

Understanding why civil servants are reluctant to carry out transition tasks

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Abstract

The transition literature attributes various transition tasks to government to support socio-technical transitions toward overcoming societal challenges. It is, however, difficult for civil servants to execute these transition tasks, because they partly conflict with Public Administration (PA) traditions that provide legitimacy to their work. This dilemma is discussed in neither the transition literature nor the PA literature. In this paper, we ask civil servants about the normative arguments that reflect their role perception within the institutional structures of their ministry, when it comes to executing transition tasks. We see these situated and enacted normative arguments and underlying assumptions as implicit rules determining legitimacy. The arguments civil servants used confirm that transition tasks are currently difficult to execute within the civil service. We found seven institutionalized rules that explain this difficulty and highlight the inadequacy of civil servants to adhere to the PA traditions while trying to execute transition tasks.

Key words: transition; government; civil service; Public Administration; institutional rules; legitimacy.

1. Introduction

The need for structural change in social–technical systems to overcome interconnected, social, economic, and ecological challenges is reflected in many recent local, national, and supranational initiatives, like the United Nation’s adoption of Sustainable Development Goals in 2015; the signing of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement by 196 parties; and the 2018 European Union (EU) grand challenges (Cagnin et al. 2012; Mazzucato 2018; Schot and Kanger 2018). The socio-technical transition literature studies these wicked societal problems (Wanzenböck et al. 2020) in many domains, like electricity, transport, water, food, heat, buildings, cities, and waste management (Köhler et al. 2019). This literature developed rapidly over the past 20 years, showing exponential publication growth and reaching 500 publications in 2018. Transition perspectives provide a deeper understanding of transformative, system-level dynamics and identify intervention points for supporting socio-technical transitions to meet societal challenges (Köhler et al. 2019).

From the perspective of transition literature, governments are essential for solving socio-technical transitions in helping steer the rate and direction of societal transitions and task governments with transition policy interventions (Borrás and Edler 2020; Hekkert et al. 2020; Hoppmann et al. 2014). Based on a systematic review of 100 transition papers’ policy recommendations, Braams et al. (2021) identify five main transition tasks that the transition literature attributes to the government, including Give Direction, Support Governance,

Support the New, Destabilize the Unsustainable, and Develop internal Structures and Capabilities (see Box 1).

Within the government, the civil service, as the operational body of the government, has a pivotal role and position in carrying out transition tasks not only because they prepare, operationalize, execute, and implement policy but also because they are better positioned than politicians to keep long-term policy stable, which is crucial for transformative directionality (Weber and Rohracher 2012; Janssen et al. 2021). Thus, if a transition is a goal politics and society agree on, then civil servants are needed to execute these transition tasks to adjust the social–technical systems actively. However, the legitimacy needed for civil servants to execute these transition tasks is not explored in the transition literature.

Although the field provides many policy recommendations in the form of transition tasks, it black-boxes the government (Borrás and Edler 2020) and, more specifically, policy departments and civil servants (Haddad et al. 2019). The general idea seems to be that good policy advice from rigorous academic studies can easily be adopted by the government. However, in reality, civil servants within policy departments do not have unrestricted freedom in their policy actions (Wilson 1989; Svava 1999). This confined rationality of civil servants is much better understood by the Public Administration (PA) literature (Stoker 2006; Stout 2013; Torfing and Triantafyllou 2016). This literature has developed a set of policy traditions explaining how civil servants (should) work (Stout 2013). These PA traditions exist side by side

Box 1. The five transitions tasks for government. Based on: Braams et al. (2021)

1. *Give direction*—The government should guide the search by articulating demands, vision, and ambitions and take the lead in establishing policy objectives and plans through policy strategies that should steer the generation and diffusion of innovation towards societal needs.
2. *Support governance*—The government should play an essential role in opening up the transition process for multiple stakeholders and collective action, encouraging others to participate.
3. *Support the new*—The government should collaborate and engage with, support, and fund new developments that could lead to new configurations breaking the dominant socio-technical regime.
4. *Destabilize the unsustainable*—The government should proactively weaken and phase out specific regimes' processes to replace niche innovation for systemic change.
5. *Develop internal capabilities and structures*—The government should develop internal capabilities and structures to enhance its capabilities to play its role and direct societal change.

(Van der Steen et al. 2018) and entail specific public values from which legitimacy can be derived. When transition scholars do not consider these traditions that dominate practice, the likelihood of successful implementation of their transition policy recommendations is relatively low due to a lack of legitimacy (Braams et al. 2021).

In policy practice, the PA traditions are broadly institutionalized by policy departments, where they translate into implicit and collectively interpreted rules of legitimation for policy intervention. These rules generally draw on an actor's perspective of sense-making embedded in a specific context (Reay et al. 2006). In the context of policymaking, institutional rules constitute shared patterns of action of civil servants founded in normative arguments about their role as policymakers and, consequently, the types of policy interventions that are legitimate to undertake. In this paper, we argue that these institutional rules explain why the civil service is generally reluctant to implement transition tasks, and these rules, therefore, require further study. The need to focus on institutional rules determining legitimacy is shared by Haddad et al. (2019: 29), who state that a micro-perspective on how 'legitimacy is created, developed, maintained, etc.' is currently lacking in the literature on transitions and transformative innovation policy.

