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# Sustainable development as governance reform agenda: An aggregation of distinguished challenges for policy-making

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## **Abstract**

Sustainable development (SD) is commonly defined as development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs and aspirations. This paper addresses the concept not with regard to economic, social or environmental policy challenges, but regarding its key implications for public governance. It shows that in terms of governance, SD requires horizontal integration of sectoral policies, closer co-operation between different tiers of government (vertical integration), integrating different stakeholders in decision-making (participation), considering different types of knowledge throughout the policy-making process (reflexivity), and balancing short- and long-term time scales (intergenerational equity). This paper contributes to the SD as well as the governance discourse in basic ways by aggregating these widely accepted normative SD principles to a comprehensive governance reform agenda. By doing so, it also highlights the considerable yet rarely noticed overlap between the discourses on SD and (good) governance.

## **Keywords**

Sustainable development, sustainability, governance, new governance, governance for sustainable development, policy integration, horizontal integration, vertical integration, participation, reflexivity, intergenerational equity, Rio principles



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# 1 Meaning(s) of sustainable development

The basic idea behind the concept of sustainable development (SD) has been around for centuries. It appeared in German forestry in the 17<sup>th</sup> century not only as idea but also as legal constraint to logging: the rule was to cut trees at a rate, which enabled forests to renew themselves over time, i.e. to utilize timber in a “sustainable” way (Birnbacher & Schicha 1996, p. 149; Kirchgässner 1997, p. 3). However, it was not before the mid 1980s that SD became a prominent concept known well beyond the confined circles of experts. In 1987, the UN-report “Our Common Future”, better known as the “Brundtland Report” (named after the president of the World Commission for Environment and Development in charge of filing the report), defined SD as “Development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs and aspirations” (WCED 1987, p. 43). Two decades later, this is still the most widely accepted definition of SD (see, e.g., European Council 2006, 2). Since it is widely accepted that the actual meaning of SD is defined by needs, and since needs (at least beyond the basic level) are societal constructs that differ from culture to culture and from decade to decade, SD is widely acknowledged to be a normative concept defined by the public rather than by scientists (Reid 1995, 58; Smith 1996, 43; Rao 2000; Steurer 2002, 296f).

Throughout the 1990s, the thematic scope of SD has been both broadened and deepened. Regarding its thematic breadth, the concept incorporated other issues than strictly environmental ones. Although SD initially touched on socio-economic issues only as far as they seemed relevant for environmental concerns, economic issues (such as energy safety or healthy finances) and social issues (such as poverty reduction) have recently evolved into equally important dimensions of SD. Today, international organisations like the UN, the OECD (2001b) and the World Bank (2002), the European Commission (2004), national governments (Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005), business initiatives such as the Global Reporting Initiative (2002) as well as researchers from various disciplines (Baker et al 1997b; Dyllick & Hockerts 2002; Steurer et al 2005) agree at least that SD is a tripartite concept that asks for the integration of economic, social and environmental aspects of development.

Regarding its conceptual depth, SD diverged into two (Neumayer 1999) to three antagonistic macro-economic paradigms, disagreeing mainly on the question whether and how the world economy should and will be able to grow in the future.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, the concept of SD is a good example of what Rittel and Webber (1973) called a wicked problem or issue. Wicked issues are controversial social constructs, as opposed to unambiguous matters of fact. Their character changes constantly with every attempt to solve them, and most often, they are not open to quick or standardized fixes. As Williams (2002, 104) puts it, “real progress is dependent on systematic change”. Thus, it became increasingly apparent that SD is not only concerned with first-order policy issues of ‘what to do’ but also with second-order governance issues of ‘how to do it’ (OECD 2001b; OECD 2002a; World Bank 2002; European Council 2006).

The ‘how’ is at the focal point of this paper. By recapitulating basic normative governance principles of SD in very general terms and by linking them with parts of the current governance discourse, the paper highlights the considerable yet rarely noticed overlap between the two threads. The next section briefly

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<sup>1</sup> The three paradigms are often referred to as weak, strong and balanced SD. While those in favour of weak sustainability argue that the world economy can grow forever because human and manmade assets can fully compensate for a decline of natural capital, those in favour of strong sustainability see strict natural limits to economic growth. Balanced sustainability is a mediating concept between the two extremes that distinguishes between non-substitutable natural capital that is critical for human survival and non-critical resources that are substitutable. Here, physical limits to economic growth become relevant only if societies fail to preserve critical natural capital (such as a stable world climate). For an overview, see Steurer (2001) and Steurer (2002, 260-271). For a similar tripartite typology, see Hopwood et al (2005).

explores the concept of governance, its relationship to SD, and some research approaches joining the two concepts. By drawing on widely accepted international policy documents and by blending them with scholarly literature, the paper then explores the normative significance of SD for public governance. The core section shows that SD, taken as a governance reform agenda, is an integrative concept in various respects, calling not only for the integration of economic, social and environmental policies (horizontal integration), but also for a closer co-operation between different tiers of government (vertical integration), the integration of different stakeholders in decision-making (participation), the recognition of different types of knowledge in decision-making (reflexivity), and the integration of long-term time frames into policy-making processes often dominated by a short-term focus (intergenerational equity). The paper concludes by putting the SD governance reform agenda into perspective with another influential normative concept on the governance side, namely 'good governance'.

