain visions and *how* socio-material configurations change. Following Jasanoff's (2005) findings from her studies on the regulation of science and technology, grassroots innovations can be seen as 'a kind of story-telling by communities', where

> "[t]he intersubjective, or communally held, cognitive frames constructed in [the] process, often embedded in material objects and routinized social practices, impose discipline on unruly events by *creating understandable causal relationships*, *identifying agents* of harmful behavior, and *finding solutions* that convey a sense of security and moral order (p. 26, my italics)."

To paraphrase Lakoff (2010), narratives organise and operationalise such frames.

I propose that this approach will shed new light on grassroots innovations and tackle some of the unresolved research questions on the agenda. Investigating narrative-socio-material relationships in grassroots innovations will allow analysis of differences internally, between niches as well as between niches and regimes, potentially clarifying how niches (and regimes) differ, the extent to which they can co-exist and whether they actually exist in the same social realm. The intention is not to reduce a plurality of viewpoints to a single format (a master or meta-narrative) but to open up to differences in values and interests (Gallopín 2004) through 'texture, richness and insight' (Raskin et al. 2002). The advantage of this mode of enquiry is that "narrative can provide a link between individual and socio-ecological sustainability" and address aspects of grassroots innovations which are "more of a question of being/becoming than of pure ratiocination" (Foden n.a.). In this way, it might also be possible to see whether grassroots innovations can be conceptualised as sites of change for deeper transitions in ways of knowing and being.

5.2 Research questions

The main research question of this study is therefore:

> *"How do sustainability narratives shape socio-material relations in grassroots innovations?"*

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1 See glossary for a definition or section 6.1 for a more detailed description of narrative enquiry.
2 This rather contrived term is intended to convey that both material artefacts and social practices obtain their meaning, and are organised, through stories. Suggestions for better wording are welcome!

To investigate this question I seek to *describe*:

1) what kind of sustainability narratives are found (with)in grassroots innovations;

2) what types of knowledge are invoked in narratives of change within grassroots innovations;

compare:

3) the ways in which sustainability narratives in grassroots innovations express different modes of conceiving action in the world;

4) how this enables (or impedes) sustainable practices and lifestyles;

explain:

5) under what circumstances narratives work in favour of diffusion of grassroots innovations; and,

6) implications for understanding niche-regime relationships.