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Sustainable Development: The Institutionalization of a Contested Policy Concept

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Very few concepts have made such a fast and pervasive career in policy discourses as sustainable development. Since its introduction as a guiding policy principle with the Brundtland Report in 1987 and the Rio Conference in 1992, it has been accepted as a framework for policy agendas as widely different as macroeconomic development and the provision of basic healthcare services. It quickly became the central concept in environmental policy, economic planning, spatial planning, and development policy, at all levels of policymaking. Outside of government and policymaking, it has also been a defining concept for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of different types, of business associations, labor unions, and even churches. Sustainable development has achieved an enormous reach in terms of its use as a framework for desired or intended societal action. Yet, at the same time, the concept remains contested at different levels. Critics point to the vagueness of the concept, the level of aggregation that is not adapted for pragmatic policymaking, the Northern bias, its voluntaristic and unrealistic view on the role of economic dynamics, or even the marginalization of the environmental dimension.

This chapter will first provide an overview of the conceptual history of sustainable development and its basic content. Next, the main elements of debate that have crystallized in the 25 years that the concept has been used by policymakers and other actors will be discussed. Several examples of the way in which sustainable development is being implemented in actual policy processes will be given by looking at the institutionalization of sustainable development at different levels of governance and by different actors. Finally, we discuss some recent developments in the

debate about sustainable development, as new concepts are emerging in political and academic circles.

The conceptual history of sustainable development

Although sustainable development as a concept has become important only since the publication of the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, in 1987 (WCED, 1987) and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the so-called Rio Conference in 1992, it is clearly embedded in a number of currents that have existed much longer.

The early scenario builders have shaped our thinking about the interaction between human systems of production and consumption, population dynamics, and the fundamental environmental and natural resource basis on which our society is dependent (see Stevis, this book). In their influential *Limits to Growth* report, the Club of Rome (1971) projects predictions about resource scarcity and pollution into the 21st century. Their conclusion was as simple as sobering: our exploitation of natural resources and its negative side effects are not tenable – or sustainable – in the long run.

Another origin of the sustainable development concept can be found in the developmentalist literature and a number of critical international reports on the enormous differences between dynamics in rich and in poor countries, such as the Tinbergen Report (1970) and the Brandt Commission Report (1977). They explained the differences between North and South primarily through the fundamental imbalances in the global economic system of trade and production, and described the unacceptable and dangerous continuation of those differences.

An important step forward in the international policy debate occurred in the early 1970s. Building upon earlier work (Almeida, 1972; Sachs, 1970), the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), the first global summit on the environment held in Stockholm in 1972, formulated the first internationally recognized and carefully developed link between environmental problems and poverty. In the aftermath of Stockholm, we see the emergence of a growing literature on international environment and development issues, which increasingly put the emphasis on the connections between economic dimensions of North–South relations and their impact on the environment (see Stevis, this book). To underline that reasoning, during the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s a number of global environmental issues were discovered and placed high on the international

agenda. The depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, and the loss of biodiversity undeniably demonstrated that this global interconnectedness could no longer be ignored. It was also increasingly recognized in that period that solutions to those problems could only be formulated at the global level (Caldwell, 1990; Haas et al., 1993; Hurrell and Kingsbury, 1992).

This global dimension is strongly present in the Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, led by Gro Harlem Brundtland), which was established by the United Nations in 1983 after it became clear that international environmental and developmental policies were not leading to satisfactory results (Chasek and Wagner, 2012). Although the obvious differentiations between North and South were made by the Commission in terms of impacts, capacities, responsibilities, and so on, the underlying message was that we had entered a period of global problems that require global solutions; hence the title, *Our Common Future*. It advanced the view that environmental challenges lie at the heart of economic development, social problems and even international peace and security. Accordingly, its major lesson was that environmental concerns need to be integrated in economic policy and in mainstream decision-making (Runnalls, 2008). The Brundtland Commission introduced and defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987: 43). Since the publication of the Report, the term has been increasingly used in international literature, negotiations, and policymaking.

Regardless of the strong differences on a number of issues, it was hard to be against the basic ideas behind sustainable development as such. It became the central concept around which the debates were organized during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in 1992. The main documents of the Rio Conference, the *Rio Declaration* and *Agenda 21*, further defined sustainable development and gave it a more policy-oriented content (UNCED, 1992a, 1992b). The emphasis became the 'balancing' or integration of environmental, economic and social goals: a stable economy should be able to produce enough welfare for everybody, and to distribute the benefits and the costs in a much more equitable way, without endangering the environment on which the whole system is based. *Agenda 21* formulated goals and implementation mechanisms referring to institutional, economic, and other changes that are deemed necessary to bring about the turn toward a more sustainable society.

