Abstract

PhD Project: 'Coherent Cycles: Pathways to More Effective Transition Policy Towards Circular Built Environments'

Integrating circular economy (CE) strategies into the built environment (BE) has been pointed out as crucial for sustainable urban transitions, because the BE profiles as a major global resource consuming and polluting human activity. The way we produce and operate cities matter, for global urban population is expected to almost double by the end of this century. Coupling the latter with ever- increasing levels of production and consumption pushes humanity far beyond the safe operating space identified by the so-called planetary boundaries.

At different institutional levels, ranging from local to global, different public and private initiatives have started to build up transitioning visions towards circular built environments (CBE). Coherence in policy process and implementation is recognized as a key factor to ensure the effectiveness of sustainable transitions. However, coherence is often restricted to the assessments of policy processes (as in the fulfillment of prevailing policy cycles), and tends to overlook higher levels of coherence, for instance, that of an adequate policy set-up in relation to other sectorial policies and to the current, critical state of the climate and ecological crises and the urgency for a change.

This research aims to develop a policy coherence perspective to the design and implementation of policies aiming for drastic changes in the production and operation of the BE by introducing CE strategies. To develop this approach, a mixed-method approach based on comparative case studies of CBE-policies has been selected. The main scientific contributions of this research are: Firstly, this research will explore widely acclaimed systemic views of policy making towards CBE implementation. Secondly, it will extend the field of transition management to the CE in the BE, a growing sustainability transition that only recently has started to be discovered in transition research. Thirdly, it will provide new perspectives of policy coherence by focusing on (1) the consistency within ongoing policy processes, (2) the inclusion of policy instruments suggested in CBE research in such policy processes, and (3) the resulting learnings on the implementation of CE policy-making strategies from the comparison between different emerging socio-technical regimes. Concretely, this research seeks to offer a policy coherence perspective for CBE transition policies by enhancing policy coherence in terms of policy process, its circular ambitions and its relation towards the planetary boundaries.

The expected results of this research will serve to improve recently created CBE transition policies, and those yet to come around the world. Likewise, it will provide a more radical perspective to mainstream 'circular' efforts, seeking to unleash the highest ambitions of the CE, and to keep the human enterprise with regard to the BE within the planetary boundaries. However, the frameworks and methods used to accomplish the research's goals are not exempt from its own limitations. Therefore, its findings provide under no circumstances exhaustive methods or 'policy recipes'. Rather, it wishes to provoke and support more systemic views and policy pathways to the ongoing sustainability crisis, in which the BE is a major pressure.