Developing a framework for sustainability governance in the European Union

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Abstract: Sustainable development represents a major governance challenge of the 21st century. If societal development trajectories are to be realigned on to more sustainable pathways major changes will be required to existing processes and practices of governance. This essay considers the nature of these changes and discusses implications for social science research.

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1   Introduction

In recent decades it has become evident that the pattern of global development which emerged over the course of the twentieth century is acutely problematic. Increasingly, the idea of sustainable development has served to articulate concerns about existing practices – especially with respect to the destruction of global ecosystems, and the urgent needs of the worlds poor – and to represent an alternative path where development 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs' (WCED, 1987). Sustainable development is an emergent international norm (Lafferty, 1996) that draws together ideas relating to the promotion of human welfare, the protection of the biosphere, the interests of future generations, and public participation in environment and development decision-making.

At a series of international gatherings the European Union and its member states, along with governments from around the world, have affirmed support for sustainable development, recently agreeing that the developed countries must take the lead in securing a 'shift towards sustainable consumption and production to promote social and economic development within the carrying capacity of ecosystems' (WSSD, 2002). Governments have already taken some initial steps to engage with issues central to sustainable development such as climate change, resource use, bio-diversity loss, and poverty alleviation. There have been recent attempts to adopt more long term and strategic approaches to managing environmental burdens through national plans and strategies, to draw stakeholders into constructive dialogue with government, to broaden the range of environmental policy instruments, and to integrate environmental considerations into economic decision making.

Yet, while sustainable development remains an appealing goal, making real progress is another matter. Assessments suggest that although there have been some advances in controlling pollution and cleaning up the historical legacy of contamination in the industrialised countries, the gains secured by environmental policy are often swamped by continued growth (EEA, 2002). Despite mounting evidence that the global climate is already changing under the impact of human activity, greenhouse emissions continue to rise (IPCC, 2001; IEA, 2002). Pressure on resources such as water and land are growing, as is the total loading of industrial pollutants. And while 'globalisation' has arguably brought gains to consumers in the North, and to some populations in rapidly industrialising states, several billion people still live in poverty in many regions of the world. So, if sustainable development is to become a reality rather than just a slogan, far more profound changes will be required than anything seen to date. And it is in this context that the issue of 'governance for sustainable development' comes to the fore.

The term 'governance' is used in varied ways in political and social scientific debate (Pierre, 2000; Kooiman, 2003), but for the purposes of this research initiative it is understood in a broad sense, as denoting the complex ways in which order and orientation are maintained in contemporary socio-political systems. Governance includes the traditional activities of government, and also other processes that regulate societal interactions. Structures of governance extend from the local and regional to the national and international, and different modes of governance predominate in diverse spheres of social life. 'Governance for sustainable development' links these regulative mechanisms with the particular objective of promoting sustainable development. *It implies the deliberate adjustment of practices of governance in order to ensure that social development proceeds along a sustainable trajectory.* It is a goal-oriented activity that seeks to achieve certain (desired) societal outcomes and to avoid other (less promising) social futures (Meadowcroft, 1997). But since sustainable development is not an end state, but a process of continued social advance, 'governance for sustainable development' is not about mobilising resources to realise a pre-determined societal order. Rather, it is about adjusting the structures that regulate societal interactions so that they can encourage positive developmental adaptation.

As a *practical political challenge,* 'governance for sustainable development' is about reforming societal institutions to maximise the opportunities for continued advance. *It is concerned not only with the design and implementation of government policy, but also with collective processes of monitoring, reflection, debate and decision that establish the orientation for policy*. It relates not only to the conduct of government but also to the governance activities of other social actors. In the broadest sense it is concerned with managing social change through democratic interactions. At the core of the specific reforms required in the developed countries is the radical transformation of patterns of production and consumption, to reduce dramatically the burden human activity imposes on the ecosphere.

As a *research theme in the social sciences*, governance for sustainable development is about understanding the initiatives which governments and other social actors are *already* undertaking to deal with the interconnections among environmental, economic and social problems. It involves comparing experience, analysing trends, and gaining causal insight into the character of ongoing interactions. But there is also a need for sober reflection on the normative and practical tensions manifest in the juxtaposition of 'sustainable development' and 'societal governance', for an exploration of alternative interpretations and understandings, and for research into innovative approaches and

processes. Above all, there is the applied challenge of bringing knowledge and perceptions from different social scientific perspectives, traditions and disciplines to bear in order to help resolve the concrete problems experienced in the development of governance for sustainable development as an emergent social practice. Social science disciplines such as economics, geography, sociology, political science, and anthropology have already begun to engage with sustainable development, but much remains to be done to develop approaches that cross disciplinary frontiers, and that integrate perspectives drawn from other areas of knowledge, including the arts and humanities, and the natural sciences.

