Integrated multi-sectoral strategies as dead ends of policy coordination:

Lessons to be learned from sustainable development

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Abstract

Until the mid-2000s, the rise of a "new pattern of strategy formation" in the context of sustainable development (SD) appeared to be a promising shift from mostly ineffective one-off-planning to iterative governance processes. The present paper revisits this once promising governance approach critically. Based on studies, evaluations and peer reviews, it synthesizes how national SD strategies have failed as policy documents and as governance processes in better integrating policies across sectors and levels of government. Based on the conclusion that comprehensive policy integration cannot be achieved through a single multi-sectoral strategy, we argue that it is time to either abandon an approach that has obviously failed to deliver or to recalibrate SD strategies towards the more realistic end of effectively communicating a long-term vision. Although the political relevance of SD strategies has declined in recent years, our findings are relevant to implementing other multi-sectoral strategies and the post-2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. While the former replicate already the governance failures analyzed here, the implementation of the latter runs a considerable risk of doing so in the near future.

Keywords

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1 THE EMERGENCE OF INTEGRATED STRATEGIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL POLICYMAKING

Since the early 1990s, environmental policies across Europe have undergone profound changes. While the 1970s and 1980s were characterized by relatively narrow (often sectoral) protection measures that usually prescribed technical solutions (such as catalytic converters), environmental policies since the 1990s have been characterized by more comprehensive, often cross-sectoral approaches that aimed to better integrate environmental concerns into other sectors (such as agriculture, energy, transport or housing). This change was mainly driven by the fact that both environmental problems and their socio-economic causes kept pace with the complexities of globalization: While the environmental problems of the 1970s and 1980s (such as water pollution, air pollution and soil contamination around landfills) were mainly local, regional or national in scope, more recent problems (such as climate change and loss of biodiversity) are global concerns that require multi-sectoral responses at all levels of government – and even beyond government, among businesses and societal actors (Steurer 2013).

How exactly did this change materialize in environmental policy-making? With respect to conceptual framing, emphasis has shifted from sectoral (or media-specific) environmental protection to cross-sectoral concepts such as environmental policy integration (Lenschow 2002; European Environment Agency 2005a, b; Jordan & Lenschow 2010), ecological modernization (Mol et al. 2009), sustainable development (WCED 1987; UNCED 1992; OECD 2001; Sneddon 2009) and, most recently, greening the economy (United Nations 2012; Ferguson 2014). Regarding policy instruments, prevalence has shifted from command-and-control tools such as laws, regulations and standards to economic incentive tools (such as taxes or emission trading) and soft (i.e., non-binding and non-sanctioned) types of regulations (such as informational policies, partnerships and voluntary/negotiated agreements; Jordan et al. 2005; Murray 2013). Most recently, mandatory information disclosure regulation (such as the EU energy labels for household appliances and buildings), which combines binding regulation with governance via markets (Doshi et al. 2012), became an increasingly popular instrument. Regarding the underlying governance rationales, hierarchical steering was complemented by steering via markets and networks (Murray 2013; Steurer 2013).

These developments have been accompanied by changes in how environmental policies are planned and coordinated. Whereas up to the 1990s, governments across Europe produced relatively narrow and often technical environmental protection plans, during the 2000s, they developed a series of integrated strategy processes with a multi-sectoral scope (Casado-Asensio & Steurer 2014; Howlett & Rayner 2006a). Among these are strategies for sustainable development (Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005; Steurer 2008; Gjoski et al. 2010), land management (Rayner and Howlett 2009), natural resources (Howlett and Rayner 2006a), climate change mitigation (Kerr 2007; Casado-Asensio & Steurer 2015) and adaptation (Biesbroek et al. 2010; Bauer et al. 2012; Casado-Asensio & Steurer 2014; Bauer & Steurer 2015). While older environmental plans often resembled one-off-documents that caught dust on shelves, most of the newer multi-sectoral strategies – in particular, those concerning sustainable development – resembled what one of the authors of the present paper once regarded as a promising "new pattern of strategy formation in the public sector" (Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005).

The present paper revisits this once promising governance approach and synthesizes recent evidence on its performance. The desk research for the article is based on a content analysis of SD strategy documents from the EU-27 countries and related materials, such as work plans, progress reports or audits issued by national, international or supranational public agencies, and a rich repertoire of scholarly works (including policy analyses and evaluations). Throughout the text, we will point to SD strategies of some countries as illustrative examples of either best practices or typical failures and shortcomings.