## 2 Governance and "governance for sustainable development"

The governance concept is similarly elusive as SD. Since both concepts are conceptual containers for different ideologies, assumptions, and principles, they are hard to pin down. However, in both cases the inherent ambiguity is a challenge as much as it is a success factor (for SD, see Baker et al 1997a; for governance, see Pierre 2000, 3). Yet, what does the governance concept stand for, in particular in the context of SD?

For the purpose of this paper, it will be sufficient to distinguish between a broad and a narrow notion of governance. The broad notion of governance addresses the ways in which policy decisions are developed and implemented, taking into account all kinds of governance modes and administrative narratives, no matter whether they are state- or society-centred, or whether they rely on hierarchies, markets or networks as the three key modes of governance (Thompson et al 1991; Gamble 2000; European Commission 2001; Considine & Lewis 2003; Kooiman 2003; Donahue 2004). In contrast, the narrow notion of governance, the so-called "Anglo-Governance School", which played an important role in making governance a popular topic in the first place (Marinetti 2003), restricts governance mainly to networks. In other words, while the broad notion of governance "denotes the steering capacities of a political system, the ways in which governing is carried out, without making any assumption as to which institutions or agents do the steering" (Gamble 2000, 110), the narrow notion equates governance often with the transfer of power from the (hierarchical) state to autonomous, non-hierarchical and self-organising policy networks, both upwards to the international and downwards to the sub-national level (Börzel 1998; Rhodes 2000).

Since the full scope of political decision-making in hierarchies, market-like or network-like arrangements is relevant in the context of SD, this paper applies the broad notion of governance and refers to the narrow one as "new governance" (Kooiman 1993; Pierre 2000; Salamon 2002b). Although the broad notion of governance also separates governing as a policy-making process from government as one of many political agents (Gamble 2000, 110), it acknowledges governments still as key political actors (Davies 2002; Ling 2002; Marinetti 2003; Kooiman 2003).

Of course, linking the discourses on SD and governance does not start with this paper. The remainder of this section summarises how the two threads have been intertwined so far and what value this paper adds in this respect. Like for the modern SD discourse in general, a milestone was the Brundtland Report, saying that "Those responsible for managing natural resources and protecting the environment are institutionally separated from those responsible for managing the economy. The real world of interlocked economic and ecological systems will not change; the policies and institutions concerned must" (WCED 1987, 9). Among the first to explore the governance aspects of SD more in depth was the UN (UNDP 1996; 1997a, b), followed by the OECD (2001b; 2002a). Since new, often network-like (although not state-independent) forms of governance play an increasingly important role in the context of relatively new policy fields such as environmental politics, genetics, biotechnology, or SD (Meadowcroft 1997, 443; Hajer 2003, 177), and

because “Governance for Sustainable Development” was one of the key issues discussed at the Johannesburg World Summit in late 2002 (see, for example, WHAT et al 2001), it became a popular discourse and research strand in the first half of the 2000s.

Since the SD governance topic joins two elusive concepts, it consists of many different perspectives and approaches. One way of categorizing them is by looking at the spatial scale applied. In this respect, scholars explore governance for SD extensively on a global or international scale (WHAT et al 2001; Gupta 2002; Young 2003; Rosenau 2003; Oberthür & Gehring 2004; Ayre & Callway 2005) and to a similar degree on the national level (OECD 2002a; Lafferty 2004; Jänicke & Jörgens 2004; Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005; Steurer & Martinuzzi 2007). In recent years, the sub-national levels of sustainability governance have also gained increasing attention (Berger 2003; Lafferty & Narodoslawsky 2003; Berger & Steurer 2005).

Another way of categorizing governance for SD research approaches is to distinguish the predominant heuristic pattern applied. Independent of the spatial scale applied, scholars often follow one or more of the following three heuristic approaches (for a summarising overview, see Table 1). First, many scholars study empirically the governance practices applied in the context of SD. The OECD country studies on “Governance for Sustainable Development” are a good example for this *descriptive approach* at the national level (OECD 2002a).

**Table 1: Approaches to governance for sustainable development (SD) research**

|                         | <i>Normative</i>  | <i>Descriptive</i>   | <i>Instrumental</i>   |
|-------------------------|---|--|---|
| <i>Type of analysis</i> | Conceptual  | Empirical  | Evaluative (i.e. normative-conceptual and empirical)        |
| <i>Focus</i>            | SD principles   | Governance practices   | Governance alternatives                                     |
| <i>Lead Question</i>    | What challenges does the concept of SD imply for public governance? | What governance practices are actually related to the concept of SD? | What governance practices may serve the concept of SD best? |

A second heuristic approach is to explore how some governance approaches fit the normative challenges of SD better than others do. Ideally, this *instrumental approach* that evaluates governance alternatives builds on descriptive empirical research (see, for example, Minsch et al 1998; Steurer & Martinuzzi 2007). In addition, many scholars build their instrumental analyses not only on empirical evidence, but also on normative assumptions about what SD principles imply for the conduct of public governance. This *normative approach* is followed here more thoroughly and systematically than in most other papers (see, for example, Jänicke 2006). For descriptive and instrumental works, the challenges SD implies for public governance are often an unquestioned starting-point. This paper contributes to the SD as well as the governance discourses in basic ways by aggregating five widely acknowledged normative SD principles to a comprehensive governance reform agenda with a fresh look.