This paper addresses this literature gap with the research question: 'What institutionalized rules in the civil service determine how civil servants can execute transition tasks legitimately?'. To answer this question, we confront civil servants at the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management (I&W) with a set of transition tasks that we distilled from the literature on sustainability transitions. First, we ask the civil servants whether they consider these transition tasks as legitimate tasks to execute. Second, we ask them for the normative arguments by which they assess the legitimacy of transition tasks. These arguments are mapped onto the three main PA traditions to explore how these traditions influence

civil servants' perceived legitimacy in executing transition tasks.

The perspective of institutionalized rules allows us to open the black box between legitimizing PA traditions and transition tasks on a micro-level to understand the institutionalized rules determining legitimacy and explaining how civil servants give meaning to PA traditions' abstract assumptions. With these rules, their orientation towards transition tasks can be interpreted. Not all legitimizing and delegitimizing arguments are expected to be grounded in PA traditions. We use the non-PA arguments in the Discussion section to consider how they may be used more broadly by civil servants in order to find legitimacy in implementing transition tasks.

2. Theory

In this section, we explore the concept of legitimacy for the government and thus civil service, when they are confronted with transition tasks. We argue that the literature on transition hardly unpacks this puzzle, leading to inertia within the civil service. The PA gives insights into how legitimacy is conceptualized and processed. However, in the daily praxis of civil servants when executing transition tasks, explicit prescriptions are not expected because PA barely focuses on transitions and theorizes systematic change (Braams et al. 2021). We, therefore, focus on implicit institutional rules to understand the daily struggles of civil servants with (il) legitimate transition tasks.

2.1 Lack of legitimacy for transition tasks

The grand societal challenges defined by the EU illustrate the increased attention given to solving persistent, wicked societal problems (Cagnin et al. 2012; Mazzucato 2018). The transition literature shows that solving these problems calls for fundamental shifts in socio-technical systems, i.e. socio-technical transitions (Diercks et al. 2019; Schot and Steinmueller 2018). In general, a large body of work on sustainability transitions highlights these transitions' specific dynamics and stipulates what governments should do to guide, manage, accelerate, and facilitate these transitions (Loorbach 2010; Wanzenböck et al. 2020). The essence of such policies can be captured by the five transition tasks described in Box 1. The literature argues that governments have a crucial role to play in these transitions via what has been labelled transformative innovation policy (TIP) (Haddad et al. 2019; Schot and Steinmueller 2018).

In their review, Haddad et al. (2019: 29) conclude that TIP lacks micro-perspectives 'on the dynamics of how legitimacy is created, developed, maintained, etc.' Following their department from the focus on the legitimation function of a Technological Innovation System, in which legitimation is deemed crucial for mobilizing resources and acquiring political strength (Haddad et al. 2019; Bergek et al. 2008), this research refocuses the angle on issues of legitimately executing transition tasks from an institutional perspective. Such notions are absent in the transition literature, except for Weber and Rohracher (2012). They reached out to policymakers by combining insights from innovation systems and the multi-level perspective in a comprehensive 'failures framework', which would legitimize governmental intervention through innovation policies.

Building on Weber and Rohrer, who prescribed transition tasks for government need bases of legitimacy to be executed, Braams et al. (2021) evaluated whether the five major transition tasks attributed to government could be executed legitimately by the civil service. Braams et al. concluded that civil servants could not, because they assign these tasks to politicians, market parties, or societal groups. These tasks confront their impartial status and reject new tasks without their minister's explicit direction. They suggest that a better understanding of PA traditions can help prescribe tasks more impactfully.

2.2 Legitimation in PA

PA has multiple traditions that use different normative assumptions on legitimate action. Thus, there are various traditions for civil servants 'to choose from' to legitimize their actions (Stout 2013). The dominant tradition within these altered over time and as per the situation. For example, competition and cooperation procedures partly replace hierarchical command and control structures in public organizations (Stout 2013) distinguishes three main traditions: the constitutional, the discretionary, and the collaborative tradition.

The constitutional tradition is based on a Traditionalist PA, coming from classical conservative Liberalism (Stout 2013), and sees obedient, neutral, and rational civil servants as the solution for irregularities, arbitrariness, and unpredictability (Pollitt 2003; Wilson 1989). To ban patronage and clientelism (Fung 2009), they are trained to execute tasks standardized, with clear constitutional procedures and processes, thereby securing legitimacy (Stout 2013; Wilson 1989).

According to *the discretionary tradition*, governments and civil services should focus on market incentives. It criticizes governments' monopolistic service provision leading to inefficiency and non-responsiveness towards consumer needs (Stoker 2006). The principal theory is New Public Management, with a neo-liberal ontology, which states that without competition, performance suffers (Hood 1991; Osborne and Gaebler 1993). It conceptualizes a set of professional norms civil servants should work with deregulation principles, laissez-faire, cost-consciousness, and integrating market mechanisms in public institutes (Osborne 2006; Wynen et al. 2014). Legitimacy comes from achieving outcomes efficiently and effectively (Stout 2013). Civil servants' enthusiasm for this new hands-off doctrine varied enormously, ranging from 'only correct way to correct for the irretrievable failures and even moral bankruptcy in the "old" public management' to 'the philistine destruction of more than a century's work in developing a distinctive public service ethic and culture' (Hood 1991: 4).

