Content:

Policy makers across the globe, and especially within the transatlantic arena, are faced with an enormous challenge—the sustainability challenge. Building upon the growing presence of sustainability as a topic in natural science and ecological movements, this volume addresses the topic from political and economic perspectives constraining and influencing sustainable development.

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Sustainable Development – An Integrative Paradigm?

A Transatlantic View on Politics, Economy and Society
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Introduction

Hartmut Marhold and Michael Meimeth

Sustainable Development has been on the political agenda for almost three decades now and has since developed into a popular and powerful concept. The first prominent definition of Sustainable Development as a concept was elaborated by the so-called Brundtland Commission, mandated in 1983 by the United Nations as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland chaired the Commission, which published its final report in 1987 under the title “Our Common Future”. The Brundtland Report defined Sustainable Development as a development that meets the needs of the contemporary generation without limiting the ability of future ones to satisfy their own needs. This was the first attempt to free the notion of Sustainable Development of an exclusively environmental understanding and to include political, economic and social aspects as well in order to create a basis for a new integrated global political strategy.

The history of the concept reached its culminating point with the Rio Conference in 1992, where a global Sustainable Development approach and multi-level participatory governance has been brought into focus. Ten years later in 2001, the Johannesburg Conference has largely confirmed the Rio approach. Both conferences were initiated and organized by the United Nations.

The success of the newly forged concept of Sustainable Development was beyond hope – indeed it led to an inflation of the adjective “sustainable”, which came to be employed for anything and nothing: Whatever was allowed to rest for more than a few months was now called “sustainable”.

However, it was only in 2005/2006 when the combination of two external challenges have stimulated the concept of Sustainable Development to become more operational: Providing Europe with energy became suddenly less reliable as it had seemed for a long while, because Russia and Ukraine quarreled about prices for Russian gas and oil deliveries – and since the pipelines passing through Ukraine are crucial for the provision and consumption of energy in the European Union, the Europeans were suddenly faced with an existential problem. Almost at the same time, during the year 2006, a number of alarming reports on climate change and global warming came into public perception and discussion, e.g. the IPCC Report or the Stern Report, and made at least the Europeans aware of yet another existential problem. Both challenges, energy
supply and climate change, revealed, through their simultaneous appearance, that they were interrelated and called for an “integrated” approach: Sustainable Development was the approach which the heads of state and government perceived as an overall framework for those sectoral problems. Other events and deadlines added to the new conjuncture propitious for Sustainable Development, among them the revision of the EU Strategy for Sustainable Development (EUSDS). The EU Strategy had originally been created in 2001. It was to be revised in June 2006, after five years of an uncertain youth, which, however, led to the creation of “National Sustainable Development Councils” in most European countries. Those councils became the focus points of reflection on Sustainable Development and important contributors to framing the concept with regard to governmental policies.

Despite the institutionalization of Sustainable Development and its growing incorporation into the political discourse of the industrialized world, scientific evidence shows that the world is farther away from Sustainable Development than ever before:

The world population grows by almost 100 million people every year, by 2050 9 billion people will be living on earth and 11 to 12 billion people by 2100.

Despite important improvements in efficiency, consumption of both energy and natural resources has continued to grow dramatically on a global scale.

According to the Kyoto Protocol, CO₂ emissions should be cut by 5% by the year 2012. Today, emissions exceed the 1990 levels by 40%.

The global nutritional situation is becoming increasingly precarious due to the growth of both, the world’s population and consumption in threshold and developing countries.

Intensive agriculture is characterized by intensive livestock farming, monocultures, the use of pesticides and severe over-fertilization. These developments go hand in hand with soil salinization, erosion and exhaustion of fossil ground water reserves.

World-wide epidemics pose a growing risk due to the close networking of people from all over the world.

Despite globalization, the gap between the developing and industrialized world continues to grow both among countries and among population.

Last but not least, the national economies of all industrialized countries are focused on unchecked economic growth.