### 3 Key governance principles of sustainable development

The concept of SD is most often geared towards first-order economic, social or environmental challenges such as “combating poverty”, “promoting human health conditions”, “protection of the atmosphere”, or “combating deforestation” (UNCED 1992a), to name just a few. However, this section shows that it is also concerned with shaping public governance in accordance with general, second-order principles. It shows that SD is a reform agenda not only for sectoral policies, but also for cross-sectoral governance structures and processes (Minsch et al 1998; OECD 2002a; Lafferty 2002).

One of the first widely accepted *policy documents* that frame SD as a governance reform agenda is Agenda 21 (UNCED 1992a). The document, which represents a “global consensus and political



commitment" (UNCED 1992a, paragraph 1.3) for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was negotiated at the United Nations Conference of Environment and Development in Rio in 1992 and subsequently ratified by 178 countries. Even though it does not even use the term governance, the broad notion of the concept is prominent throughout. The major governance challenges raised in Agenda 21 are (UNCED 1992a; see also Jänicke & Jörgens 2004, 307; Jänicke 2006):

- "Integrating environment and development in decision-making" (chapter 8),
- Increasing the coherence of policies between different jurisdictions (chapters 8, 38f),
- "Strengthening the Role of Major Groups" such as local authorities, workers or businesses (Section III),
- Facilitating a long-term strategic perspective (chapter 8 and throughout the document),
- Achieving all this by utilizing different types of information and knowledge for decision-making (chapters 35, 40).

Although Agenda 21's impact on actual sectoral policies seems to be critically limited (Meadowcroft 2000, 120; Steurer & Martinuzzi 2007), two developments suggest that its significance for new SD governance approaches is significant (speaking of "The Rio Model of Environmental Governance", Jänicke and Jörgens [2004, 306f] and Jänicke [2006] come to a similar conclusion):

- First, numerous supra-national policy documents reiterate the so-called "Rio Principles" (see, for example, OECD 2001b; WSSD 2002a; WSSD 2002b, paragraphs 1, 120f;2 United Nations Economic and Social Council 2002, paragraph 9). The most recent reiteration of these and some other principles can be found in the renewed EU SD Strategy that was adopted by the European Council (2006, 4f) in June 2006.
- Second, as Steurer and Martinuzzi (2005, 2007) show, both the numerous guidelines for SD strategies (UNDESA 2001a, b; OECD-DAC 2001, 18f; IIED 2002, 33-36) as well as actual strategy processes put in place across the EU are also rooted in the Agenda 21 principles.

Let us now explore the specific governance challenges raised in Agenda 21 and reiterated in other policy documents by linking them to the recent discourses on governance and SD. As both discourses have made considerable progress since the adoption of Agenda 21 in 1992, this is a fresh look at the present significance of SD as governance reform agenda. Table 2 summarises that all five principles explored below can be regarded as variations of the integration challenge, underscoring that SD is above all an integrative concept.

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<sup>2</sup> Although the commitment to the Rio Principles was renewed at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in autumn 2002, Gardiner (2002) points out that some of them (in particular the Precautionary Principle) were among the most contentious issues of the summit.

**Table 2: Five normative governance principles of sustainable development**

| <i>Governance principle</i>                      | <i>Aspect of integration</i>                               | <i>Elements to integrate</i>   | <i>Governance challenge</i>  |
|--|--|--|--|
| Horizontal integration                           | Policy fields/<br>Dimensions of sustainable development    | Economic, social and environmental policies  | Governments should make their economic, social and environmental policies more coherent  |
| Vertical integration                             | Spatial scales   | Local, national and supra-national levels of policy-making                                       | Different tiers of government should work together towards common objectives   |
| Participation (stakeholder integration)          | Originally: Modes of governance<br>Today: Societal domains | Originally: Decision makers and stakeholders<br>Today: state, businesses and civil society       | Governments should involve stakeholders from businesses and civil society in decision-making   |
| Reflectivity (knowledge integration)             | Knowledge  | Knowledge from different sectors, subjects and heuristic backgrounds and policy-making processes | Governments should base their decisions on cross-sectoral knowledge provided by science and society and they should reflect their policies |
| Inter-generational equity (temporal integration) | Time scales  | Short- and long-term time scales   | Governments should obey a long-term temporal scope in their time-frame of electoral cycles   |