Both *Our Common Future* and *Agenda 21* mention several policy principles for sustainable development (see also IISD, 2013). Their application is meant to achieve a political operationalization of the meta-goals of sustainable development. A number of them seem to have reached (at least in their theoretical dimension) consensual status. They include integration, equity, intergenerational solidarity, internalization, and participatory policymaking. An absolute core principle is the necessity to integrate different policies. *Horizontal Policy Integration* is defined as recognition of the linkages between different policy domains and the need to approach them together (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003). Vertical integration refers to the need to come to better policy coherence between different levels of policymaking and implementation, for example, subnational, national, and international (Berger and Steurer, 2008; Happaerts, 2012a). *Equity* forms the strong normative foundation for the social dimension of sustainable development (Ikeme, 2003). Production and consumption have to be based on a more equitable distribution of costs and benefits, both within Northern and Southern countries and between them (Agyeman et al., 2003). *Intergenerational Solidarity* refers to the – until now – often absent long-term planning that is necessary to come to fundamental changes in our society. It will be increasingly necessary to take the next generations into account when we make decisions, which was a totally new notion in politics when the Brundtland Report advanced it in 1987. The *Internalization of Social and Environmental Costs* is another key principle (Bartelmus, 1994). It has become increasingly clear that the market price of goods does not fully reflect cost elements such as environmental damage during the complete production cycle, from the extraction of resources and energy production to the problem of dealing with the waste at the end of the consumption cycle. Finally, *Participatory Policymaking* involves both instrumental and normative hypotheses (Hemmati, 2002). On the one hand, more participation by stakeholders is believed to result in better policymaking and implementation. On the other hand, a participatory society is believed to be a better society, as it fundamentally recognizes the role of citizens and social groups for the legitimacy of policymaking processes.

Since the Rio Conference, those principles have been accepted as guidelines for international policy debates. Actors have committed to them and have adopted myriad programs and changes in order to further the sustainable development agenda. In 2002, they met again in Johannesburg (South Africa) for the Rio + 10 Conference known as the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). The main issue

on the agenda was the lack of strong implementation that was generally observed in the decade since UNCED. States and other actors discussed better strategies to push forward the common agenda. It had become clear that implementing the multifaceted concept was far more difficult and required much more political commitment than was generally admitted (Nierynck et al., 2003). Held in a far less optimistic international atmosphere than UNCED, debates in Johannesburg had become more political and confrontational. In the process leading up to Johannesburg, the South was reluctant to hold a new summit with an explicit environmental agenda without a strong focus on development issues, and it had become difficult to come to global strategies on biodiversity and climate change. The international community continued to try to address these issues at the Rio + 20 conference in 2012 (see below).

Academic debates about sustainable development as a policy concept

The Brundtland and Rio definitions can be considered as meta-concepts, which capture an integrated, holistic vision of the future (O'Toole, 2004). The translation of sustainable development as a policy concept has proven to be very difficult, both conceptually and in its implementation. Since its conception, several critiques have developed.

The vagueness of the concept

The broad use of sustainable development has led some to claim that *sustainable* has become an adjective that can be placed in front of nearly anything. One of the criticisms about the concept is that it is vague and means something different to all actors in the debate (Blühdorn, 2007; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). That is probably correct, although it is, to a certain extent, not surprising and perhaps intended (Daly, 1991; Spangenberg, 2004). Like other political terms such as 'freedom' or 'democracy', sustainable development is an essentially contested concept (Connelly, 2007). Contested concepts have two levels of meaning. A first level of meaning is commonly accepted but rather vague, like the Brundtland definition and three dimensional representation of sustainable development are. The semantic battle takes place at the second level of meaning, where the contested concept has to be interpreted in practice and translated into concrete actions. The argument over the second level of meaning reflects an array of different conceptualizations of sustainable development, some of which contradict

each other. Sustainable development thus becomes a 'legitimizing concept': through multiple interpretations, it justifies diverging or even opposing ambitions (Gendron and Revéret, 2000). One instance of such opposing ambitions is between industrial elites, who would never abandon the premise of economic growth, and environmental movements, which strive for fundamentally new priorities and decision-making criteria. While those two actors applied totally different discourses in the past, they are now both embracing the concept of sustainable development. The battle between them is fought with regard to the exact interpretation of the concept (Gendron, 2006).

Environmental sustainability or broader interpretations?

Most actors defend a broad definition and emphasize that the integration of social, economic, and environmental goals is the central difference between traditional environmental policies and sustainable development (Zaccai, 2002). However, the policy translation of sustainable development often has a strong environmental bias, which has several explanations. First, there clearly exists an ecological essentialism in its foundation. The ecosystem is seen as an essential precondition for human functioning in its social and economic dimensions. It is obvious to many authors that the environmental dimension forms the foundation for the other two (Gendron, 2005; Zaccai, 2011), and for that reason they denounce a three-pillar visualization or an idea of balancing one dimension against another (Kemp et al., 2005). A second explanation is that environmental groups have from the start been the strongest proponents of the sustainability concept, and have hence had a very significant impact on the debates. Third, many of the policy-oriented translations of sustainable development are based on some form of environmental policy integration. That could explain why, in many countries, sustainable development was put onto the political agenda but never achieved a central status, as environment ministries (which often have the competency over sustainable development) are usually still considered 'junior' departments.

