

Disclosing Sustainability: The Transformative Power of Transparency?

International Conference
Wageningen University, the Netherlands

June 24-25, 2016

www.transparencyp2016.com

Conference Theme

Transparency is one of the most widely touted concepts of our age. We live in an era of ever greater openness and disclosure of information, even as a push for more transparency is not discernible to the same extent everywhere and in all social settings. The driving force of this growing call for transparency is an unwavering belief in its potential to foster more accountable, democratic and effective decision-making and action at different levels and across public and private domains. While the transparency turn is being ever more closely scrutinized in policy domains such as diplomacy, national security, human rights, or economic relations, the relationship between *transparency* and *sustainability* remains strikingly obscure. Yet even in this realm, there remains an assumption that transparency is transformative, i.e. that greater openness and deliberative acts of information disclosure can empower those previously uninformed about the sites and sources of environmental gains or losses, and can transform practices and institutions towards sustainability. Yet does transparency live up to its sustainability promise? Does it enhance the accountability of those perpetuating environmental harm and foster improved environmental outcomes? Such questions are theoretically and empirically under-examined. This conference will address such questions for a wide array of environmental challenges and sectors.

There will be three conference streams (although we welcome proposals on any topics that explore the links between transparency and sustainability):

1. *Transparency, accountability and empowerment in global environmental governance:*

Increasingly, 'governance by disclosure' is pervading public and private attempts to govern transboundary environmental challenges, ranging from trade in hazardous substances to climate change. A key development is a growing reliance on monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) systems, as a means to enhance accountability and improve sustainability performance. Yet the politics of MRV systems (and governance by disclosure) remains little scrutinized. Who is being held to account, who is empowered, and (how) is sustainability being furthered? We welcome papers that explore the relationships between transparency, accountability, empowerment, and improved sustainability performance in a wide range of multilaterally negotiated state-led and public-private-hybrid environmental governance arrangements. Particularly less examined are areas requiring anticipatory governance of novel technologies, such as geoengineering, synthetic biology or nanotechnology. By anticipatory governance, we mean governance in the face of extreme uncertainty and normative conflict over the very existence and nature of harm. How (if at all) is transparency and governance by disclosure implicated in anticipatory governance of novel technological risk and harm?



2. Transparency and traceability in commodity chains

Transparency is rapidly moving to the centre of sustainability governance of (global) commodity chains, and is accompanied by new actor roles and changing power relations. Pressure is increasing to supply information about the environmental performance of commodity chains (products as well as production and processing methods) through labelling and certification schemes or other means. In the context of globalizing modernity, enhanced sustainability is often seen as resulting from transparency through traceability. Yet, how is the quality and reliability of information within commodity chains assessed by different involved actors? What forms of and challenges to trust exist between different commodity chain actors? Who is deciding on information standards and who is in control of informational flows? How can the need for clear and reliable standards be balanced with the search for continuous improvement in commodity chains? If transparency becomes a marketable product in itself, what are the consequences for sustainability and different societal actors?

3. Citizen generated (and citizen-centered) transparency

The relationship between transparency and sustainability is often approached through a top-down perspective, with a focus on institutions, rules and technocratic monitoring systems. An alternative to this approach is how transparency can be achieved bottom-up or through co-creation. Citizens, as individuals or organized in collectives, are increasingly involved in the analysis, provisioning and monitoring of sustainable development. Citizens detect environmental problems through innovative technologies, such as smart phones; monitor energy use and consumption through in-house displays; or analyze data on sustainable development through open data platforms. What do these developments mean for promoting sustainability through transparency? Do citizens gain greater insight and influence over trajectories of sustainable development? Does this empower them to creatively self- or co-organize sustainable lifestyles? If so, who gets involved and in what ways do they become empowered? Or do new technologies of visibility actually control and constrain citizen involvement, demanding more top-down oversight?

Confirmed keynote and plenary speakers include (for programme updates, see [here](#))

Prof. Hans Bruyninckx, Professor and Executive Director, European Environment Agency
Prof. Magnus Boström, Orebro University
Prof. Elena Fagotto, Harvard University
Prof. Virginia Haufler, University of Maryland
Prof. Susan Parks, University of Sydney

Key Dates

Deadline for paper abstracts and panel proposals: **15 October 2015**

Notification of acceptance: **15 November 2015**

Registration deadline (for paper presenters): **15 April 2016**

Registration deadline (for non-paper presenters, i.e. those attending only): **31 May 2016**

Full papers due: **15 May 2016**



Types of Submissions

1. Individual papers:

Abstracts (300 words or less) addressing one or more of the above streams or any other topic relevant to exploring the link between transparency and sustainability can be submitted on the conference website: <http://www.transparencyp2016.com/submissions/>.

2. Full panels:

Panel proposals addressing one or more of the above streams, or any other topic relevant to the main conference theme, can be submitted [here](#). Proposals must include a description of the panel (300 words or less), 4-5 abstracts (each 300 words or less), and list a panel chair and discussant.

Additional information

Conference fee: Euros 150 (includes two lunches, coffee/tea, and one conference dinner); Reduced fee of Euros 100 for PhD candidates and students.

Registration: Please register at <http://www.transparencyp2016.com/registration/>

For information on *travel, accommodation and other information*, please go to <http://www.transparencyp2016.com/location-and-accommodation/>

Please note: some limited *travel support* for 8-10 participants from developing countries is available, more information on the conference [website](#).

International Advisory Committee

Prof. Bas Arts, Wageningen University (Netherlands)
Prof. Magnus Boström, Orebro University (Sweden)
Prof. Daniel Esty, Yale University (USA)
Prof. Elena Fagotto, Harvard University (USA)
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Prof. Phil Macnaghten, Wageningen University (Netherlands)
Prof. Susan Park, University of Sydney (Australia)
Prof. Gert Spaargaren, Wageningen University (Netherlands)

Conference Organizing Committee

Conference Co-Chairs: Aarti Gupta, Peter Oosterveer, Ingrid Boas

Conference manager: Robin Smale

Committee members: Tracy O'Conner, Diana Morales Irato

Environmental Policy Group, Wageningen University, the Netherlands
(<http://www.wageningenur.nl/en/Expertise-Services/Chair-groups/Social-Sciences/Environmental-Policy-Group.htm>)

We look forward to welcoming you to Wageningen!