### 3.1 Integrating policies across sectors – or horizontal integration

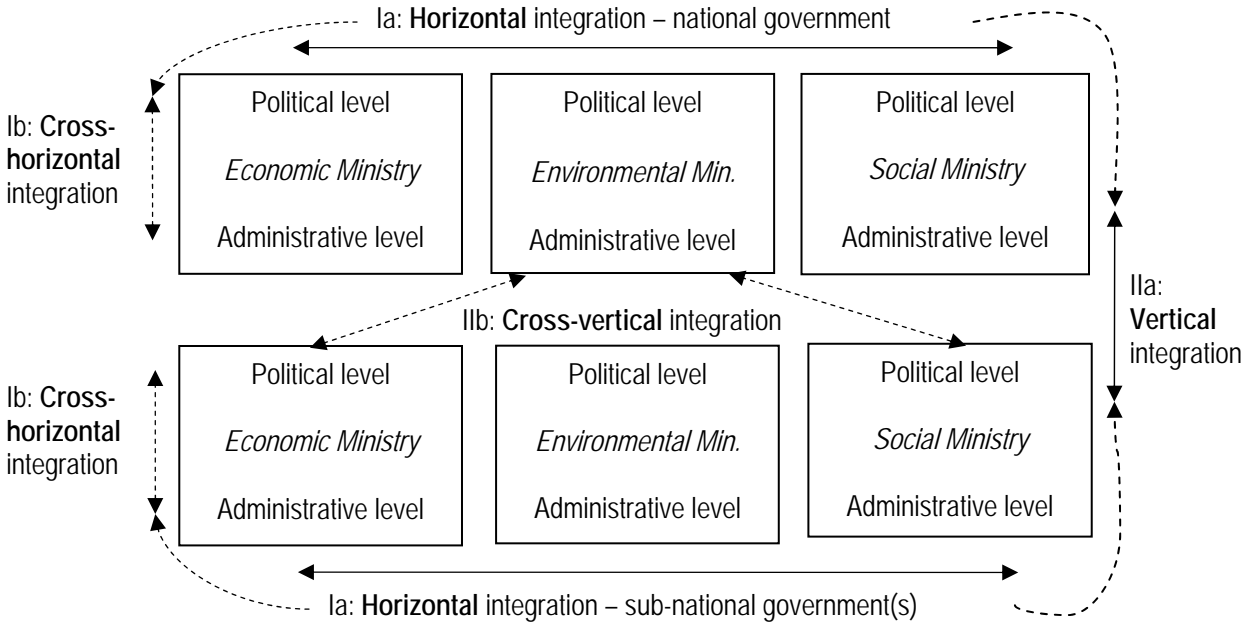
As Peters (1998, 295) notes, “From the time at which governing structures began to be differentiated into departments and ministries there have been complaints that one organization does not know what another is doing, and that their programmes were contradictory, redundant, or both”. However, numerous scholars (including Peters himself) emphasise that the challenges of co-ordination and integration have increased in the last few decades (Peters 1998; Ling 2002) at every level of policy-making, including international organisations such as the UN (see, for example, WHAT et al 2001, 14f). On the one hand, this is often attributed to the fact that New Public Management has further disaggregated the already specialized ministries and departments into service delivery agencies in which “the incentives to achieve each organization’s aims were greater than the incentives to achieve more system-wide objectives” (Ling 2002, 618; see also Scharpf 1993, 125; Peters 1998, 295f). On the other hand, “Issues are becoming increasingly ‘cross-cutting’, and do not fit the ministerial boxes into which governments, and policy analysts, tend to place policies” (Peters 1998, 296).

The guiding model of sustainable development is one of the most prominent “cross-cutting” issue of our time because it is essentially about better integrating economic, social and environmental aspects in order to avoid unintended consequences (or external effects), such as climate change through greenhouse gas emissions. However, the Brundtland Report had already recognized in 1987 that the cross-cutting challenges of SD are handled by institutions that tend to be “independent, fragmented and working to relatively narrow mandates with closed decision-making processes” (WCED 1987, 310). In a similar vein, Agenda 21 points out that “Prevailing systems of decision-making in many countries tend to separate economic, social and environmental factors at the policy, planning and management levels” (UNCED 1992a, paragraph 8.2.). Consequently, it urges, “Governments [...] should strengthen national institutional capability and capacity to integrate social, economic, developmental and environmental issues” (UNCED 1992a, paragraph 8.12.; see also WCED 1987, 310, 313f). In this respect, Scharpf (1993, 143) distinguishes between negative and positive co-ordination. While negative co-ordination means that policies are shaped in a way that they do not affect the objectives of other policy fields negatively, positive co-ordination indicates that different policies are set up in a way that they complement each other in achieving various related policy objectives or one overarching objective.