A number of countries and actors have, however, chosen the more holistic interpretation of sustainable development. Some countries in Europe (for example, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands) have included very strong social and economic goals in their national sustainable development plans. But developing nations are probably the strongest proponents of the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. They put *Human Development* centrally in the whole enterprise (Mestrum, 2003), meaning that basic economic welfare

and social development in terms of education, healthcare, and access to services (such as sanitation and waste management) are the central elements and the real basis for sustainable development programs.

The impact of the concept on the North–South debate

Although the Brundtland Report and the preparation of UNCED placed a heavy emphasis on the North–South dimension of sustainable development, the concept increasingly became an element of debate between North and South (Najam, 2011). That debate is often narrowed down to a development versus environment debate. Yet it is much more complex and refers to both development and environmental dynamics in industrialized and in developing countries, and to the connection between those two (Faber and McCarthy, 2003; McLaren, 2003). In that sense, sustainable development can be interpreted as an essential concept in the globalization debate.

Indeed, some of the harshest criticisms of sustainable development are based on either the fact that it is the *n*th concept coming from Northern intellectuals trying to capture global inequalities, or that it is reaffirming precisely those power structures that underlie the issues for which it claims to be a cure (Faber and McCarthy, 2003; Lélé, 1991; Najam, 2011). Those critiques question both the fundamental analysis that is behind the use of the concept and the sincerity of the real agenda behind its use.

Conceptualizations of sustainable development by authors from the South usually go in one of two directions. Some approach the issue as closely connected to structural elements of the global economy and the impacts it has on socioeconomic conditions and subsequently also the environment (Najam, 2011; Napolitano, 2013; Stevis and Assetto, 2001). Sustainable development then refers to fundamental changes in international economic parameters. The other approach is much more linked to poverty as a pervasive phenomenon in the South (Mestrum, 2003), leading to recommendations in the sphere of basic needs. Furthermore, developmentalist approaches to sustainability usually place a larger emphasis on the bottom-up or communitarian approach because of a better cultural fit, or because of weakness of state institutions (Arunachalam et al., 2007; Fisher, 1993).

Is there really much beyond the discourse?

Ever since the Johannesburg Summit, a growing number of critics have been claiming that the implemented actions until now are very limited in comparison to the challenges or that sustainable development is staying at the discourse level altogether. One part of the critique is

that real political will for social change toward sustainable development is largely absent (Van Ypersele, 2003). Another fundamental criticism is that the capacity to really implement changes is not made available, referring to the limited amount of funds that industrialized countries have effectively made available to countries of the South in the context of multilateral environmental agreements. For critics, fundamental change of trade mechanisms, debt relief schemes, and financial transactions will need to be discussed from the perspective of sustainable development (Petrella, 2003).

A number of authors that have analyzed governmental policies for sustainable development claim that they are characterized by symbolic politics. That means that they have low impact effectiveness but high politico-strategic effectiveness (Happaerts, 2012b; Newig, 2007). Their impact effectiveness is low because they do not solve any problems in the 'real' world (Szerszynski, 2007). Many policies result in transversal instruments such as sustainable development strategies and interdepartmental working groups, but have less direct policy measures in specific sectors. They often have a low administrative relevance, receive little agenda attention, and mostly stay off the political radar. Paradoxically, sustainable development does attract a high degree of declaratory commitment, as political discourses are usually filled with all sorts of references to 'sustainability'. Since the policies have low impact effectiveness, that discourse is characterized as lip service, window-dressing, or empty rhetoric, and some authors explicitly oppose it to effective action (Baker, 2007). Yet the policies do meet a determined, politico-strategic goal. They succeed in displaying to a broad public the commitment of political officials, and they remove a pressing issue from the political agenda. In that sense, policies can become highly cosmetic (Meadowcroft, 2007).

In short, although sustainable development has been widely accepted as a relevant and useful concept, there is much debate on its meaning, applicability, and impact. Some of that discussion is about definitional issues and interpretations, but it is clear that there is also a more fundamental debate about some of the key elements of sustainable development, which touch upon basic features of our system of production and consumption.

Academic debates and research on the institutionalization and practices of sustainable development

In the following pages we will look at several dimensions of the institutionalization of sustainable development at different levels of

governance. Moreover, we look at academic debates about the actors involved in changes toward sustainability. In conclusion, we discuss the types of knowledge claims that have been made regarding sustainable development.

Sustainable development and global governance

One of the central issues in the sustainable development literature is about the necessity for, and the feasibility of, a functioning system of global governance for sustainable development. The necessity of such a system is defended because reconciling global sustainability with the current economic forces of globalization will require some sort of governance regime (see also Biermann, this book). A number of academic research agendas concerned with global governance for sustainable development have converged into a program on earth system governance, which is defined as

the interrelated and increasingly integrated system of formal and informal rules, rule-making systems, and actor-networks at all levels of human society (from local to global) that are set up to steer societies towards preventing, mitigating, and adapting to global and local environmental change and, in particular, earth system transformation, within the normative context of sustainable development.