The paper first introduces policy integration and strategy formation in the public sector (section 2). It then provides a comprehensive assessment of national SD strategies from across Europe as policy documents (section 3) and as governance and capacity building processes (section 4). Section 5 discusses to what degree and why SD strategies have been ineffective in coordinating sectoral policies. The concluding section 6 provides a brief outlook on the future of strategy formation in the public sector. Because SD strategies, which represent one of the oldest, normatively well-grounded and most comprehensive types of integrated strategies (Casado-Asensio & Steurer 2014), appeared promising in the early 2000s (Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005), the developments of the last few years summarized here represent valuable lessons to be learned for environmental governance in general and for other multi-sectoral strategies in particular, including those intended to implement the post-2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

2 POLICY INTEGRATION AND STRATEGY FORMATION

The quest for policy integration and coordination is probably as old as public administrations organized along sectoral boundaries (Peters 1998, 2013). In recent decades, it gained new prominence through two contrary developments. As indicated above, the late 20th century was characterized by the emergence of cross-sectoral problems, such as climate change, and holistic normative responses, such as ecological modernization (Mol et al. 2009) and sustainable development (Sneddon 2009). This development contrasted with a further fragmentation (also referred to as "agencification") of the public sector through New Public Management (NPM) reforms (Christensen & Laegreid 2007). Consequently, policy scholars have addressed the coordination challenge with a variety of concepts, including horizontal government, horizontal integration (Peters 1998, 2013), boundary-spanning policy regimes (Jochim & May 2010), strategic public management (Steurer 2007), and meta-governance (Meuleman 2008). Respective practices include the EU's emphasis on "coherence" as a cornerstone of its good governance and sustainability agendas (European Commission 2001a: 10; European Council 2006: 5) and the UK's "joined-up government" and "whole-of-government" reform movements (Cabinet Office 2000; Ling 2002; Christensen & Laegreid 2007). In the environmental policy field, these concepts and practices were reframed as environmental policy integration (Jordan & Lenschow 2010), climate policy integration (Adelle & Russel 2013), climate mainstreaming (Brouwer et al. 2013), and governance of sustainable development (Jordan 2008; Steurer 2009).

These concepts resemble the "old doctrine of coordination in the study of public administration", all aiming "to get a better grip on the 'wicked' issues straddling the boundaries of public sector organizations" (Christensen & Laegreid 2007, 1060 on the "whole-of-government" approach). Thus, they aim to better integrate sectoral policies, so that they mutually reinforce rather than contradict each other and thus maximize synergies and minimize trade-offs between them. Of course, this kind of integration goes beyond optimizing public management routines and interfaces. It usually involves profound political struggles between different (sectoral) actors, their values, aims and interests (Meadowcroft 2009; Jochim & May 2010). When we add the vertical dimension of policy coordination, it even entails power struggles between different levels of government that are usually very sensitive about who can instruct whom (Steurer & Clar 2015).

The conceptual literature suggests at least three factors that explain why some policies are better coordinated and more coherent than others (May et al. 2005; Jordan & Hardin 2006; Peters 2013). First, policy areas where key actors share basic ideas and images ("policy glue") are more coherent than others. Second, policies tend to be more coherent if the political rhetoric in a policy area is matched by a unified interest group population, creating a "policy with publics". In the case of a "policy without publics", lack of coherence arises from weak policy networks and communities. Third, the organizational structures and governance mechanisms through which policy coordination takes place are also major factors. While hierarchy has been the default recourse for addressing coordination problems in the public sector for decades, less intrusive modes, such as negotiation and networking, are now regarded as viable but

demanding alternatives. Each of the three factors suggests that the coordination or integration[1] of policies across multiple sectors is never easy, especially when the guiding model is as vague as sustainable development.

Multi-sectoral or integrated policy strategies, which emerged from the late 1990s onwards, were supposed to be the key tools in better integrating policies concerned with problems caused by several sectors. Analogous to the quest for policy integration in general, the key concern of these strategies is to "address the perceived shortcomings of previous, more ad hoc, policy regimes", on the one hand, and the one-off planning attempts of the 1970s and 80s, on the other. Thus, their main purpose is to coordinate multiple goals and orchestrate the systematic use of policy instruments, so that various sectoral policies "support rather than undermine one another in the pursuit of those goals" (Rayner and Howlett 2009: 100). While sectoral strategies (such as employment or forest strategies) should also consider other sectoral goals and policies that are beyond their immediate concern, integrated strategies (in particular, those related to sustainable development) have, by definition, a multi-sectoral scope.