Today, the quest for this kind of policy integration seems to be more relevant than ever before in a variety of contexts. It emerges as “coherence” in the OECD context (and OECD 1995, 73; 1996) as well as in the European Commission’s (2001, 10) account of good governance (see also European Council 2006, 5); as “joined-up government” by the UK’s Cabinet Office (2000; see also Ling 2002); as environmental policy integration (EPI) among environmental policy scholars (Lenschow 2002; Lafferty 2002; Nilsson & Persson 2003; Meijers & Stead 2004), and as “horizontal government” (Peters 1998) or horizontal (policy) integration in the governance discourse (OECD 2001b, 12, 47; OECD 2002a, 15-19; European Commission 2004; Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005). The quest for horizontal integration has even spread beyond the public domain. In the private sector, considering social and environmental issues in business routines is well known as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and “triple bottom-line” management (Dyllick & Hockerts 2002; Post et al 2002).

As policy-making processes are shaped not only by politicians but also by administrators (Hansen & Ejersbo 2002; Page 2003), the issue emerges of how these two branches of government ought to deal with the challenge of horizontal integration. Is it a matter of one or of both branches? Based on an empirical analysis of first experiences with National Strategies for SD in Europe, Steurer and Martinuzzi (2005) conclude, “integrative mechanisms in just one of the two branches are hardly able to substitute for the lack of collaboration in the other”. Accordingly, the Rio +5 “Programme for the further implementation of Agenda 21” (UNGASS 1997, 6) affirms that “Achieving sustainable development cannot be done without greater integration at all policy-making levels and at operational levels, including the lowest administrative levels possible”. This, however, increases the complexity of horizontal integration even further.

Figure 1: (Cross-)Horizontal and (cross-)vertical integration



### 3.2 Integrating policies between tiers of government – or vertical integration

Like most so-called “wicked issues”, the concept of SD permeates not only functional and professional, but also jurisdictional boundaries (Williams 2002, 104). No matter how centrally a government is organised, certain issues of SD cut also across the boundaries between vertical tiers of policy-making, from supranational institutions like the European Commission, via federal and county governments, to city halls.

In the case of global environmental problems, it is particularly obvious that “the sphere of competence of authorities in charge of environmental protection [...] does not always match with the boundaries of the affected environment” (Liberatore 1997, 116). Meeting the global challenge of climate change, for example, depends on international agreements (such as the Kyoto Protocol) as much as on national energy taxation schemes and local spatial planning. Better co-ordinating the policies at different tiers of government is commonly referred to as vertical (policy) integration (OECD 2001b, 47; OECD 2002a, 15, 19, 20f; European Commission 2004, 15ff; Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005).

The concepts of horizontal and vertical integration are of course closely related. Ideally, the integration of policies between different governments builds on horizontal integration processes within governments. The proximity of the two forms of integration is probably one reason for some conceptual confusion. Lafferty (2002, 17), for example, sees vertical integration as the “Integration within the purview of ministerial sectors”, “‘up and down’ within the arena of ministerial sectoral responsibility” of a particular government (see also Jänicke & Jörgens 2004, 318; Jacob & Volkery 2004). According to this view, vertical environmental policy integration is, for example, “the degree to which a sector has been ‘greened’ – the extent to which it has merged environmental objectives with its characteristic sectoral objectives to form an environmentally prudent decision-making premise for its work” (Lafferty 2002, 16). Since this concept seems to refer to the intra-ministerial implementation of what was agreed upon in inter-ministerial horizontal integration processes, Steurer and Martinuzzi (2005) refer to it as “cross-horizontal integration”, leaving space for the common interpretation of vertical integration as described above. Here again, the SD and the governance discourses show a remarkable concurrence. The increasing quest for vertical integration is not only due to the rise of SD, but also (and perhaps primarily) to the European unification process. European aspects of vertical integration are most often discussed under the label of multi-level governance (Scharpf 1994; Kohler-Koch & Eising 1999; Lankowsky 1999; Marks & Hooghe 2001). According to Hooghe and Marks (2001, 3) multi-level governance involves the “dispersion of authority away from central government – upwards to the supranational level, downwards to subnational jurisdictions, and sideways to public/private networks”. The common ground between vertical integration and multi-level governance is, among other features, “the claim that governance must operate at multiple scales in order to capture variations in the territorial reach of policy externalities” (Hooghe & Marks 2001, 4; see also Liberatore 1997, 116).

### **3.3 Integrating stakeholders in decision-making – or participation**

Whenever governance for SD is under discussion, the quest for the involvement of civil society (and business) in policy-making is imminent. Agenda 21, for example, emphasises that “One of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development is broad public participation in decision-making” (UNCED 1992a, paragraph 23.2.); and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development states that “Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level” (UNCED 1992b, principle 10). Similar commitments to participation are reiterated in all kinds of international and national policy documents on SD, such as the renewed EU SD strategy (European Council 2006, 5), National Strategies for SD and respective guidance documents (UNDESA 2001a, b; OECD-DAC 2001; IIED 2002; European Commission 2004). According to Agenda 21 (UNCED 1992a, paragraph 8.7) these strategy processes, which are supposed to harmonize the various sectoral economic, social and environmental policies, “should be developed through the widest possible participation”.