(Biermann et al., 2009)

The answer to the global governance for sustainability question can be approached in different ways. Institutionalists, who believe in the potential of incremental institutional adaptation for problem-solving in the direction of sustainable development, tend to start from the United Nations as an institutional anchoring point (Pallemaerts, 2003; Paterson, this book).¹ A number of organizational steps, which form a sort of skeleton of a global sustainable development governance regime, have been taken. For example, after the Rio conference, the UN Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) was founded to oversee the implementation of *Agenda 21*. Also, numerous global conferences on partial themes of sustainable development have been held, such as on the role of women (Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995, Beijing), on sustainable housing (6th World Urban Forum, 2012, Naples), on issues related to indigenous people (World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, 2014, New York), and on numerous other issues. Certain global conventions are labeled as post-Rio regimes because they illustrate that the sustainability paradigm has

entered global policymaking dynamics. The Convention to Combat Desertification (1994), for instance, incorporates a number of innovative elements, such as discourses of participatory policymaking and implementation, decentralization as a fundamental policy goal, and the use of local knowledge as an explicit 'good'. The sustainable development concept formed the overarching umbrella for those discourses, which represented at that point a very new dimension in international environmental policymaking (Bruyninckx, 2004).

Other approaches are of a more structuralist nature and emphasize the essentially unsustainable character of the global political economy. In that view, the embedded imbalances between economic performance and social and environmental consequences and the unequal distribution of wealth between and within North and South are key characteristics of the current system of production and consumption and are reflected in the institutional outcomes at the level of global governance (Zaccai, 2002; Paterson, this book). Those social and material foundations of the current system prevent social change in the direction of sustainable development (Petrella, 2003). From a structuralist perspective, the current functioning of global governance is inadequate and incremental changes will be unable to bring about the social transformations required to come to a sustainable society. The debate on fundamental changes in the UN system (or on multilateral reform more broadly) can be placed in this context. Attention should go to financial and economic institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Group of 8 (G8), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Economic Forum (WEF) as promoters of unsustainable development (Clapp, this book). Those debates are recently seen in a new light, as emerging powerhouses such as China, India, and Brazil are blurring the lines between North and South, and claiming a more significant role in multilateral institutions (Vihma, 2011).

Regional organizations and governance for sustainable development

Regional institutions have been put forward as one of the elements in multi-level governance arrangements on sustainable development. The EU, which has always been a promoter of global sustainable development (Van den Brande, 2012), can be considered as a special case. It is the only international organization that has competencies in all relevant policy areas important to sustainable development and with a strong impact on the policies of its member states. That includes

agriculture, transport, trade relations with countries in the South, and so on. Sustainable development has also been added as a central objective in the EU's founding treaty.

The EU developed its own Sustainable Development Strategy (EUSDS) in preparation for the Johannesburg Summit (European Commission, 2002). Elaborating goals in themes such as clean energy and the management of natural resources, the strategy was considered to be a necessary environmental add-on to the Lisbon process, the EU's main socioeconomic strategy between 2000 and 2010. However, the EUSDS never received much political attention and was rather disconnected from the Lisbon process. When Europe 2020, the EU's new socioeconomic strategy, was launched in 2010, an effort was made to include sustainable development concerns directly into Europe 2020. That strategy now aims at 'smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' (European Commission, 2010). In response to some criticisms on the Lisbon process, Europe 2020 gives a more prominent place to social and environmental goals and indicators. One of the priorities that the European Commission puts forward is resource efficiency (European Commission, 2011). While environmental concerns – managing natural resources more responsibly – are at the core of that policy, the Commission frames it as a predominantly economic issue (Happaerts and Bruyninckx, 2013). In a continent that depends on imports of many commodities, achieving more economic growth with fewer resources is presented as a strategy for innovation, jobs and competitiveness. That illustrates some of the common points of the EU's sustainable development agenda since the 1990s, namely environmental policy integration and the decoupling of economic growth from material input, energy use, and environmental degradation. A more recent phenomenon in the EU, which can also be traced back to the core principles of sustainable development, is the adoption of 2050 as a long-term time horizon. That not only happens in the EU's resource efficiency policy, but also with regard to climate change, energy, and transport.

Although the inclusion of sustainable development in the high-level Europe 2020 strategy can be regarded as a step forward, Pisano and colleagues (2013) show that this high-level socioeconomic strategy has a narrow interpretation of sustainable development and tackles only a limited number of issues. Moreover, it is unclear how the integration of different strategies will play out at the EU level. Especially in light of the global financial and economic crisis, and the sovereign debt crisis in the European monetary union, it is unpredictable how the priorities of European leaders will evolve.

The state and the institutionalization of sustainable development

One of the most lively and interesting debates of recent years in the academic literature on globalization has been on environmental governance and the role of the state. The central idea of governance is that the nation-state is not the exclusive actor anymore, but that societal functions and processes are performed and implemented in different ways, by a variety of actors and at different levels (Biermann, this book; Rosenau, 2005). Sustainable development has given rise to innovative forms of multi-actor governance, as we explain below. However, most authors also agree that a key role in sustainable development governance is still put aside for governments (Jordan, 2008; Meadowcroft, 2008). While governments are increasingly dependent on the cooperation of civil society or private actors and have lost some of their powers due to globalization and economic and political integration, most multi-actor interactions (for example, participative processes, government business cooperation, and so on) rely on a strong center that is often still provided by governments. Moreover, in many parts of the world citizens continue to look at governments as the major catalysts of societal change (Kemp et al., 2005).