It is in this general context that investigators in the GoSD network have come together to pursue an ambitious programme of research on governance for sustainable development. Through this special thematic issue of the *International Journal of Sustainable Development,* we hope to share our perspectives with the wider scholarly community.

2   The orientation of the enquiry

European governments have made a number of important commitments to the general principles of both 'good governance' and 'sustainable development'. The European Commission has emphasised that 'good governance' includes 'openness', 'participation', 'accountability', 'effectiveness', and 'coherence' (EC, 2001). Sustainable development featured prominently in the 'Fifth Environment Action Programme'(EC, 1992), and has been included in the Union Treaties. Many EU initiatives relate to the general goal of sustainability, including the objective of integrating economic, employment and social policy to transform the European Union into a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy (adopted at the Lisbon summit in 2000), and the plan to link environmental objectives into all areas of European policy (the 'Cardiff Process'). But, to date, governments in the European Union – like governments across the developed world – have only begun the process of engaging with the challenge of governance for sustainable development.

In a general sense, one could say that sustainable development is concerned with 'quality of life' – provided it is clear that this refers not just to our immediate concerns, but also to the needs of people far removed from us in space and time; and that it applies not just to material consumption and 'lifestyle' issues, but to human flourishing in the broadest sense, including moral development and the character of our relationships with the non-human natural world. At its heart lies a notion of continuing human development within the context of a living planet. It points towards a co-evolution of the 'anthrosphere' and 'biosphere', where the human quest for a better life does not take place at the expense of the ecological context within which human society is embedded.

Practical experience of attempts to link environment and development decision-making over the past decade, an understanding of the complexity of social/ecological interactions and of the scale of the necessary transformations, as well as an appreciation of analogous processes of economic and social change, point to some of the key requirements of governance for sustainable development. These include:

- *developing appropriate political frameworks* for iterative rounds of 'future-visioning', goal identification, policy design and implementation, performance monitoring and policy adjustment

- *adopting a long term focus*, engaging with changes that will take several generations to see through – for example, the transition to the carbon-neutral energy system that ultimately will be required to address climate change

- *developing a better understanding of ecological processes and of social/ecological interactions*, as well as of the possibilities of (but also the limits to) their conscious adjustment

- *integrating different kinds of knowledge* into decision processes, particularly understandings drawn from natural and social sciences, as well as establishing an appropriate balance between lay and expert knowledge

- *structuring engagement as a learning process*, so that governments and other social actors can acquire experience, experiment with options, draw lessons from failure, and learn how more sustainable social practices can be generalised

- *strengthening the resilience of social institutions* – their capacity to adapt successfully in response to pressures and unexpected shocks (for example, by encouraging diversity and experimentation in the socio-technological sphere, or by extending deliberative and collaborative interactions among societal organisations).

Governance for sustainable development will also require:

- *integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions of decision-making* across society

- *evolving complex systems of multilevel governance* (with cross connections among institutions at local, regional, national, international and global scales), *where decision-makers remain responsible to citizens, communities and stakeholders*

- *transforming unsustainable practices embedded in core economic sectors*, such as energy, transportation, resource extraction, construction, manufacturing, and agriculture

- *maintaining political support for long term adjustment* despite the fluctuating short-term preoccupations of politicians and electorates

- *incorporating sustainable development into educational and cultural practice, individual codes of conduct and popular morality*.

It is also important to appreciate that 'governance for sustainable development' will imply:

- *difficult choices*, because not all social goods are commensurate and win/win scenarios are not always practical

- *significant struggles* within and between societies over the orientation of development, the distribution of costs and benefits among social groups, the identification of the public interest, and the definition of the appropriate role of government in orienting (and adjusting to) change

- *serious failures*, set-backs and disappointments – because these processes involve great uncertainty and indeterminacy, knowledge and the ability to use knowledge remain restricted, and there are powerful constituencies that remain attached to existing ways of doing things and that will resist change.