Within this perspective, the implementation of Sustainable Development has been far less successful than popularity and the general political acceptance of this concept by the political elites would suggest – even if there is a growing awareness among civil societies and the political elites of the industrialized world about the imminent dangers of this collision course with nature. Therefore, this obvious “knowledge-action gap” which characterizes the implementation of
Sustainable Development can not be explained by a lack of information and knowledge on Sustainable Development alone. Although systematic education and information of civil societies and political elites are of critical importance within this context, it is a far more necessary condition than a sufficient one to understand the implementation problems of Sustainable Development. Rather, what is needed is a far better understanding of the political, economic, social and cultural mechanisms underlying the dynamics and directions strategies to implement Sustainable Development could, should or will have in the future.

It is against this background, that the ASKO EUROPA-STIFTUNG and the College of Liberal Arts of the Texas A&M University have launched in 2008 an intensive debate between scholars from both sides of the Atlantic on political, economic, social and cultural perspectives on Sustainable Development: What do decision makers refer to by talking about “Sustainable Development”? Are there different national, European and US paradigms on this topic? What is the political, economic and social reality of Sustainable Development, seen from a comprehensive understanding of this term: intergenerational, interregional (integrating the local, national and international environment) and inter-sectoral (integration politics, economics, society and environment)? And finally: Sustainable Development requires not only the inclusion of all these perspectives within a society, but also in an international context as well. So what are the implications for the transatlantic relationship?

The reasons why these issues have to be best discussed within a transatlantic framework are obvious: although the challenges of Sustainable Development are global ones and, therefore, can only be matched by a global approach, a transatlantic understanding between the European Union and the US is of critical importance. The European Union and the US as the most advanced economies have led the way into a Non-Sustainable Development as they are the most important consumers of limited resources. On the other hand they are the most advanced producers of sophisticated sustainable technologies and corresponding cultural techniques. Therefore, similar as they are, the European Union and the US have a common responsibility to take the lead towards a Sustainable Development.

The papers presented in this volume have been born of the 3rd Transatlantic Fall Symposium organized and co-directed by the ASKO EUROPA-STIFTUNG and the College of Liberal Arts of Texas A&M University held at the European Academy Otzenhausen (Germany) from October 13 to October 15, 2008. The contribution of this volume are a very first step in developing a common multidisciplinary transatlantic approach to the challenges of Sustainable Development. This transatlantic exchange has been continued and enlarged by another symposium held at Texas A&M University in October 2009 on “Sustainable Development: how to bridge the knowledge-action gap? Exploring
the added value of social and cultural perspectives”. The findings of this symposium will be published in a separate volume.
An American perspective on sustainable development: What is it, where is it, and what are the prospects for the future?

Eric Lindquist

“Disappointment abounds in public discourse about sustainability.”
Voss and Kemp 2006.

1. Introduction

The objectives of this symposium are to explore such issues as what decision makers mean by “sustainable development” and what is the current political reality of sustainability from a transatlantic perspective. This paper addresses these issues by providing some preliminary comments and observations about where the United States currently stands in regard to sustainable development. This is accomplished through a consideration of how sustainable development is/isn’t defined in the United States, and where it is being considered or applied. We then discuss some of the barriers and constraints to sustainable development from this perspective. In addition, this paper presents some preliminary findings from a recent research project on climate change and adaptation at the state and regional level of governance and planning as an illustration of the difficulty in integrating sustainable development into the sub national governance structure in the United States. In conclusion we return to the overall themes of the symposium with a consideration of the impact of recent natural disasters along the U.S. Gulf Coast and their impacts on and possible contributions to the advancement of sustainable development in the United States as a viable issue and goal.