The active role of government can be illustrated by looking at the most visible state-based practices in sustainable development policymaking. A large number of countries are implementing national sustainable development policies, sometimes leading to legislative or even constitutional initiatives on sustainable development. In many countries sustainable development is recognized as a policy field at the level of ministerial competence and in a large number of countries sustainable development agencies have been set up (Meadowcroft, 2007). All of this has its impact on bureaucratic functioning, for instance with regard to interagency cooperation or long-term strategic planning. But, sustainable development has also led to conflict within state bureaucracies as the allocation and redistribution of responsibilities, influence, and budgets have been feeding turf battles.

Sustainable development policy processes have changed the institutional aspects of policy participation (Frickel and Davidson, 2004; Niestroy, 2005). In almost all countries, national advisory bodies or councils are functioning. This has increased the opportunities of environmental and developmental NGOs and actors to influence governmental policies (at least in principle) (Betsill, this book). In some countries with strong neocorporatist traditions, the advisory landscape has been redrawn. Whereas labor unions and employers' organizations have been the preferred negotiating partners of the government,

sustainable development added other dimensions to socioeconomic policymaking and shifted the debate in different ways. That has meant that traditional bodies have sometimes added the environmental theme to their agenda, or have been enlarged with environmental groups. Sometimes new bodies incorporating the traditional social partners have formed the new arena to discuss issues.

The debate on the local dimension: Decentralizing sustainability

A recurring debate in the academic literature goes back to the 'small is beautiful' debate of the 1970s (Schumacher, 1973). After the example of states, and sometimes as a reaction to the lack of decisive national action, subnational governments such as regions or provinces have taken steps to institutionalize sustainable development (Bruyninckx et al., 2012). Another interesting evolution has been the application of sustainable development at the local or city level, including in the South (Qi et al., 2008). For instance, *Local Agenda 21* initiatives have spread surprisingly fast to all countries and very different types of municipalities (Kern et al., 2007).

In the spirit of 'think globally, act locally', a number of those local initiatives also explicitly include a more global dimension, either through evaluating their own local contribution to reaching international policy goals, such as the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, or because they have (if they are in the North) a clear connection with the South. Although *Local Agenda 21* activities are driven by local dynamics, significant transnational networks and structures have been developed (for example, Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI)) with an emphasis on developing countries, or the Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development (nrg4SD)). Those networks provide communities with local approaches to issues, practical toolkits or instruments, and good practices. They also create a space for interaction and discussion and often fulfil a lobbying function for local and subnational governments in global governance processes (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004; Happaerts et al., 2011). Academic attention has included studies the role of cities on the global stage. That role is significantly altered as a result of globalization, as especially mega-cities or global cities have become strategic sites of global environmental governance, concentrating knowledge, infrastructure and institutions vital to the function of transnational actors (Bouteligier, 2012).

Debates on stakeholders and actors

Few elements of the sustainable development discourse have produced such a large social science literature as participation. As mentioned

earlier, one of the strong suggestions in the academic literature is that sustainable development initiatives of various types illustrate the shift from traditional government to governance arrangements that may or may not include the state as key point of reference (Jordan, 2008; Mol et al., 2005). If we regard sustainable development as a process of social change, rather than a policy process, that makes sense. In the absence of traditional government, and based on interpretations of the participatory dimensions of sustainable development, a number of innovative new networks on specific environmental issues have emerged that are closely linked to sustainable development practices (Hemmati, 2002). Indeed, economic, social, and environmental actors have created networks that influence production and consumption processes in such areas as tropical forest products, agricultural products, and energy consumption. Through labeling networks for example, sustainable production and consumption are promoted (Cashore and Bernstein, 2004). The fact that state institutions only play a marginal or even negligible role in some of these schemes demonstrates that sustainable development does have a viable existence outside of formal state politics. We will illustrate this by emphasizing the various roles played by stakeholders in this sort of arrangements.

Environmental and development NGOs have been among the earliest and most enthusiastic supporters of the sustainability concept (Zaccai, 2002; Agyeman et al., 2003). They have used it to emphasize their older ideas on the essential nature of environmental protection, on participation in policymaking, on the need for solidarity between North and South, and maybe even more, they have found elements in the sustainability discourse in support of more structural changes in our system of production and consumption. In that vein, they support the global solidarity movement, which defends the interests of the South's victims of globalization and developed-world policies, and the movement for sustainable livelihoods, which tries to create sustenance opportunities in the South that offer alternatives to current development processes (Kates et al., 2005).