Proponents of the collaborative tradition argue that the principles of a market economy are not appropriate to govern (Stoker, 2006). It arose from New Public Service and is based on Humanism (Stout 2013) and did not shift the focus back to the formal structures of the government but rather to an interdependent, negotiating, self-regulating network containing various actors (Sørensen and Torfing 2005). Direction and power are shared through networks. Therefore, societal change processes are co-directed with different parties. Civil servants should give voice to emergent coalitions and bring different actors together to create broad support (Sørensen 2012). Legitimacy for transitions is gained when

a fair process and empowerment for a broad spectrum of parties are unlocked (Rothstein 2012; Stout 2013). Civil servants experience several tensions with this tradition: (1) between efficiency and inclusive decision-making, (2) managing internal legitimacy, focusing on the needs of the selected participants vs the broader external legitimacy of the whole network, and (3) the flexibility of a network is hard to institutionalize into stable and effective policy (Provan and Kenis 2008).

These traditions do not replace each other; the new traditions were added to the spectrum (Bourgon 2009). Such a spectrum can be understood as layers of sedimentation or Russian dolls, with different answers to what defines doing good in the civil service (Van der Steen et al. 2018).

These current PA traditions do not describe or prescribe clear government responses to fundamental shifts in socio-technical systems, even when such shifts are urgently needed to overcome societal problems. This may constitute a legitimacy crisis for civil servants, as the multiple traditions either fail to offer or offer paradoxical and sometimes conflicting prescriptions to attain legitimacy in dealing with transitions. For instance, whereas civil servants must be free to act on their expertise (discretionary tradition), they also need to obey hierarchy and politics (constitutional tradition). Jacob et al. (2021) show a similar discrepancy when interviewing 17 civil servants of two German ministries between internal views on transformations and the required competencies to execute these plans. Based on a systematic review of the transition literature, Braams et al. (2021) assessed the executability of a clustering of five main transition tasks against the normative arguments from the PA traditions that legitimize government action. This theoretical exercise finds that PA traditions take different positions in carrying out the transition tasks assigned to the government. However, an empirical analysis of how PA traditions relate to transition tasks is currently missing in either of the two bodies of literature.

2.3 Implicit rules indicating legitimacy in the institutional environment

Institutionalizing a new logic means confronting the old logic (Dacin et al. 2002). The literature on sustainability transitions has led to a large set of actions that governments should take to speed up transitions. We state that they introduce a new logic—the transition logic—to governments. The introduction of this new transition logic in a ministry is an exogenous factor that changes work activities. It disrupts the status quo in a field, allowing other actors to interpret what is needed for change (Reay et al. 2006).

Because of imminent system changes in society, civil servants' work is currently in flux, which brings a reinterpretation, reconstruction, and re-enactment of the rules, norms, and standards. Civil servants ask themselves: 'What are legitimate tasks for us as civil servants in supporting a given socio-technical transition process?'. To comprehend 'a legitimate task', we follow Suchman's definition for legitimacy: 'Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (1995: 574). Within projects of change in organizations, the creation of legitimation can be seen as a continuous exploration 'to meet the expectations of the social system they are part of' (Jemine et al. 2019: 3).

The new tasks ministries have to execute in a transition change the organization and legitimation processes. Whether transition tasks are considered legitimate is dependent on collective interpretations of the work civil servants do and the prevailing institutions conveyed by the PA traditions. It is an ongoing structuration of their shared reflections on the incongruity between their changing work and tasks and the deep-rooted institutional restrictions. Whether legitimacy is found depends on how this incongruity between change and stability is explained collectively (explicit or implicit). We are interested in the civil service's implicit rules, which explain the incongruity between change and stability.

The PA traditions are enacted within the civil service and often become, over time, more implicit. Collective meaning-making processes manifested on a micro-level and situated in daily work are the implicit rules within these traditions. These rules regulate the institutional context (Deephouse and Suchman 2008) and standardize civil servants' difficulties or advantages and aversions or preferences. The embedded, often implicit rules thus structure actors' considerations and form collective interpretations about constraints and possibilities for agency and change (Thornton and Ocasio 2008) and what is and is not considered legitimate.

3. Method

This research aimed to understand which institutionalized rules establish the conceived executability of transition tasks. We were interested both in the potential conflict between normative assumptions of dominant PA traditions with transition tasks and the institutionalized rules that guide civil servants in deciding what is considered legitimate.

The Dutch Ministry of I&W is a compelling case. Part of this ministry has a 20-year history of grappling with transitions (Loorbach 2007: 159), while other parts have mainly been serving the economy by building infrastructure. Historically being the Ministry of Traffic, the rationale within the ministry had to switch from supporting economic development via, e.g. the 'gateway to Europe-discourse', towards focusing on transformative societal challenges such as climate adaptation, a circular economy, and a green mobility system. Nowadays, the ministry is co-responsible for reducing greenhouse gasses by 49 per cent by 2030 and 95 per cent by 2050. This is translated for I&W into (1) emission-free mobility for people and goods by 2050 and (2) a sustainably driven, circular economy by 2050 (Ministry of Economic Affairs (2019)). The third transition is the adaptation to climate change. Sea-level rises and changing weather conditions need other water management securing for flood and drought. This shift in attaining public value makes the Ministry of I&W an appealing place to study how civil servants legitimize transition tasks because it embodies both an economic and a transition rationale.