As envisioned in the governance literature (see references below) and in various guidelines (OECD 2000; OECD-DAC 2001: 18ff; OECD 2001a: 120; OECD 2006: 10; UNCED 1992: Chapter 8; UNDESA 2001), integrated strategies for sustainable development represent not only policy documents (as the environmental plans of the 1970s and 1980s did) but also cyclical governance and capacity building processes. As policy documents, integrated strategies aim to (re-)construct a multi-sectoral policy domain by means of (long-term) key principles, values and policy objectives (Rayner and Howlett 2009). The objectives should be complemented by details on measures and policy instruments, either in the strategies themselves or in periodic action plans, sectoral and/or regional follow-up strategies. This brings us to the second function of integrated strategies. As cyclical governance processes, integrated strategies aim to better integrate policies horizontally across sectors and vertically across levels of governance. Thus, those responsible for the strategies are called upon to involve policymakers from other sectors and/or governments on a continuous (institutionalized or ad hoc) basis (Lim and Spanger-Siegfried 2004: 189; Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005; Howlett and Rayner 2006b: 251-2; Jacob et al. 2012: 12; Casado-Asensio & Steurer 2014). Key elements of cyclical governance processes include regular monitoring, evaluation and reporting activities, which brings us to the third function of integrated strategies. In addition to their policy and governance functions, integrated strategies also represent capacity building efforts. Also based on insights gained through cyclical monitoring, evaluation and reporting, this function mainly aims to build a policy-relevant knowledge base, establish policy networks, and raise awareness for certain issues (also by involving non-state stakeholders) (Jacob et al. 2012, 12-15; Mulgan 2009: 75). In addition to communicating SD internally within public administrations, SD strategies could also aim to popularize the concept externally throughout society (Quitzow 2011, 132-141).

By adhering to these three functions (and lengthy lists of guiding principles providing further details on how to implement them—for an overview, see Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005, 457f), SD strategies were supposed to enable sectorally fragmented and shortsighted governments to adequately address the cross-sectoral and long-term governance challenges inherent in the sustainable development concept. This expectation was first expressed in Agenda 21, adopted in Rio (UNCED 1992, chapter 8). This document asserts that SD strategies should "ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations" (UNCED, 1992, paragraph 8.7). In June 2001, the Gothenburg European Council reiterated this and other calls issued by the UN by inviting its "Member States to draw up their own national sustainable development strategies" (European Council, 2001, 4). Consequently, many EU Member States developed their strategies for the Johannesburg World Summit rather quickly, in late 2002 (European Commission, 2004; Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2005). Around 2006, SD strategies gained additional momentum across Europe, as the renewed EU SD strategy was adopted by the European Council (2006) after a lengthy negotiation process. However, that momentum

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[1] We use the two terms synonymously, with the slight difference that "coordination" refers more to the process and "integration" more to the outcome of governance.

faded quickly, inter alia, as first climate change (2007-08) and then the economic and financial crisis in the US and Europe (2008-2012) eclipsed SD as a guiding model for several years (Steurer & Berger 2011).

As the remainder of the present paper shows, SD strategies have not recovered from this decline in recent years. The strategies still exist,[2] but they turned into dead-ends of policy integration that are difficult to reverse. While it was no surprise that SD strategies fell short in meeting the (overly) demanding governance ideals shaped by scholars and the guidelines issued by international organizations, it is surprising how badly they failed in providing a sense of direction regarding both the substance (see section 3) and the process of governing sustainable development (see section 4).

3 SD STRATEGIES AS POLICY DOCUMENTS: CONCEPTS, PILLARS AND GOALS

This section addresses SD strategies as documents that aim to provide a vision, outline relevant themes and formulate policy objectives. As such, SD strategies (should) provide the substance of policy initiatives regarding sustainable development in various sectors. Which notions of sustainable development have been employed in these strategies, what topics have been discussed, and what objectives and goals have been set across Europe? Answers to these questions show how European governments have operationalized one of the most comprehensive guiding models of our time.

