

Sustainability Governance in Democracies

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ABSTRACT

The pursuit of sustainable development requires a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision-making, an economic system that is able to generate surpluses on a sustained basis and a social system providing for a solution to tensions arising from disharmonious development; it recognizes also the rights of the individual to adequate conditions of life through balancing environmental, economic and social norms. Although international law is neutral towards different forms of government, increasingly democracy is regarded as the only form of government truly reflecting the “consent of the governed” and therefore being in accordance with the right of the self-determination of people and thus the basis for the realization of human rights. But the theoretical and practical linkage between democracy and sustainable development is still weak. Although there is a burgeoning literature on democratic mechanisms and sustainability, democracy is not regarded as prerequisite for sustainability. The authors argue in this paper that although sustainable development seemingly does not need democratic forms of governance as the values attached to SD could also be implemented in a non-democratic system, research on democracy, human rights and sustainable norms need to be better linked to each other in order to be able to implement the political requirements simultaneously. The authors propose an integrated approach that respects the ideas of sustainable development, as well as human rights and democratic forms of governance. Thus, the authors present different systems of democratic governance, sustainable development indicators systems as well as human rights systems. From there the authors develop ideal-type models that represent those ideas and develop an integrated approach to a democratic sustainable development system in accordance with human rights.

Keywords: Democracy, Framework of Analysis, Governance, Sustainable Development, Sustainable Governance

1. INTRODUCTION: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE?

How to govern sustainable development in democratic contexts? Governance has become a

quite popular term, both in theory and practice. Political scientists have used and applied the concept in a wide range of projects, resulting in a vast amount of publications, but still refer to governance in different ways: discussion centers around “governance as steering”, “new and old modes of governance” and criteria, how to measure “good” governance. In other words different meanings as to what and how gover-

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nance means are available. For politics, where the term governance is also increasingly in use, the most interesting question is how governance works. By what means, rules, actor constellations, institutional set-ups and procedures can a certain policy-output be achieved?

When taking a closer look at the development of international law since the Second World War, we observe a trend towards the recognition of democracy as the only legitimate form of governing. Starting with de-colonialization and further with the break-down of the communist regimes in the 1990s the right of self-determination has gained prominence and with it democracy as the only form of government truly reflecting the “consent of the governed”. But although there is a burgeoning literature on democratic mechanisms (especially participatory and discursive forms of democracy) and sustainability, ecologists have been for quite some time critical towards the possibility to achieve sustainability by democratic means. Authors like Ophuls (1977) argued that the ecological crisis could only be tackled by limiting the individual freedom of citizens and establishing a strong government (Doherty & de Geus 1996: 1). As democracy holds the risk, that the issue of sustainable development does not meet the necessary majorities, green demands seemed to require an increasing centralisation of power to overcome blunt self-interest (Ward, 2008: 387). Theoretically, it seems easier to constrain environmentally damaging economic activities by autocratic means (Buitenzorgy, 2011: 60; Neumayer, 2002). Efficiency, equity, effectiveness, but also legitimacy are defined as key principles for environmental decision-making by Ager et al. (2003: 1096f). But although democracies may score high on the issue of legitimacy and to a certain amount on equity, it might be a poor performer regarding efficiency and effectiveness. So Saward (1993: 64) put forward the conclusion that there is a complete opposition between green imperatives and an acceptable justification of democracy. Individuals or interest groups may ignore the damage which their economic actions pose on the environment and free ride; for example

business groups may opt to ignore certain behaviour as they have a strong influence in market democracies (Li & Reuveny, 2006: 938; Dryzek, 1987). Discussions on “environmental sustainability” have to take into consideration these social, economic and political practices as the attempt of changing those practices may threaten other dimensions of social development (Ekins, 1994; Meadowcraft, 1997: 172). On the other hand democracies may well be more responsive to the environmental needs of the public, as environmental groups find an arena for mobilization and democracies are more likely to comply with international environmental agreements (Kotov & Nikitina, 1995; Li & Reuveny, 2006: 937). Saward’s solution to the contradiction between democracy and green imperatives is that there has to be a move away from political mechanisms and their justification to political culture, as green principles expressed as imperatives leads to authoritarian solutions (Saward, 1993). Good democracy means not only following simply the will of the majority. As new indicator concepts for measuring democracy show, there is an understanding that politics (democracy) carries a responsibility for society and the environment (Campbell 2008: 30).

Sustainable development per se is a normative concept that has to be interpreted. Meaning is attributed to it not only by experts and decision-makers, but also by civic society and interest groups (Meadowcraft, 2007). Therefore participatory aspects as well as the institutional context of the governance of sustainable development become particularly important. According to the Brundtland Commission sustainable development requires economic growth. Democracy on the other hand is required for the equitable distribution of economic growth and the equitable redistribution in the absence of growth (Lafferty & Meadowcraft, 1996; Midlarsky, 1998: 342). And while there is a claim that sustainable development has the capacity to challenge the increased integration of the world in a capitalist economy dominated by business groups (Christie & Warburton, 2001), the Brundtland Report allows business

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