NGOs have gradually gained a more visible position in international negotiations on sustainable development (Betsill, this book). Where they were only marginally represented in the first real side conference at the Stockholm Conference in 1972, they were represented with literally tens of thousands at Rio and Johannesburg. They now have received observer status or speaking rights in many post-Rio conventions and have also started their own more independent processes of international negotiation on a more sustainable global society, such as the annual World Social Forum. A new sort of NGOs, often in the form of

umbrella organizations, has emerged to represent sustainable development as such, and multiple new alliances between NGOs have formed, bringing some to speak of the formation of a global citizenship as a counter-force to liberal globalization (Attfield, 2002).

In the business world we have witnessed a number of interpretations of sustainable development (Zadek, 2001; Kates et al., 2005). They often link the concept to technological innovation, in an attempt to stress technocratic solutions to environmental problems (Sagoff, 2000), or they emphasize that, regardless of environmental or social concerns, welfare is dependent on 'sustainable' growth by businesses to guarantee long-term employment and profit. More comprehensive translations of sustainable development into the business community are based on concepts such as triple bottom-line management, integrated business management, stakeholder management, corporate social responsibility, and so on (Capron and Quairel-Lanoizelée, 2004). As actors in a social context, companies have social and economic responsibilities toward the community in which they operate (Mol et al., 2005). Companies have come together at the global level, in the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and in other joint initiatives, to underscore their commitment to being a responsible global player.

Critical voices have correctly pointed out that the number of companies that have really incorporated this sort of new approach is still rather limited. In addition, in times of economic crisis, sustainable development is easily considered as a threat to the bottom line of the company, namely profit. So the critique is that sustainable entrepreneurship seems to be a sort of 'luxury' in times when things are going well. Others talk about a fundamental trend and claim that global scrutiny by NGOs and other interest groups has changed the environment in which companies operate so fundamentally that they are taking public opinion seriously into account and have made significant changes (Mol et al., 2005).

Workers' organizations or labor unions have been rather slow to adopt sustainable development wholeheartedly as a concept that could further their claims (Kjaergaard and Westphalen, 2001). They have been especially hesitant because of the rather dominant position of environmental elements in the discourse. Unions have taken a very ambivalent position toward environmental issues in general. If it referred to workers' health and safety, they have supported them, but as soon as there is reference to more general environmental issues associated with certain industrial sectors, such as the petrochemical or the energy sector, they

regard environmental issues as a potential threat to employment. This history of mixed feelings partially explains the lukewarm acceptance of sustainable development as a concept (Bruyninckx, 2002). In more recent debates such as the green economy (see below), labor unions tie in with their tradition of advocating social rights and fairness, by emphasizing the need for a 'just transition' (Räthzel and Uzzell, 2013; Rosemberg, 2010; Stevis, 2011).

The role of knowledge and instruments

A specific literature has emerged about the knowledge requirements for a more sustainable society (Löfbrand, this book). The more practical translation of this debate has been reflected in an approach on 'instruments for sustainable development' (Damon and Sterner, 2012). At a more fundamental level, authors urge for a new framework to look at global society and a completely new ability to face the enormous complexity of challenges in the sphere of sustainable development (Capra, 2002; Homer-Dixon, 2000; Urry, 2003).

In order to answer some of the major calls for new knowledge-based approaches, global networks on partial issues of sustainable development have formed, which could be described as epistemic communities (Haas, 1992). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), to which thousands of scientists from different disciplines worldwide contribute, is probably the most well-known example. Regardless of the existence of such epistemic communities, critical questions can be asked about the role of scientific knowledge in international negotiations. In several international processes, such as climate change, it is clear that the gap is widening between the sense of urgency proclaimed by scientists and the slow pace of political negotiations.

An interesting part of the knowledge and instruments issue is the potential of local or indigenous knowledge (Corell, 1999). The idea that hard science constituted a Western-biased approach to sustainable development lived strongly among some. Local knowledge is supposed to be more authentic and more adapted to local demands (Bruyninckx, 2004).

Another theme in the knowledge for sustainable development debate is linked to the development of sustainability indicators. Recommended by *Agenda 21*, indicators are widely regarded as one of the essential policy tools for sustainable development (Hák et al., 2007; Kates et al., 2005). Practitioners and scientists alike have engaged in indicator development in the 1990s and the 2000s. One of the most well-known exercises is the Ecological Footprint (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996).

Sustainability indicators have become the standard instrument to monitor progress toward sustainable development (Steurer and Hametner, 2010). Some feel that the proliferation of indicator sets is due to the fact that many institutions find work on indicators less threatening than actually intervening for change (Kemp et al., 2005). More recently, the attention has shifted from developing specific sets of sustainability indicators toward replacing or complementing GDP as the common indicator of economic welfare. In the 'beyond GDP' debate, efforts are made to include environmental and social indicators in a more comprehensive measure of welfare or well-being (Fleurbaey, 2009).

Looking at the knowledge challenges for the future, Dedeurwaerdere (2013) argues that 'sustainability science' needs to address two issues. First, scientists not only have to provide models of the complex systems underlying sustainable development but also look at required changes in core values and worldviews of individual and collective actions. Second, scientists have to contribute to the removal of practical and institutional barriers for sustainable development. Those two issues require an interdisciplinary (or transdisciplinary) perspective, combining not only all scientific disciplines but also extra-scientific stakeholder expertise, and a shift away from a value-neutral toward an ethical stance on sustainability (Dedeurwaerdere, 2013).