We conducted 34 semi-structured individual interviews with civil servants of the Ministry of I&W who are confronted with transitions. Four senior-level civil servants who coordinate knowledge development and innovation within I&W listed a total of 51 potential respondents. From this list, we used quota sampling to identify a sample of 40 civil servants that worked in the different transition domains that fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of I&W. Sampling across these transition domains allows for more generalizable results.

Thirty-four out of the 40 addressed civil servants agreed to an interview; 16 worked within the mobility domain, 11 within the circular economy, and 7 in the water domain. Interviewees vary in seniority: 17 respondents were senior policy officers, 11 were middle management, and 6 were top management.

From the answers of these civil servants, who elaborated why they thought transition tasks were legitimate to execute, we extracted more general patterns that reflect institutionalized rules. These rules indicate whether transition tasks are comfortably assimilated into civil servants' traditional work. The transition tasks which the respondents were asked about were selected from Braams et al. (2021), who distilled 80 specific transition tasks for government from 100 articles on socio-technical transition and aggregated them into five categories. We selected two tasks from every category (10 in total) based on their exemplarity and prevalence in the literature. One of each couple of tasks was in the take-off phase of the transition, which we predicted to be easier to undertake due to the limited impact and resources needed for such policies (Turnheim et al. 2018), and the other one in the implementation phase, which was predicted to be more difficult because of the anticipated kickback from society and thereby politics (Turnheim et al. 2018). See Table 1 for the specific transition tasks per aggregated category.

All interviews are transcribed and coded in NVivo in several phases. First, respondents' answers to the question if they view specific transition tasks as ones that the organization would order them to execute were coded as either 'yes' or

Table 1. Aggregated categories and specific transition tasks.

Aggregated categories	Specific transition tasks
Give Direction	'Justify that we, as government, can intervene in the market to stimulate goals and steer the transition' 'Communicate necessary ambition on the transition goals towards the society'
Support Governance	'Make space for a great variety of voices, arguments, and interpretations in the design process of transition policy' 'Organize and maintain platforms for collective action to stimulate transition goals'
Support the New	'Work mainly together with companies who stand for new solutions' 'Mitigate initial negative aspects of new developments'
Destabilize the Unsustainable	'Collect (international) results for experiments that show banning or taxing specific products is beneficial for the transition' 'Put negative aspects of the industrial production processes under pressure'
Create Internal Capabilities and Structures	'Develop internal competency to understand new developments and technology' 'Develop the skill to learn and experiment in your team'

'no'. We coded their argumentation in an open and inductive way (Holton 2010). This first phase covers the possibility that such orders may happen and the normative arguments for allowing this. In the second phase, arguments were inductively mapped on the normative PA framework. This step allowed us to explore to what extent respondents adhere to specific PA traditions. Finally, all codes from the first phase were clustered into generic themes containing similar quotes (Charmaz 2005). We moved iteratively between the transcripts with their first-phase codes and the generic themes to interpret the percentages of executability for the second phase. The implicit institutionalized rules were composed as the explanatory denominator from emblematic quotes about the daily practices.

4. Results

The five transition tasks structure this section. Each subsection first describes what reasons and conditions civil servants give when asked if they deem specific transition tasks executable; it then discusses the underlying institutionalized rules. Seven rules that emerge this way undermine the legitimacy of executing transition tasks. These findings are summarized in Table 2, showing the number of interviewees mentioning these arguments. The final subsection provides an analysis across transition tasks.

4.1 Giving direction

The transition task 'giving direction' states that a government should guide and steer innovation towards societal needs (Edler and Boon 2018). The majority of respondents (about 60 per cent) considered these tasks executable because

government holds democratic legitimacy to make decisions and uses transparent procedures to create broad support for this. However, they constantly underline two conditions that need to be met: a clear political mandate and an apparent market failure. When respondents were unsure about these conditions, they used arguments about arbitrariness and a lack of a long-term commitment to society and politics. We found two institutionalized rules from the responses that structure these actor considerations around giving direction: (1) the difficulty of constructing concrete ambitions and (2) the process of keeping long-term ambitions stable.

4.1.1 The avoidance of constructing concrete ambitions

An example of how civil servants struggle with clear transition ambitions is found in the area of climate adaptation. The increasing need to adapt to a changing climate is marked as a transition for the ministry, with the ambition to create climate resilience or robustness. However, respondents argued that the ambition of climate resilience would not, for strategic reasons, be reduced to a single indicator or a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) statement, resulting in vagueness in ambitions: what do we mean by climate robustness? 'We say, "it [climate robustness] is about heavy rainfall or extreme drought, that ensuing damage should not be greater than damage in 1990." However, we have not written this kind of precision down. [...] Maybe because it is a task of our ministry [...] and we will never reach this goal because of extreme weather (interviewee #22)'.