Yet such difficulties are characteristic of all major societal endeavours. Setbacks and unexpected outcomes can provide a context for critical reflection, lesson drawing, and the reinvigoration of efforts to achieve valued ends.

The elements cited above provide important points of focus for the collaborative research of the GoSD team. Central themes of our investigation include:

- the appropriate role of public authorities in 'steering' societal change; the rights and responsibilities of other collective actors (businesses, civil society organisations, and so on) and of individual citizens in defining sustainability goals and in making and implementing policy; and the adaptation of democratic decision-making-procedures to the imperative of sustainable development

- the interactions between 'science' and 'society', particularly the epistemological, ethical and practical challenges arising from interactions among experts, political actors, and the public in defining sustainable development policy

- the integration of sustainable development into European Union practice at all levels so as to develop a working system of multi-level governance for sustainable development – one that respects the principles of 'proportionality' (actions are appropriate to the scale of a problem) and 'subsidiarity' (actions are taken at the appropriate level closest to the citizens)

- the formulation of clear objectives at various governance levels, their operationalisation in terms of targets and interim goals, measurement through indicators, and the monitoring of performance

- the elaboration of sectoral approaches for the systematic integration of environmental considerations into key economic arenas, and the development of transition strategies that will allow significant progress towards sustainability in key domains over a 20–30 year time frame

- the international dimensions of European Union engagement with sustainable development, such as efforts to reform institutions of global governance (including financial, trade and environmental regimes), the linkages between 'internal' and 'external' initiatives on complex issues such as climate change and biodiversity, and meeting Union obligations towards developing countries

- the formulation of practical suggestions relating both to policy and to process, so as to enhance the practice of governance for sustainable development within the European Union.

3   An interpretive device

To facilitate engagement with the complexity implicit in governance for sustainable development the GoSD research team has adopted the 'prism of sustainability' to

represent linkages across its varied dimensions (see Figure 1). Three vertices of the 'prism' are defined by the economic, the social, and the environmental aspects of sustainable development. The forth vertex is an 'institutional dimension', representing formal and informal institutions that structure social behaviour in various realms. This 'institutional' vertex has a slightly different status from the other three. While the established dimensions of sustainable development constitute broad areas of social endeavour, which may be conceptualised as social subsystems or components of the development trajectory (and in relation to which one can identify specific objectives and assess performance), *the institutional vertex refers to structures and practices that frame activity within each of the other dimensions*. Its inclusion as a separate pole within the 'prism' is an analytical move designed to highlight the significance of institutions and institutional reform for shaping outcomes across the economy, society and the environment, and to capture the specific problem of governance for sustainable development. It reflects the fact that 'governance for sustainable development' is a practical activity oriented towards guiding societal development, as well as the perspective of researchers interested in understanding and facilitating such activity.

The 'prism' draws attention not just to conditions within the three sectors of economy, society and environment, to the objectives that societies define in relation to each of these domains, and to the measurement of progress towards (or away from) these goals, but also to the overlaps (complementarities and tensions) that exist among the three arenas. After all, sustainable development requires integration of different dimensional objectives and policy goals; and to this end, cross-dimensional inter-linkages must be taken into account, as it is here that synergies and compromises can be sought. Juxtaposition of the fourth 'institutional' element points to the defining role of institutions and to the potential of institutional reform, not just in relation to the three basic domains, but also in relation to the interfaces among them. Thus, for example, just as the issue of resource efficiency bridges the gap between environment and economy, so the institutional parameters that structure patterns of resource usage in a particular context must be appreciated in both their economic and environmental moments. And in relation to these institutional dimensions it is also possible to frame social objectives and assess progress towards their attainment.

Figure 1   The 'prism of sustainability'
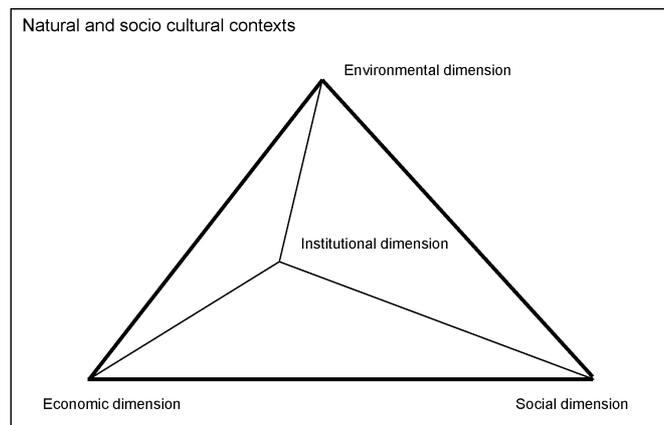
Source: Adapted from Spangenberg (2002)