In this part of the chapter we have looked at different processes that form part of the gradual institutionalization of sustainable development, and we have situated them in ongoing academic debates. It has become clear that many aspects of sustainable development are linked to essential discussions in the social sciences in general and international relations more specifically.

The downturn of sustainable development and the emergence of new debates

Rio + 20

If sustainable development experienced a fast and steady institutionalization at all levels and in all spheres of global society in the 1990s and early 2000s, several signs point toward a downturn in recent years. The political attention to sustainable development has visibly faded. The negative tendency is marked by a decrease of attention to political initiatives aimed at sustainable development, which pushes some scholars to announce the '*fin de règne*' of the concept (Zaccai, 2011). The Rio + 20 summit was another expression of the diminishing enthusiasm.

Despite initial blockage by the North, the United Nations agreed to hold a third sustainable development summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), nicknamed 'Rio + 20'. With nearly 44,000 participants, it was the largest global summit ever. The number of state leaders that were present (79), however, was much lower than in 1992 (117) or 2002 (104). In stark contrast to the initial Rio summit, the pessimism at Rio + 20 was so great that the mere fact of having an outcome document was viewed by many governments as a success, while the Conference should actually be seen as a failure (Biermann, 2012).

Two themes were central: the green economy within the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication (see next section), and the institutional framework for sustainable development. Regarding the latter issue, results remained largely below the expectations of some, who hoped, for instance, for a breakthrough in the debate on a World Environmental Organization or, at least, a major upgrade of the status of UNEP (Biermann et al., 2012). The most noteworthy results of Rio + 20 are the replacement of CSD with a high-level political forum, and the formulation of Sustainable Development Goals. While most observers agree that the CSD has never exceeded the status of a talk shop (Chasek, 2007), it is doubtful whether the new forum will really lift sustainable development discussions to a more political level within the UN system. As for the proposed Sustainable Development Goals, they should build on the Millennium Development Goals after 2015. A high-level group is tasked with the formulation of the goals. Sustainable development experts urge for them to target the life-support systems of the planet, which are the boundaries of societal development and the source of welfare for current and future generations (Griggs et al., 2013).

We see three complementary explanations for the current downturn of sustainable development. The first is the less favorable international context compared to 1992, when the end of the Cold War was followed by a general feeling of optimism about negotiating global solutions to environmental (and other) problems. At present, the world is struggling with the effects of a severe financial crisis that erupted in 2008, and an unprecedented global economic crisis that followed. As a consequence, priorities are even more so than before aimed at the short term, at domestic politics and at economic growth. The second and related reason is the overall pessimistic atmosphere in multilateral environmental governance in recent years (with the failure of the Copenhagen

Conference in 2009 and the ensuing deadlock in climate talks as an emblematic negative milestone). The third explanation relates to a common feeling of disappointment with the actual impact of the institutionalization of sustainable development. To an increasing extent, the optimism about the fast and pervasive rise of sustainable development in policy discourses is replaced by the sobering reality of symbolic politics in some cases and the overall lack of improvement in environmental and social issues.

'It's the *green* economy, stupid!'

The choice of the green economy as one of the main themes of Rio + 20 denotes a consensus among states to put the economy at the center of attention in times of global economic crisis. It was also in line with the headway that this new concept was making in recent years, for instance with the publication of UNEP's *Green Economy Report* (UNEP, 2011). In that Report, the concept is presented as a strategy to achieve sustainable development and poverty eradication by investing 2 percent of global GDP in ten key sectors, such as energy, water, and agriculture. Public and private actors should both engage in the transition to a low-carbon, resource-efficient, and socially inclusive economy. The challenges that UNEP puts forward do not differ much from those described by the Brundtland Report in 1987, seeing that the core problems remain the same. But the issues are now framed much more as economic problems. For instance, a large emphasis is put on job creation, and investments occupy a significant place among the policy instruments that are promoted.

The shifting of global attention away from sustainable development toward a concept such as green economy entails both opportunities and risks. As the concept seems to have a certain appeal for governments, because it justifies their intuitive priority for economic development, it can have a less threatening character for some than sustainable development did. Optimistically, it could thus be more easily integrated into governments' main economic policies and lead to concrete improvements there, and therefore has more chance to exceed the status of symbolic politics. On the other hand, the concept bears the risk of neglecting some of the more essential elements of sustainable development, such as the social dimension or North–South equity, if it is too narrowly interpreted as a more efficient and cleaner economy (Onestini, 2012). Another risk is that a purely instrumental view on the environment is adopted as a 'capital stock' which offers resources and ecosystem services, and which absorbs waste. In that sense, the focus on a green

economy could be a serious setback in the sustainable development debate.