Some of the relevant policy documents and the scholarly literature reveal at least four rationales behind these normative quests for participation. Participation is expected to (i), help define the ‘wicked issue’ of SD, (ii) facilitate reflexivity (see the next sub-section) through the exchange of relevant knowledge and information, (iii) increase the societal ownership of sustainability policies, and (iv) facilitate horizontal integration through the reconciliation of different stakeholder interests. Since these four rationales explain the normative quest for participation very well, it is worthwhile to explore them in more detail. Yet again, this

exploration shows how closely related the SD agenda and the governance discourse are also in this respect.

(ad i) As mentioned in the introduction, human beings and their present and future needs “are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development” (UNCED 1992b, principle 1; see also WCED 1987). Since needs are highly subjective constructs which change over time, the concept of SD is supposed to be specified not by scientists, but by societies in a discursive, participatory way. Put differently, participation is regarded as an important means to the definition of SD (as an aside, this is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to define the concept) (Baker et al 1997a, 25). As Rittel and Webber (1973) emphasise, this form of societal constructivism is a common feature of wicked issues in general (see also Williams 2002).

(ad ii) The different stakeholder positions on what SD may be is one type of information relevant for policy-makers; knowledge about and experience with particular problems and policies is another. Since everyone is a user and provider of information in the context of SD (UNCED 1992a, paragraph 40.1.), participation is widely regarded as an important way of making this dispersed knowledge available to decision-makers. “Broad participation helps to open up debate to new ideas and sources of information [...] and develop a consensus on the need for action that leads to better implementation [of SD]. Central government must be involved [...] but multi-stakeholder processes are also required involving decentralised authorities, the private sector and civil society, as well as marginalized groups” (OECD 2001b, 19). As Pierre (1998, 140f) emphasises more generally, a key purpose of participation is to address “the state’s need for qualified expertise and knowledge not available within government organizations”. This need is particularly significant in the context of complex societal problems, or wicked issues.

(ad iii) Since SD is a comprehensive guiding model that affects entire societies, carrying it out depends also on a widespread societal commitment to the concept’s objectives. Thus, Agenda 21 states that “One of the major challenges facing the world community as it seeks to replace unsustainable development patterns with environmentally sound and sustainable development is the need to activate a sense of common purpose on behalf of all sectors of society.” The next sentence explains how this challenge relates to the principle of participation : “The chances of forging such a sense of purpose will depend on the willingness of all sectors to participate in genuine social partnership and dialogue” (UNCED 1992a, paragraph 27.2.; see also United Nations Economic and Social Council 2002, 42; Baker et al 1997a, 23f). In other words, practitioners as well as scholars expect that participation will enhance the legitimacy and ownership of SD policies among stakeholders.

(ad iv) As horizontal integration does not always result in mutual benefits or win-win situations, it is not only an administrative coordination challenge but also a power struggle between different interests (Berger 2003). Since the very purpose of participation is to involve and reconcile different interests in policy-making, the principle is expected to serve also the quest for horizontal integration in all tiers of government (Cabinet Office 2000, 32; Baker et al 1997a, 25).

In a literature review, Green and Hunton-Clarke (2003) demonstrate that participation begins with the dissemination of information, proceeds to the consultation of stakeholders and culminates in various co-decision-making arrangements, also referred to as “decisional participation” (see also OECD 2002c, 41f). Accordingly, the commitments to participation as well as the rationale behind them described above are generally open to interpretation. However, in the context of SD, participation is generally understood as a quest for decisional participation. In fact, by emphasising a rather high level of involvement, the concept of SD aligns itself closely with new governance approaches such as co-governance, networks and partnerships between the state, businesses and civil society (OECD 2002a, 26f; OECD 2002b, 5; WSSD 2002a, paragraphs 27ff; Carley & Christie 1994, 235-247). In 1997, for example, the UNDP policy document “Governance for Sustainable Human Development” asserted, “Each domain of governance – the state, the private sector and civil society – has a unique role in promoting sustainable human development [...]. Because each domain of governance [...] has strengths and weaknesses, the pursuit of good governance requires greater interaction among the three” (UNDP 1997a, 5, 8). Today, the new governance arrangements, and with them the principle of participation, point not only towards new relations between

the state, businesses and society (Paquet 2001; Salamon 2002a; Kooiman 2003), but also towards a new conceptualization of the state altogether. The state narrative fostered by the new governance narrative is no longer described as lean or minimalist (the dominant narrative in the new public management discourse of the 1980s and 1990s), but as enabling, activating (Jann 2002, 2003) or relational state (Midttun 2005; Midttun et al 2006), all with an emphasis on strengthened state-business-society relations.

Overall, it is certainly hard to pinpoint the degree to which the relations between the state, businesses and society have changed because of the SD concept. Interestingly enough, however, the quest for stakeholder involvement in the public sector is mirrored by a reshaping of business-society relations through concepts like Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and stakeholder relations management in the private sector (Carroll 1993; Carroll 1999; Post et al 2002; Zadek 2004). While the regulatory pressure of the state seems to decrease, public-private partnerships, the societal pressure on businesses and respective stakeholder management practices seem to increase (Midttun 2005). Not surprisingly, both CSR and stakeholder management have very strong conceptual (Steurer et al 2005) and practical (European Commission 2002) ties to the concept of SD, in particular to its principles of horizontal integration, participation and long-term thinking.