From the collaborative PA perspective, it seems acceptable to aim for broad support at the dispense of concreteness and

Table 2. The impact of PA traditions on institutionalized rules and transition tasks.

Institutionalized rules	Impact of PA on institutionalized rules
1. Vague ambitions lead to uncertainty and, therefore, a general uneasiness for civil servants to make it applicable. This makes interpreting the given direction difficult	The collaborative tradition is willing to aim for broad support at the expense of concreteness and executability, resulting in vague ambitions
2. Voluntary agreements can help transitions, but their long-term goals are susceptible to strategic and political changes	The collaborative tradition suggests voluntary strategies with active parts of society when issues are not prioritized in the political arena. However, the constitutional tradition prevents civil service from giving direction themselves. Moreover, legitimation is based on elections and therefore expires, harming long-term projects
3. Opening up the governance structures feels vulnerable for civil servants because of the proximity of a delicate political constellation. It can lead civil servants to be trusted partners of society or ministers' defenders	This dynamic is an interplay between the progressive, collaborative assumptions of opening up and the hierarchical division between politics and the administration of the constitutional tradition
4. Civil servants work for all of society; they deem it unethical to favour new parties or developments over incumbent parties	The constitutional tradition prescribes non-arbitrariness; favouring new developments and associated actors of existing practices becomes an integrity issue. Thus, many conditions have to be met to prevent allegations of unfairness
5. Civil servants prefer approving the new over disapproving the unsustainable	The constitutional tradition states that the minister is politically responsible for the actions of the civil service, which mutes the latter on making disapproving statements in public
6. Destabilizing unsustainable practices often create reconfigurations within regimes and systems. This leads to unanticipated and unwanted extra activities outside the job description	Notions of efficiency in the discretionary tradition have cut internal government budgets and outsourced many tasks. Adding new tasks is therefore unwelcome. Moreover, the constitutional tradition sees civil servants as just the executive body of the minister and less as an organization that can think for itself
7. Domain knowledge is undervalued in the civil service compared to the knowledge of the process, complicating the development of new capabilities beneficial for transitions	The discretionary tradition fixates on managing processes effectively and cutting costs where possible. Knowledge accumulation is not a core task of government and is therefore undervalued

executability. Abstract ambitions may help build coalitions and create trust among parties, but it complicates the implementation without refinement as ambition for transition is often negotiated within broad networks with generally formulated agreements in subtle balance. Civil servants need a clear political mandate to translate this into more concrete measurements from a constitutional perspective. Without a clear mandate, no legitimate action is possible.

Another underlying reason for being vague that we observed is general not-knowing. Uncertainty and unexplored terrain seem to inhibit civil servants' ability to formulate integral ambitions when political vision and societal commitment are lacking. Respondents raised the challenge of translating broad ambitions into more concrete actions and into an overarching abstract but guiding vision. A vague middle level may be interpreted as a safe haven between operationalization and generalization, avoiding a general unease at being accountable for concrete statements. Such struggles seem particularly explicit for policymakers working with mission-oriented innovation policy (Janssen et al. 2021).

4.1.2 The difficulty of keeping long-term ambitions stable

Next to implementing new policies and regulations, more cooperative policy instruments such as voluntary agreements and covenants are also applied. These instruments are preferred in the take-off phase of transitions when broad support for ambitions in society is not yet ensured. 'I think the part of the ministry responsible for sustainability is not used to intervening heavily. So, there are many agreements and covenants and those kinds of softer policy instruments. [...] Covenants and pacts with industry are creative means to book progress for us on an environmental agenda [when this was not a top priority on the agenda of the minister]' (Interviewee #15).

Interviewees note that agreements with market parties, which often have to start voluntarily, are much more effective when they have a prospect of enforcement in the future. They argue that this requires long-term political commitment towards stricter enforcement. In order to scale up these trajectories, the voluntary agreement containing processes of multiple years need to be codified into law and regulation. As this extends well beyond the usual political term, such processes are sensitive to political power shifts.

The collaborative tradition advocates applying voluntary strategies with active parts of society when issues are not priorities in the political arena. This view contrasts with the stricter interpretation of the constitutional tradition, which withholds civil service from giving direction themselves. The difficulty of navigating this interplay of rationales is explained by a seasoned civil servant stating that the long-term ambition set by the ministry's softer policy instruments is not always stable due to changing political priorities or strategies. As a result, civil servants hesitate to communicate goals and ambitions among other societal parties, especially when political leadership changes and creates a vacuum in ambition and direction.

4.2 Supporting governance

The transition task of supporting governance endorses the government to play an essential role in opening the policy-making process for multiple stakeholders (Fagerberg 2018). About half of the respondents answered confidently that these tasks were executable, considering it good practice and

belonging to the civil servants' craftsmanship to get broad support. The other half were indecisive, mainly listing practical difficulties and often stating that it could be a task, given its focus on involving society, but hardly is. The more stringent uneasiness of the respondents concerned civil servants' supposed neutrality; this position of neutrality could be constrained in choosing which parties can participate. As expected, the collaborative tradition delivers the most legitimizing arguments, while the constitutional and discretionary traditions mainly delegitimize these tasks. Delegitimizing arguments concerned unequal treatment and a supposed unwanted intervention in the market. The common denominator we found was the aversion to the potential chaos of opening up government action to inputs from diverse stakeholder groups.