A fundamental solution for the persistent problems of sustainable development

After several decades of international environmental politics and 25 years of debate about sustainable development, there is a clear discrepancy between institutional progress on the one hand and the lack of environmental effectiveness on the other. To explain that discrepancy, a growing group of scholars approach sustainable development through the transition perspective. That is a relatively recent strand in the literature that finds its origins in systems and complexity thinking, innovation and technology science, among others. In transition theory, the issues of sustainable development are thought of as persistent problems. Such problems are particularly difficult to steer, because they are complex (as they involve multiple scales, actors, and levels of governance), interdependent (think, for example, of the various links between climate change, transport, and energy), uncertain (for example, with regard to tipping points and causality chains), and deeply embedded in the fabric of society (Loorbach, 2007). Most essentially, they are linked to our dominant patterns of production and consumption. To solve the persistent problems of sustainability, transition scholars maintain that regular policy and market solutions have proven to be insufficient, and that incremental institutional steps rather reinforce than reduce the problems and the structures underpinning them (Frantzeskaki and Loorbach, 2008). Instead, innovations at systemic level are needed. That refers to the concept of socio-technical systems, which consist of the dominant structures, cultures, and practices that have emerged to fulfil the major societal functions (such as food, housing, energy, and mobility) (Rotmans and Loorbach, 2010). In that line of thinking, sustainability transitions are understood as fundamental changes in dominant structures, practices, technologies, policies, lifestyles, and thinking, in order to come to real system innovations (Kemp and Rotmans, 2005). Other strategies, which perpetuate the incumbent – unsustainable – systems, are considered to lead to a lock-in of those systems and are an obstacle for sustainable development (van der Brugge and Rotmans, 2007).

Although the assumptions underlying transition theory are built on a fundamental critique of current modes of development, this thinking has enjoyed a firm resonance in international discourse in recent years (Happaerts and Bruyninckx, 2013). It relates strongly to debates about

degrowth, a concept that advocates the maximization of well-being in combination with the contraction of production and consumption (Jackson, 2011). Assuming that the resonance of transition thinking will be mostly discursive, it can still be seen as an interesting evolution. As the consensus among scientists is growing about the need for far-reaching changes in our production and consumption patterns if we want to achieve a sustainable society, the inclusion in international discourse of a concept that advocates such fundamental transitions is indeed significant.

Conclusion

Sustainable development has quickly conquered the discourse in a number of very important fields of policymaking such as environmental policy, development policy, spatial planning, and so on. It has done so in a surprisingly pervasive fashion and at all levels of governance. In addition, the concept is used by all sorts of social actors in highly varied contexts in both developed or industrialized countries and developing or industrializing countries. It remains, however, a very contested concept. We discussed its vagueness, the distinction between holistic versus more ecological interpretations of sustainable development, and the different critiques that the concept provokes in North–South debates.

We have also given numerous examples of the institutional consequences of sustainable development at all sorts of policymaking levels. The importance of those processes of institutionalization is that they embed sustainable development in concrete practices, involving (networks of) actors and giving a certain permanence in behavioral patterns at the policy level. Nevertheless, after 25 years of institutionalization, some initiatives have proven to be rather symbolic, and an overall pessimistic international atmosphere has contributed to a diminishing enthusiasm for the concept of sustainable development.

As new concepts such as the green economy are emerging at the policy level, attention in academic debates is moving increasingly toward systemic approaches that advocate fundamental transitions in our modes of production and consumption, lifestyles and thinking. Future research should focus especially on how such approaches fit within global environmental politics and could be introduced into international policy and decision-making. Such a perspective is specifically relevant as current policy approaches inspired by the green economy have a tendency to ignore some of the key characteristics of the sustainable development paradigm.

Note

1. Strong proponents of 'institutionalism' are found among regime theorists, neo-institutionalists, and idealists (Gupta, 2002).

Annotated bibliography

Jordan, A. (2008) 'The governance of sustainable development: taking stock and looking forwards', *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 26, 17–33.

This article makes a valuable attempt to take stock of the literature that tried to combine the concept of governance with sustainable development. Jordan shows that existing studies mostly adopt either a normative or an empirical perspective, and he recommends researchers to further explore the causal relations between certain types of governance and the specific outcomes that they bring about.

Loorbach, D. (2007) *Transition Management. New Mode of Governance for Sustainable Development* (Utrecht: International Books).

This book is one of the key references of Transition Management, the most well-known operational approach within the literature on transitions. Transition processes that are modeled after this approach have been put into practice at the (sub)national level in the Netherlands and Belgium, and in local communities around the world, where Transition Management shows potential in terms of mobilizing stakeholders and formulating a common long-term vision for sustainability.

Meadowcroft, J. (2008) 'Who is in Charge here? Governance for Sustainable Development in a Complex World', In J. Newig, J.-P. Voß and J. Monstadt (eds), *Governance for Sustainable Development. Coping with Ambivalence, Uncertainty and Distributed Power* (London and New York: Routledge).

This chapter argues that the state retains a pivotal role in steering societies toward sustainable development, despite the tendency that existed in the early 2000s to dismiss the role of national governments within the governance paradigm. He pleads to give more attention to what states do in the context of distributed power, and to focus on their possibilities to reorient societal development toward sustainability.

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