2. What is sustainable development, how is it defined in the United States, and why does this matter?

The definition(s) of sustainable development have been, and will be debated for years. Other papers presented at this symposium take on this issue in greater detail than will be offered here. For purposes of this paper, we will focus not on a definitive definition, but, first, on several perspectives of the concept in regard
to its operationalization, and second, on what the concept means in the United States using illustrations from federal level agencies as well as from current research being conducted on climate change and regional decision making. We emphasize the operationalization, or problem solving aspects, of sustainable development as subsequent sections of this paper will focus on how and where this concept is showing up at multiple levels of government in the United States.

According to Voss and Kemp, sustainable development “should be understood as a specific kind of problem framing that emphasises the interconnectedness of different problems and scales”\(^1\). As such, they suggest that it requires a new perspective and approach to problem solving, one that adopts a non-linear approach, as opposed to what they call the “delimitable, decomposable problems that can be managed in a linear way”\(^2\). Sustainable development, then, is process rather than outcome as the outcome cannot be known in advance (in part as a result of uncertainty, for example) and any attempt to predetermine a sustainable development outcome will result in frustration and failure. A process focus, being one of inclusion of multiple stakeholders, different perspectives and approaches to problem solving, can be more integrated, flexible and able to react to change as a result of uncertainty. Their approach also appreciates and embraces the inherent complexity within sustainable development and the linkages between the social, technological and ecological domains.

Dryzek, too, focuses attention on the non-linear process of moving toward sustainability. In his discussion of the concept he states that sustainable development is not so much an “accomplishment” as it is a discourse, and one which is “not proven or demonstrated but, rather, asserted”\(^3\). As such there is no clear path, but rather a non-linear road. Sustainable development requires commitment and acceptance (based on discourse) followed by action and experimentation. This is what we are trying to discover in this paper: is there evidence that sustainable development in the United States is being accepted and operationalized in some manner?

In the United States, sustainable development has had a mixed reception, in large part to its ambiguity and in the difficulty in defining what it is and how to get there. Work by Dernbach suggests that the United States is “stumbling” toward sustainability, in that the movement is random and unorganized and uncoordinated, and the progress unsteady. Movement, even stumbling, in a positive direction is important, however, because “its goals – human freedom, opportunity, and quality of life – are also our goals”\(^4\). Sustainable development

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1  Voß et al. 2006, p. 4.
2  Ibid.
3  Dryzek, 1997, p. 3.
would help the United States secure a better and more stable world, for example, and a stronger and more efficient America\textsuperscript{5}. These points are all admirable, in theory, but are the sufficient to move the country in this direction? One major reason the objective of sustainable development has not been met in this country, is because, as Bryner suggests, it is also “not our problem”\textsuperscript{6}. This perspective suggests that sustainable development has been unable to get a foothold and support in the United States, especially in Congress whose support is critical for integrating the concept into broader policy arenas, and also with the general public. The result has been that in the United States, sustainable development is seen as something other countries, primarily the less developed countries, has to deal with. In essence it is seen as a solution to the problems of other parts of the world but not in the United States. Other contributing factors to the lack of acceptance in the United States include our system of divided, and often divisive government, and a lack of a sense of moral obligation to the rest of the world for our above average consumption of natural resources and the production of pollution\textsuperscript{7}. He concluded that at least at the federal level, the future did not look very optimistic in regard to an acceptance of and movement toward sustainable development in the United States.

From a political perspective, too, sustainable development runs counter to political reality. Rabe suggests that the inability or unwillingness of Congress to deal with climate change or other environmental issues stems from the fact that the opportunities to claim credit for successful legislation are so low\textsuperscript{8}. Any impact of policy made today may not be felt for a generation or two, hardly the constituency a politician is currently concerned with. In the fall of 2008, however, the US presidential election was underway, with candidates from both major parties making promises, outlining agendas, and trying to attract attention to their objectives and approaches to solving the major problems of the day. After eight years of the Bush administration there was a sense that issues such as climate change and sustainability would be elevated to agenda status. However, sustainable development, or even climate change, were noticeably absent for the most part. With other issues such as unemployment, the economy, terrorism and national security, there was little room for anything else. One brief exception can be found in the “Science Debate,” a “concerned citizens initiative” with sponsorship from the AAAS, the Council on Competitiveness, the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid. p. 7.
\textsuperscript{6} Bryner, 2000.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Rabe, 2007.
the Institute of Medicine, and support from more than 175 leading American universities and other organizations.