4.2.1 Aversion to the potential chaos of opening up the government to stakeholders

Opening up the process of policy development in the transition to multiple stakeholders is generally considered an important task: respondents sometimes see such tasks as 'almost too obvious' and 'very useful to get out of your tunnel vision' (Interviewee #10). Others see it as a strategic manoeuvre: 'Getting the whole ecosystem involved is essential, especially while orienting phase; otherwise, the political arena gets uncontrollable in a later phase' (Interviewee #27). Losing control of suggested solutions is considered challenging and may lead to unwanted dynamics or resistance in society. For instance, a respondent argued that a process of governance is sometimes purposefully avoided when the ministry has not formulated an official position. Civil servants expressed feeling vulnerable exchanging ideas in a policy void 'because the lines to parliament are so short with, for instance, social media' (Interviewee #12), in which unaligned ideas could harm their minister.

The balance for civil servants between co-creation with society and executing and protecting the orders of their minister is delicate. It may lead to a unique position for civil servants in society because they are seen as neutral and working in society's interest, which 'creates a situation where everybody wants to talk to you' (Interviewee #19). On the other hand, the balance could also be tipped towards strategic behaviour, such as rhetorical means for the political arena: knowing in an early phase where your opponents are and strategizing to convince parliament. This balance can be seen as an interplay between the progressive, collaborative assumptions of opening up and the hierarchical division between politics and the administration of the constitutional tradition. The different role perceptions of working for society as an institute or working for the minister as an instrument are at the root of this institutionalized rule.

4.3 Supporting the new

'Supporting the new' recognizes that the government should engage with and support new niche actors and their developments (Kivimaa and Kern 2016; Schot and Geels 2008). Almost half of the respondents hesitated about these tasks' executability, and a little over a quarter rejected these tasks. They expressed concerns about the level playing field, arbitrariness, ministerial responsibility, and unlawful intervention in the market. The constitutional tradition sets many

conditions to act, while the collaborative tradition acknowledges that other parties are needed to execute a new policy. Emblematic for this task is the line: ‘we work for society as a whole’, creating a general unwillingness to disempower incumbents.

4.3.1 Aversion to the disempowerment of established interests

In general, respondents show hesitation in working with new parties if this excludes or frustrates incumbent parties. ‘Well, [...] it affects my integrity [excluding incumbent parties], while I think we are working for everybody. So, you look at the societal interests and think strategically about whom to use and evaluate everybody’s contribution fairly, with multiple representatives.’ (Interviewee #1). Preferring newcomers with different solutions is sometimes needed to direct system change, which becomes an integrity issue. This doubt comes down to the central question: Whom do you serve as a civil servant?

Respondents displayed suspicion about new players, stating that those often try to establish new monopolies by arguing for a new policy beneficial for their projects. Respondents argued that new parties and solutions are no alternative to incumbent parties who keep the essential aspects of the sector running. An adage seems here: a promising innovation is one that merges itself into the existing situation, with minimal adjustments to the broader configurations. Therefore, innovations are primarily seen as ‘nice to have’ by the civil service and only attractive when easily implemented. They are not worth the trouble of changing the whole system.

More innovative-minded respondents mentioned additional problems; working with frontrunners also means keeping in close contact with laggards to get them on the right trajectory, which burdens the service’s capacity and cannot always be carried through. The constitutional tradition prescribes non-arbitrariness; favouring new developments becomes an integrity issue. Many conditions have to be met to hedge against allegations of unfairness. The discretionary rationale focuses on the extra costs of changing processes that reconfigure whole systems, explaining the inertia and lock-in.

4.4 Destabilize the unsustainable

‘Destabilizing the unsustainable’ focuses on regime destabilization and the phase-out of harmful practices and goods (Loorbach 2007). About 40 per cent of the interviewees reported that these tasks are executable by the civil service. The same percentage of respondents articulated some hesitation, and 20 per cent rejected these tasks. They mentioned the minister’s vision as an essential condition for civil servants to execute these tasks and indicated that the topic to which the tasks relate should no longer be in the political arena. Respondents’ delegitimizing arguments were that there is a shortage of knowledge, awareness, and mandate to execute the tasks; that market mechanisms are much more efficient to coordinate goods and practices, including destabilizing unsustainable ones; and that governments should not intervene in this inherent market process. We find that two institutionalized rules underlie the respondents’ normative arguments: (1) a preference for approving the new over disapproving the unsustainable and (2) an aversion of civil servants to overstepping their mandate.

4.4.1 Preference for approving the new over disapproving the unsustainable

Destabilizing the unsustainable is often politically sensitive, and respondents feel unauthorized to articulate such thoughts in discussions. For example, a respondent illustrates: ‘it is not appreciated in formal discussions [for civil servants] to state that building new houses in the west of the country is unwise because of the predictions that the sea level will rise’, as such statements would critique the current ministry’s building policy (Interview #26). In internal conversation, there is some room for negative examples and practices in policy and society. However, in discussions among non-colleagues, many respondents express anxiousness about the possible consequences of their statements, which could even lead to litigation or a political fight with questions from the parliament. This perception is dictated by particularly the constitutional tradition, which states that the minister is politically responsible for the civil service statements, effectively forbidding the latter from making disapproving statements on unsustainable practices in public.

