A game of engagement and distance. Action research on the brink between social movements and government policy.

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How do social movements try to influence the discourses and practices of transition policy? And what does involvement as a researcher in such a network of civil society organisations imply? The empirical basis for the proposed article are the experiences of the Transition Network of the Civil Society (Transitienetwerk Middenveld, TNM), that was formed in Flanders (Belgium) in 2010 and that is still active. The network consists of a mix of ‘old’ social movements (the two main unions), ‘new’ social movements (such as the environmental and third world movement), arts and socio-cultural organisations, an ethical bank and individual members from new media and academia. It was formed in reaction to the official transition management processes of the Flemish government and out of a concern to promote just and more radical forms of transition. One of us (Paredis) was asked by the initiators of the network to join and strengthen the initiative because of his experience in transition research and (previously) as a campaigner and lobbyist in social movements. The researcher has been an active member of the network over the past six years. Explicit interventions in the network included structuring the vision of TNM and developing, in cooperation with the members, a ‘learning history’ to increase reflexivity on strategies and substantive choices. Simultaneously, however, Paredis also functioned as a researcher in policy-driven research on transition governance for the Flemish Government, where one of the ambitions is to integrate civil society in transition processes. The article will reflect on how such a context and its starting points influences the ambitions a researcher can have, and how a change in context (such as after a change in government, with huge effects on transition policies as well as supporting government structures) can open up new possibilities. It will also go into the game of engagement and distance that a researcher plays in such a situation, taking on different roles and navigating different, and changing, relationships with government and civil society actors.

Dirk Barrez, author, independent journalist and one of the initiators of Transitienetwerk Middenveld is willing to write a reflection on the proposed article.