The initiative sought to have the major candidates address important science issues of the day in order for the public to be able to draw conclusions and comparisons about their respective platforms. Two questions relevant to sustainable development, regarding climate change and water policy, were included. Only Senator McCain’s answer to the water policy question included the statement that he understood the importance of all levels of government working together so water is “protected, managed, and utilized in a wise, just and sustained manner.”

3. Where do we find sustainable development at the federal level in the United States?

In light of the previous sections, can we identify places in the federal government where sustainable development has found a niche? We ran general keyword searches in federal agency databases and libraries in order to develop a rough measure of interest or attention to the concept. This gave us limited results, with few reports and documents mentioning sustainable development or sustainability. These reports listed here are examples of the exceptions:

- Governments and Donors Threaten Progress to Halve Hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2015. GAO-08-680 May 29, 2008
- U.S. Climate Change Science Program: Impacts of Climate Variability and Change on Transportation Systems and Infrastructure -- Gulf Coast Study. Synthesis and Assessment Product 4.7
- U.S. Department of Transportation: “Sustainability Performance Measures for State DOTs and other Transportation Agencies.”

At the agency level, the Environmental Protection Agency has developed some basic information on sustainable development as a first step in moving toward more emphasis on “sustainable practices.” The web site, http://www.epa.gov/
Sustainability/basicinfo.htm, includes general information and links to related sites. The information provided is at a very general level with little detail or links to major research or publications on sustainable development.

We then conducted a more rigorous search of the National Science Foundation (NSF) web site in order to determine if “sustainable development” came up at the program and project level. Our intent was to determine of the research community in the United States, as illustrated by NSF programs and grants, was at all focused on this concept. At the program level, we identified only five programs in the NSF that included “sustainable development” in the program description and call for proposals. For example, in the NSF Chemistry Program, the concept was included in the “International Collaboration in Chemistry between U.S. Investigators and their Counterparts Abroad” call for proposals, while the NSF Civil Engineering Program included a grant competition entitled: “Environmental Sustainability.” From the NSF grant database, however, only 54 currently funded projects, out of approximately 10,000, included the phrase “sustainable development” in the abstract. Of these 54 grants, 27 were internationally focused projects and 27 were U.S. focused projects.

What are the barriers and constraints in the U.S to sustainable development?

Can we identify the most significant barriers in the United States, and elsewhere, perhaps, to the acceptance and implementation of sustainable development? From the agenda setting literature in political science, we know that decision makers and politicians have a limited capacity for issues at any given time (see, for example, Kingdon9, and Baumgartner and Jones10). In addition, issues rise and fall on the decision agenda over time, in constant competition with what issues were previously important and what issues are looming on the horizon. This situation begs the question, can sustainable development compete for our attention with such major issues of the day as terrorism and homeland security, hurricanes like Katrina and Ike, energy and oil costs, the economy and recession, and the banking, housing and mortgage crisis? More specifically, and in addition to its competition with other issues, the ambiguous nature of the general concept of sustainable development makes it difficult to achieve decision status. It is exceptionally difficult to develop and implement policy based on abstract concepts, and sustainable development is no exception. The lack of acceptance or uncertainty of the concept, too, within the general public and the policy and decision community all contribute to this

10  Baumgartner & Jones, 2009.
situation. And, as Bryner\textsuperscript{11} suggests, sustainable development is not a solution we look to as one which is applicable to “our” problems.