New developments, on the contrary, are considered ‘sexy’ and non-threatening. Interviewee #12 states: ‘We find it easier to give a podium for things that go well. We can be selective with this because it does not hurt anybody. Somebody just gets an extra pat on the back’. This preference means that civil servants focus their attention on ‘supporting the new’ instead of ‘destabilizing the unsustainable’.

4.4.2 Aversion to overstepping their mandate

Respondents indicated that they are even wary of acknowledging some unsustainable effects of existing goods and practices in their domain because overcoming these sustainability problems requires ‘enormous, systematic change’ for which their directorate is not equipped (Interview #17). So instead of looking at societal problems in an integrated way, combining, for example, safety and accessibility with sustainability, civil servants prefer to feel and be responsible for one aspect or a few aspects. This restraint allows for a narrower job description with a more explicit mandate, for which their organizational structures are designed. Interviewee #14 illustrates: ‘We are a body of political execution. We are not an organization that tries to maximize the change in the world’. (Interviewee #14). This quote shows that civil servants see themselves as a body of execution in a specific domain without their own voice, displaying the perception of the constitutional tradition. Furthermore, the focus on efficiency of the discretionary tradition has cut internal government budgets and outsourced many tasks. Adding new tasks seems, therefore, unwelcome.

4.5 Create internal capabilities and structures

‘Developing internal capabilities and structures’ highlights the need for new skills and structures for the government to promote and direct transitions (Quitow 2015). Only 30 per cent of the respondents were positive about the executability of these tasks. The constitutional tradition mainly legitimizes this task, stating it is good practice and benefits transparent and knowledgeable policymaking. Delegitimizing arguments came from the discretionary tradition and are concerned with the danger of spending public money on potential failures in the proximity of the political arena, leading to no real commitment in the organization. The institutionalized rule found

is the systematically undervaluing knowledge compared to procedural skills.

4.5.1 Bias towards process specialists over content specialists

During the last decades, much process-based knowledge is accumulated to get policy through the administration and the political arena, but there is too little understanding of the content. Interviewees reported that the civil service has searched for very generalist people who can switch quickly between topics and are especially good at understanding politics and translating content into political stories and back. 'It is more important to have good narratives for parliament than have a substantive piece with accurate content' (Interview #25).

'For transition, however, you need different competencies. And I do not think we are quite there yet' (Interviewee #3). Respondents stated that management is too far removed from the content of the knowledge development. Historically, the discretionary tradition fixates on managing processes efficiently and cutting costs where possible. Knowledge accumulation is, in this view, not a core task of government and is therefore undervalued.

4.6 The impact of PA traditions on institutional rules

Table 2 provides an overview of the institutionalized rules that influenced the willingness of civil servants to execute transition tasks and the impact PA traditions had on these rules. When we compare these findings across transition tasks, we find that the constitutional tradition is most dominant in influencing the attitude of civil servants towards transition tasks.

The constitutional tradition remains the central guide for civil servants in deciding what actions are legitimate. The discretionary and collaborative traditions have redefined and redirected government to a less central position in society over recent decades, making it more challenging for the government to guide transitions. The dialectic way PA traditions are developed, reacting to and addressing each other's pitfalls, generates built-in trade-offs of conflicting underlying public values. These trade-offs stood out less when the government was retreating through decades of *laissez-faire* and seeing society as networks with distributed power. However, when transitions challenge governments to become more directive, a new balance needs to be established. It seems that the government as a steering force is back on the agenda, although this is not fully recognized yet by PA traditions and the civil service.

Approximately 70 per cent of all the legitimizing arguments and 50 per cent of the delegitimizing arguments can be traced back to normative assumptions of PA traditions. These percentages indicate the vital role PA traditions play in legitimizing new tasks for the government. In reverse, it also shows that not all legitimizing and delegitimizing arguments are grounded in PA traditions. While civil servants may use these non-PA arguments to find legitimacy in implementing transition tasks, there seems no counterbalance rationale championing the necessity of executing transition tasks within the civil service against these traditions. To that end, an appropriate rationale for government, compatible with transition tasks, is needed. This rationale should shift this dialectical motion from currently limiting conditions to create additional legitimacy forms for fundamental, societal change. For this

purpose, Braams et al. (2021) coined the term transformative government.

5. Implications for a transformative government

Our research shows that civil servants struggle with the advice from transition scholars related to necessary government actions to accelerate highly needed societal transitions. The existing PA traditions seem to resonate strongly in policy departments and negatively influence the willingness of civil servants to execute transition tasks. Since societal transitions are critical for developing a sustainable future, these hindrances justify the need for a reform of PA traditions and new reflexivity.

A transformative government rationale could reassess PA-induced institutionalized rules to address the societal challenges. We found legitimizing arguments set forward by civil servants endeavouring to implement transitions, which can be understood through current PA traditions. However, when interpreting and articulating these arguments collectively and coherently via the lens of transformative government, they expose a new perspective with a more central role for the civil service. Below, we elaborate shortly on the following assertions that would support a transformative government: (1) transition goals are just like public values, (2) keeping transition projects out of the political arena in certain phase-outs is beneficial for the execution of transition tasks, and (3) a redefined role of civil servants could be beneficial for the execution of transition tasks. These pieces of equipment for transitions indicate a basis for further research.