Of course, the 'prism of sustainability' is not a causal model; nor does it purport to offer a comprehensive map of social interactions related to sustainability. Rather it is a heuristic device to facilitate discussion and analysis. To capture this consideration, the graphic locates the 'prism' within a wider field of 'natural and socio-cultural contexts'. Moreover, different disciplines employ different analytical vocabularies, and so the way the device is understood and applied by researchers from different traditions will vary to some extent. So, articles in this 'Special issue' make reference to different elements and interpretations of the 'prism'. Such differences reveal some of the complexities involved in developing a multi-disciplinary approach to governance for sustainable development. But they can also clarify the insights available from alternative perspectives, thus, paving the way for closer conceptual and theoretical integration in the future.

4   Core methodological considerations

The broad and complex scope of the issues related to governance for sustainable development, and the fragmented state of current knowledge, suggest that no single theoretical perspective or methodological approach would be adequate to structure the research effort envisaged here. Indeed, adoption of a monistic theoretical frame or an exclusionary methodological stance would risk locking the enquiry into a narrow track, obscuring potential insights, and holding back cross-fertilisation among different analytical perspectives. Thus the GoSD team is committed to a radically pluralistic approach, which encourages the development and integration of insights from a large number of disciplines, perspectives, and methods.

As a community, European scientists and scholars have only just begun to undertake inter-disciplinary research of a scale and scope that fully engages the complex problem structures of sustainable development, where it is necessary not only to cover individual branches of scientific enquiry, but also to span the natural and social sciences. In this context, one idea that could be pursued within an integrated GoSD project is a 'governance of science' research module, organised as an inter-disciplinary *deliberative forum*, where representatives from contributing disciplines can explore the challenges of co-ordinating these disparate methodologies and modes of analysis. While individual researchers will primarily work within the traditions with which they are most comfortable, and specific projects will involve well-defined theoretical and methodological perspectives, such a forum could provide a research and learning environment where critical evaluation of interdisciplinary methodologies and theoretical challenges could take place.

5   Conclusion

Human societies now confront major choices about their development paths, choices that will determine which of many possible futures will actually come into being. The idea of governance for sustainable development embodies a commitment to ensure that these choices respond to the urgent development priorities of our time without undermining perspectives for future generations. Governance for sustainable development raises issues which have long preoccupied social theorists – such as the nature of the social good, the role of different institutional arrangements in promoting welfare, the character of social

innovation, the appropriate relationship between experts and ordinary citizens in democratic decision-making, and the linkages among decision-making bodies at various geographic scales. But it also brings to the fore, the comparatively 'new' issues of environmental limits, sustainable resource management, human population and consumption levels, and so on. Above all, it is linked to a series of practical problems which governments will increasingly be compelled to address in the coming decades. It is towards this larger effort that the GoSD team intends to direct its efforts. For we believe that in our activities today, we need to be guided by visions of the future; even as we appreciate that these visions can only ever be rough approximations, always needing to be revised and refined, as the future we are creating continuously becomes the past that has created us.

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But, in the case of the European Union (EU), where does sovereignty lie? What does an "European citizenship" entail? Multi-level governance, a proto-theory of European integration created by Gary Marks in the early 1990s, may serve this scope. This essay analyzes its birth, development and usefulness employing a constructivist approach. The first part gives an overview of the historical context that saw multi- level governance emerge as a criticism of Neo-functionalism and Intergovernmentalism. The third part delves into the theoretical framework of multi-level governance and its development in the past twenty years. The fourth part goes back to the state- centeredness approach to which it opposes pluralist multi-level governance. The European Union has been engaged in sustainability policies for a long time. Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union stipulates, inter alia that: European Commission: Environment. The Union shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment. The strategy provides a cross-cutting political framework for all EU policies and strategies. In particular, it is intended to ensure that economic growth, environmental protection and social integration go hand in hand. A revised version of the strategy was adopted by the European Council in 2006. 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. Keywords. Sustainable Development United Nations Environment Programme Global Governance European Monetary Union Green Econ