Finally, Voss and Kemp point out two significant factors working against the acceptance of sustainable development. First, the intergovernmental structure within the United States and its fragmented government, make it difficult to generate the top down attention and focus that may be needed to elevate and promote the concept as an issue that warrants attention and resources. Second, they recognize the difficulty in engaging the public on any scientific issue, concrete or abstract, hence their assertion that, “disappointment abounds in public discourse about sustainability”\textsuperscript{12}. With little in the way of federal level guidance and support, and public interest, it is not surprising that sustainable development has seen only modest acceptance in this country.

4. Where do we find sustainable development at the regional/local level?

If, as the previous sections suggest, sustainable development is not being seriously considered and addressed at the federal level of government and funded research, can we identify other levels of government where this concept is being applied or considered? One logical place to look is at the city or regional level\textsuperscript{13}. To return to Dryzek, we find the assertion that “sustainability is an issue at regional and local levels too, for that is where solutions will have to be found”\textsuperscript{14}. Urban and regional planners embraced the concept early on, to the extent that Campbell declared sustainable development “the current object of planning’s fascination”\textsuperscript{15}. In spite of the early adoption, its application has proven difficult. Berke and Conroy asked the question, “are we planning for sustainable development”\textsuperscript{16} in their review of 30 comprehensive city and county plans and found that although many of the plans included the concept, in and of itself it had no impact of actually moving toward sustainability. They further found that the practitioners themselves had very little understanding of how to translate or operationalize the concept. The solutions offered were one of more education for planners and better integration of the concept into the community. The result of their study was, in essence, while planners and the planning community

\textsuperscript{11} Bryner, 2000.
\textsuperscript{12} Voß et al. 2006, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{13} Lindquist, 2001.
\textsuperscript{14} Dryzek, 1997, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{15} Campbell, 1996.
integrated the concept into their planning documents, it was not being operationalized.

Building on the assertion that sustainable development might be found at the sub national level in the United States a recent study focused on assessing current thinking at the state and regional level on climate change and adaptation. Climate change, one of the most significant aspects or themes in sustainability and sustainable development (Lafferty and Meadowcroft\(^\text{17}\); Dernbach\(^\text{18}\)), can be used as a proxy measure of sustainable development attention. The objective of this study was to generate a baseline understanding of current policy response to climate change/variability at the state and regional transportation planning and decision levels. The study included content analysis of transportation plans of the state departments of transportation (DOTs) from all 50 U.S states and from the 70 largest metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), the institutions engaged in planning activities at the regional level in the United States\(^\text{19}\). We also conducted in depth interviews with transportation planners and policy makers at these agencies. Preliminary findings showed, first, that few of these agencies had included climate change as a factor or issue in their plans or policy statements. The content analysis of the 50 state DOTs and 70 MPOS transportation plans and policy documents found that very few state DOTs and MPOs were even considering climate change as an important issue. In the analysis of the most recent plans (circa 2007), only four States (California, Connecticut, Oregon and Washington) explicitly mentioned climate change (primarily the impact of transportation on the climate) and none mentioned adaptation to climate change. The analysis of MPO plans had similar results.

Following the content analysis, we conducted a survey of all 50 state DOTs and the 70 MPOs in order to gain more detailed understanding of these issues. From these responses we conducted follow up in depth interviews with a sample of the decision makers and planners. Our preliminary findings showed that climate change, in general, was not on the decision agenda, much less any kind of response or systematic attention to possible impacts of climate change on transportation though adaptation or similar strategies. The in depth interviews with decision makers did suggest that some agencies were considering including climate change and adaptation in future plans and policies, however. The major reasons for this minimal attention to climate change in the state and regional planning efforts, much less adaptation, as revealed through surveys and in-depth interviews, included the following responses:

\(^{17}\) Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 2000.  
\(^{18}\) Dernbach, 2002.  
\(^{19}\) Lindquist (Forthcoming).
• lack of public interest in climate change,
• lack of resources to focus on the issue,
• suspicion of climate change science,
• the politicization of climate change as an issue,
• lack of political will from elected officials,
• no clear guidance from the state or federal levels, and
• lack of capacity in the state DOTs or MPOs for researching, understanding,
• and dealing with climate change.