Ad (1) Under a new transformative government rationale, transition goals could be more explicitly embedded as public values. In line with Bozeman (2007: 13), we perceive public values as the principles on which policies should be based and which provide a normative consensus about the rights, benefits, and prerogatives to which citizens are entitled. A reconceptualization of transition goals can be seen in the interviews; public values were sometimes used synonymously or together with transition goals, which, in the eyes of the interviewee, legitimized their execution—seeing urgent and necessary system change towards sustainability as public value consists of both a direction and an incentive to act. Respondents often argue that transition goals would lose out to currently more predominant public values such as safety, competitive position, and accessibility. Identifying transition goals as public values seems to give them a higher status, leading to fewer institutional rules causing inertia.

Ad (2) Another suggested solution to explore in further research is to lessen inertia by keeping the transitional subject out of the political arena in certain phases. Long-term projects often become an administrative issue over specific periods. The Dutch Delta Program, an official independent commission ensuring protection against flooding and weather extremes, was taken out of the political arena. Their independent mandate is to shape and prioritize its programme and execute this in collaboration with national and regional governments. A respondent indicated the importance of not relying on politics for basic needs like drinking water and water safety. Instead, society needs independent, autonomous organizations to be responsible for safeguarding these societal needs.

Ad (3) A final notion, interesting for future research, often mentioned in interviews, was rethinking the current role perception of civil servants. A recalibration towards serving society and its shared values would be necessary, requiring discretionary abilities and creativity. The civil service can develop considerable knowledge in early-stage transitions since they, as neutral agents, can quickly become most knowledgeable in the new field because many streams of entrepreneurial activity and solutions, scientific knowledge, policy problems, and political goals come together in their policy sphere (Kingdon 1984). Thus, civil servants could guide the transition and help it mature. Respondents report that such capacities are often dependent on specific individuals interpreting their instruction towards public value within the civil service. These specific individuals have the position and the capabilities to overview a transition in its early phase.

It comes, however, with a potential danger of being disciplined by the organization when stepping beyond their discretionary space. Such guidance of the transition by civil servants can be seen as a way to depoliticize the subject. Depoliticizing contains, of course, a danger of technocratic tendencies without much accountability. It is thus about rethinking and understanding when transitions should and should not become political. As new rationalities often emerge from paradoxes and merging different domains, transitional scholars should collaborate with political scientists and PA scientists to further understand and guide governments who try to transform society towards sustainability.

6. Conclusion

Few studies have connected the Transition and PA tradition literature, resulting in a knowledge gap regarding the civil service's feasibility of transition task execution. This paper sets out to open up the black box of governmental departments and understand the reluctance of civil servants to carry out these transition tasks. Based on 34 interviews, we find that civil servants at the Dutch Ministry of I&W find it challenging to carry out transition tasks.

By analysing interviewed civil servants' normative arguments regarding the executability of transition tasks, we also identified seven institutionalized rules that determine what tasks are considered legitimate or not. Institutionalized rules are crucial to comprehend because they are embedded in daily work and determine avoidances, difficulties, aversions, and biases. All of them are influenced by PA traditions and enclose paradoxical notions. These paradoxical notions embody the different and sometimes contrasting normative assumptions of the PA traditions. They show how legitimacy arises between system change and institutional restrictions, and cautiousness.

The institutionalized rules found are as follows:

1. The avoidance of formulating concrete ambitions.
2. The difficulty of keeping long-term ambitions stable.
3. Aversion to the potential chaos of opening up the government to all stakeholders.
4. Aversion to the disempowerment of established interests.
5. Preference for approving the new over disapproving the unsustainable.
6. Aversion to overstepping their mandate.
7. Bias towards process specialists over content specialists.

These institutionalized rules embody many criteria set by all PA traditions. The inflexibility of PA traditions to legitimize transition tasks can be understood as safeguarding democratic and market principles stringently. Therefore, it appears unfeasible to meet all these criteria within current PA traditions when legitimizing transition tasks. For this reason, it is vital that a new tradition emerges that does legitimize transition tasks. We propose transformative government for this purpose. Transformative Government searches for a path to combine the urgency and necessity for system change without losing democratic principles. Therefore, it should remain reflexive on both the PA traditions and transition literature's normative values. Transformative Government can become another layer on the Russian doll of PA traditions, stressing and legitimizing another answer to what is needed.

Finally, this paper also has two main limitations. The first limitation is the selection of transition tasks proposed to interviewees. Braams et al. (2021) found 80 tasks for government in the transition literature, but only 10 were presented. Although we came up with selection criteria, responses on executability may have differed while presenting other tasks. The second limitation is generalizing institutionalized rules from the Dutch Ministry of I&W case. Not many other ministries have undergone a trajectory in proximity to the development of transition theory. Civil servants may have been accustomed to the transition lingo over the years and, therefore, more inclined to see such tasks as acceptable. It is interesting to replicate this design in ministries less informed.

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