### **3.4 Integrating different types of knowledge – or reflexivity**

It is commonly held that knowledge plays an increasingly important role in modern societies. However, in the context of SD, the aspiration for knowledge- or evidence-based societies, economies and policy-making takes on a very specific meaning, often referred to as reflexivity. According to Meadowcroft (2007, 160), the principle of reflexivity refers to “self-critical and reflective practices that contribute to the conscious re-ordering of social life”. More specifically, Agenda 21 and subsequent policy documents ask (often rather implicitly) for the integration of different types of knowledge into decision-making processes in at least three distinctive respects:

First, reflexivity emerges in support of the quest for horizontal integration (UNCED 1992a, paragraph 40.10.). Efforts related to this sort of “cross-sectoral reflexivity” are monitoring schemes employing cross-sectoral sets of SD indicators and the application of integrative evaluation tools such as Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) or Sustainability Impact Assessment (SIA) (European Commission 2004). Second, because policy-relevant knowledge is increasingly dispersed among different societal actors, be they other legislatures, scientists, businesses, NGOs or citizens (Pierre 1998), the quest for reflexivity is also closely related to the principle of participation. As Agenda 21 emphasises, “In sustainable development, everyone is a user and provider of information considered in the broad sense. That includes data, information, appropriately packaged experience and knowledge” (UNCED 1992a, paragraph 40.1). In this sense, reflexivity also means making effective use of dispersed forms of knowledge in decision-making processes through participatory arrangements. Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs), for example, aim at the integration of knowledge stemming from not only different policy domains but also different societal groups (Nagy 2002, 6f). As Sheate et al put it (2003, 5), SEA “can provide a framework within which more strategic participation of the public and stakeholders can take place”. Reflexivity through participation seems to be particularly relevant in areas where scientific evidence is not adequately available (OECD 2002b, 6).

Third, since the concept of SD builds essentially on subjective human needs that change over time, the concept’s normative governance principles aggregated here as well as long-term policy objectives themselves need to be revisited continuously. In this sense, reflexivity means questioning and redefining the normative principles and objectives of SD itself.

Overall, reflexivity is essential for SD because “Only by reconsidering existing practices, critically appraising current institutions and exploring alternative futures is it possible to shift our development trajectory onto more sustainable lines” (Meadowcroft 2007, 160).

### 3.5 Integrating short- and long-term time scales – or intergenerational equity

So far, this paper has shown that wicked issues such as SD transcend not only the sectoral boundaries of a single ministry (requiring horizontal integration) or the jurisdictional boundaries of a single government (asking for vertical integration), but that they reach even well beyond the state domain altogether, which implies the quest for participation. In addition, Williams (2002, 104) points out that wicked issues also cross “generational boundaries” (Williams 2002, 104), i.e. that they encroach on different time scales. Because SD strives to balance the needs of present with those of future generations, this certainly applies here (WCED 1987; UNCED 1992a; UNCED 1992b). The Johannesburg Declaration on SD (WSSD 2002a, paragraph 26, emphasis added), for example, recognizes “that sustainable development requires *a long-term perspective* and broad-based participation in policy formulation, decision-making and implementation at all levels” (see also OECD 2001a; OECD 2002a, 10). The rationale behind this quest is that issues such as pension scheme adaptations, biodiversity and climate change evolve over long periods and, thus, do not automatically match with the timeframe of policy-making processes (Liberatore 1997, 116f). As the OECD (2002a, 30) confirms in its study on “Governance for Sustainable Development”, “decision-making in democratic systems generally follows the electoral cycle (4 to 5 years) and so impairs a long-term decision-making perspective”.

While the challenge of integrating a long-term perspective into a rather short-term policy-making frame surfaces in policy documents often rather implicitly (for example in the form of environmental policy objectives), academics deal with it often explicitly and comprehensively. In the context of environmental policy, the importance of a long-term time scale has been discussed as “precautionary principle” since the 1980s (O’Riordan & Cameron 1994). Along with Liberatore (1997, 108), one can summarize that the precautionary principle “is aimed at guiding decision-making in conditions of uncertainty regarding events and processes that might involve serious and irreversible damage”. Although the precautionary principle is still under discussion (Sadeleer 2002), sustainability scholars shifted their attention – in line with the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987, 43) – from risks and uncertainties to the economic, social and environmental needs of present and future generations more generally (Baker et al 1997a, 3f; Weiss 1997; Neumayer 1999, 16-22).

While the other four SD governance principles (in particular those on horizontal integration and participation) showed a strong resemblance with the general governance discourse, the same can not be said for the temporal aspect. Here, the SD governance reform agenda seems to have a distinctive proposition. Although the narrower narrative of new governance is eager to extend the short-term focus of the market-based New Public Management narrative, it certainly fails to adopt an intergenerational perspective that is so characteristic for SD.