The preliminary results from our study paint a fairly pessimistic picture of the state of climate change and adaptation as an issue or concern at the sub national level of government in the United States. There are other themes or aspects within sustainable development, however, that may show more promise at this time.

5. Sustainable development through proxy measures: Sustainable development by a different name?

Are there more focused attributes of the concept in the decision and planning domains in the United States that are gaining traction? If one of the criticisms of sustainable development is in its operationalization and actually putting it to work to solve problems, what might be extracted from the general concept in order to make incremental progress or tackle parts of a problem? Taking a reductionist approach and reducing sustainable development to manageable processes has been suggested as one means to an end (see, for example, Voss and Kemp20). Climate change, as discussed above, has been suggested as one such theme within sustainable development. Others include such concepts and tools as:

• Adaptive management
• “Smart Growth” and land use planning
• Resilience
• Vulnerability
• Risk management

20 Voß et al. 2006.
These proxy measures or concepts may be more easily quantified and applied, unlike “sustainable development,” and they may also be less value-laden, rhetorically, and palatable to the general public. These concepts are finding traction in the planning community, where sustainable development has been accepted more widely than in other areas of decision and policy making (see, for example, Berke and Conroy21). This stands to reason considering the long term and environmental focus of much of what urban and regional planning attempts to accomplish. However, the optimism of the planners, as exemplified by Campbell’s statement that “in the battle of big public ideas, sustainability has won: the task of the coming years is simply to work out the details, and to narrow the gap between its theory and practice”22, does not seem to have been fulfilled, at least not yet. The aggregation of successful attempts with these proxy measures may move the United States in a more sustainable direction, over time. This situation would appear to support the non-linear aspect of sustainable development implementation, and the “stumbling toward sustainability” as articulated by Dernbach23.

6. Conclusions: Sustainable development for whom, and at what cost?

Our discussion to this point paints a fairly pessimistic picture of the political, research and intergovernmental domains in regard to sustainable development in the United States. There does seem to be movement in this direction, albeit slow. However, not all policy change or evolution is incremental and slow, it can be changed as a result of dramatic events that punctuate the status quo (Baumgartner and Jones 200924; Birkland 200625). What potential is there, then, for such occurrences in regard to sustainable development in this country?

In 2005 and 2008, two major hurricanes struck the U.S. Gulf Coast. Hurricane Katrina, in 2005, resulted in over 1800 fatalities and $100 billion in damages in the New Orleans, Louisiana area and became a symbol of failed government and emergency response around the world. In 2008 Hurricane Ike struck land near Houston, Texas, causing over 100 deaths and $24 billion in damages. Can these events inform the sustainable development discussion in the United States? Perhaps, if the aggregate impact of the events can keep pace with other world

22 Campbell, 1996, p. 304.
23 Dernbach, 2002.
events and issues on the agenda. One result of these events has been that concepts such as resilience and vulnerability are now part of the policy and public debate. Attitudes in the Houston area in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike both question the viability of continued development on the Texas Gulf Coast, and support the need for more infrastructure investment and technological fixes (more flood control, and retrofit of existing infrastructure, for example) in order to redevelop and maintain the status quo along the coast. These approaches seem to be working at cross purposes, yet, considering the investment and infrastructure currently in place there seems to be no signs of a decrease in development and interest in the region.

To return to the symposium themes, we have found little evidence in support of the notion that the United States is responding to the enormous challenge of sustainable development in any significantly organized or structured manner. While there is movement in that direction, and will probably be more so in the future at sub national levels of government, it would seem, that Bryner’s assertion still stands, that for the time being and even in light of major disasters, sustainable development really is not a viable solution to “our” problems.

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