## 4 Integration as a key theme of SD and ‘good governance’

As this paper recapitulates, the wicked issue of SD does not match well with predominant governance and administrative practices. It does not fit into the ministerial boxes within governments, nor does it adhere to the jurisdictional boundaries between governments, nor to the limited (and perhaps even shrinking) scope of the state altogether. Moreover, its time scale goes well beyond that of the electoral cycle, and its complexity exceeds the knowledge base of single actors (Williams 2002, 104). Consequently, SD is essentially a governance reform agenda that is composed of the following five integrative principles (for a summary, see Table 2): (i) The principle of horizontal integration requires integrating economic, social and environmental policies, and (ii) vertical integration means integrating local, national and supra-national levels of policy-making. (iii) By requiring the integration of stakeholders in decision-making processes on an ongoing basis, the principle of participation also facilitates a closer integration of all three societal domains. (iv) Regarding reflexivity, SD asks for an integration of knowledge and experience coming from different

actors into decision-making processes. Finally, (v) intergenerational equity aims for integrating long-term time scales in electoral cycles with a short- to medium-term focus. Overall, SD is obviously a narrative of integration (Meadowcroft 1997, 451; Minsch et al 1998, 16; Liberatore 1997; Wijkman 1999).

By linking SD as governance reform agenda with the more general governance discourse, the paper also shows that the overlap between the two threads is considerable. With one exception (i.e. the principle of intergenerational equity), the governance discourse often circles around similar issues (sometimes by using different terms). Consequently, it seems that both the SD agenda and the governance discourse push institutional reforms in similar directions – i.e. towards better integrated (both horizontally and vertically), knowledge-based and more open policy-making. This impression is confirmed when the concept of ‘good governance’ comes into play – at least in a European context.

Like SD, good governance is a normative concept that prescribes how policies should be made. Another similarity is that both concepts emerged in the context of development assistance. On the one hand, SD was initially promoted by the UN as concept that addressed equity issues (both between North and South, and between present and future generations) and the role of nature in development processes (WCED 1987; Steurer 2002, 241ff). On the other hand, good governance was popularized by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as a concept that addresses institutional barriers to development in developing countries (Adam 2000). In this context, good governance embraces foremost some basic features of functioning democracies, such as voice and representation, political stability and absence of violence, rule of law and control of corruption as preconditions for development (Kaufmann et al 2007). Yet, what about good governance in the European context? For EU Member States, the European Commission’s (2001, 10) White Paper on “European Governance” distinguishes openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence (both in terms of sectoral and spatial fragmentation) as five principles of good governance. As Table 3 shows, these principles match quite well with the ones aggregated in this paper.

**Table 3: Principles of SD and good governance in comparison**

| <i>Aspect</i>            | <i>Principles of SD</i>   | <i>EU principles of good governance</i>     |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Policy fields/sectors    | Horizontal Integration    | Coherence, effectiveness                    |
| Space                    | Vertical Integration      |   |
| Societal sectors         | Participation             | Participation, openness                     |
| Knowledge and experience | Reflexivity               | Effectiveness <sup>3</sup> , accountability |
| Time                     | Inter-generational equity | (Sustainable development)                   |

Regarding the aspect of time, the White Paper stresses that “the Union should identify more clearly its *long-term objectives*. These may, with the overall objective of *sustainable development*, include improving human capital, knowledge and skills; strengthening both social cohesion and competitiveness”, and “meeting the environmental challenge” (European Commission 2001, 28; emphasis altered). In other words, good governance is assumed to be not only “essential for sustainable development” (WSSD 2002b, paragraph 120; see also OECD 2002a, b), but also vice versa.

Overall, however, the focus on SD as a governance reform agenda must not distract us from the fact that, in daily policy routines, the challenges described here entail serious conflicts of interests and power

<sup>3</sup> To be achieved also through “an evaluation of future impact and, where available, of past experiences” (European Commission)



struggles (Lafferty 2002, Berger 2003; Meijers & Stead 2004, 7f, 13). It is, for example, one thing to agree on the desirability of a long-term time scale in participatory policy-making, but an entirely different thing, for example, to actually negotiate a pension reform in the interest of future generations by involving stakeholder groups with strong interests in the present and near future (for an empirical account of how European governments struggle to implement SD strategies, see Steurer & Martinuzzi 2007). Against this background, governance reforms, aiming to overcome the persistent misfit between institutional problem-solving capacities and the complexity of wicked issues such as SD (Young 2003), come into view as wicked issues themselves. Although public administrations are often perceived as “great rock on the tide-line”, withstanding all kinds of policy changes and reform waves (Peters & Savoie 1998, 3), their wicked issue character implies that they are adaptable social constructs rather than given forces of nature (Young 2003, 382). As Albrow (2001) points out, merely the rise of the concept of governance indicates that the nature of the state is in flux, and the principles of SD aggregated here certainly provide an important orientation. However, this requires closing another circle of thought. Of course, the principle of reflexivity also implies to question the principles of the SD reform agenda themselves critically, but this is a different story to be dealt with elsewhere.

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