The many faces of sustainable development

The main content-related reference points for all SD strategies are the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) and the documents of the UNCED Conference, in particular, Agenda 21 (UNCED 1992). These policy documents emphasize the necessity of meeting human needs equitably within and between generations, given limits imposed by environmental considerations. This emphasis led to the widely shared view that SD is mainly concerned with balancing environmental, economic and social concerns – with economic and social concerns deduced from human needs. Many scholars argued that this "Brundtland approach" was too anthropocentric (Buchdahl and Raper 1998, Eckersley 1992) in the sense that it was concerned with sustaining economic growth and development than ecosystem services (Meadowcroft 1997: 170; Sachs 1993). In this sense, the Brundtland report arguably did weaken the environment-centered framing of SD in one of the first reports on the concept (IUCN 1980) by adding economic and social concerns and the requirement of balancing them with environmental concerns. Because even an activity with negative environmental effects can be sustainable, according to the Brundtland report, the notion of sustainable development is always relative. This opened up a wide spectrum of interpretations of what SD actually is (Reid 1995, Redclift 2005), and it helped to popularize the concept across all societal domains, in particular, in politics among all parties. However, the concept's fuzziness required governments to define their notion of SD and how they wished to implement it. In Europe, governments accomplished this with SD strategies. While the Brundtland Report did not outline a concrete strategy that governments could adopt, it nevertheless argued that the quality of growth must change and that the main objective should be "doing more with less" (WCED 1987, Ch. 8). Consequently, the key concepts in most SD strategies are dematerialization and decoupling of economic activities from environmental degradation.

In operationalizing SD, most governments collaborated with non-state stakeholders such as civil society organizations and business associations. The basic idea of most SD strategies is to minimize trade-offs and maximize synergies between economic, environmental and social concerns (see, e.g., Government of Lithuania 2003: 2).

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[2] For an up-to-date overview of SD strategies in Europe, see http://www.sd-network.eu/.

Table 1: The operationalization of sustainable development in the EU-27

Three-pillars approach (17 countries)	Integrated approach (4 countries)	Environmental approach (4 countries)	Sustainable Economic Growth (1 country)	Two-pillars approach (1 country)
Belgium (2004/2008)	Austria (2002/2010)	Ireland (1997)	Slovenia (2005)	Spain (2007)
Cyprus (2007)	Finland (2006)	Italy (2002)		
Czech Republic (2010)	Germany (2002)	Denmark (2002)		
Estonia (2005)	UK (1999)	Netherlands (2003)		
France (2003/2010)				
Greece (2002)				
Hungary (2013)				
Ireland (2012)				
Latvia (2010)				
Lithuania (2003)				
Malta (2007)				
Poland (2009)				
Portugal (2005)				
Romania (2008)				
Slovakia (2001)				
Sweden (2002)				
UK (2005/2011)				

However, if we look beneath the surface at how different countries put this into practice, at least five distinct ways of structuring SD strategies emerge (for an overview, see table 1):

- Most countries explicitly structure their strategies in accordance with the three pillars of SD;

- Four countries address all three pillars in a more integrated way under holistic headings such as "quality of life" or "economic competitiveness";

- Five countries focus their SD strategies on one of the three pillars (four on the environmental and one on the economic pillar);

- Spain was the only country that focused its SD strategy on better integration of social and environmental issues.

Similarly to the three-pillars and the integrated approaches, the four strategies with an environmental focus are also concerned with decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation, e.g., via eco-efficiency or the dematerialization of production and consumption patterns. However, as these strategies tend to neglect social issues, they have been criticized as too narrow (for the Netherlands, see Dalal-Clayton and Krikhaar 2007: 14).

In practice, however, all attempts to balance different aspects of SD proved problematic in at least two respects. First, because most SD strategies include a wide range of topics and do not emphasize priorities, policymakers were able to cherry pick those aspects that served their interests best, ignoring others altogether, or delegating them to other (often weak) actors in uncoordinated ways (also referred to as the "candy store dilemma"; see Finnish MoE 2009: 24; see also European Commission 2004: 20; OECD 2004: 53). Consequently, the common ground laid out in SD strategies was inadequate for far-reaching policy reforms from the beginning, and respective policies disintegrated sectorally - sometimes already in the formulation phase and at the latest in the implementation phase (see section 4). Second, the balancing of the three pillars of SD proved to be political rhetoric that was unable to overcome the predominance of economic (sometimes socio-economic) over environmental interests. This is particularly clear in the relationship between the EU's Lisbon and SD strategies (Steurer & Berger 2011) and in the new EU Member States, where environmental issues are marginalized not only in the implementation phase but also in the policy documents.

Overall, SD strategies as policy documents aim to reconcile the three pillars of SD but fail to actually balance or better integrate them, no matter what approach they follow (SRU 2004: 524; Finnish MoE 2009: 23). They do not address (let alone overcome) trade-offs or conflicts between different (often sectoral) objectives (see Finnish MoE 2009: 23). This integration failure becomes even clearer when we assess SD strategies as governance processes (see section 4).

Management by objectives, or the "political art" of goal setting

National environmental plans and SD strategies share a core idea: they both pursue a rational policy approach that aims to steer policymaking through the formulation of objectives (Jänicke and Jörgens 2000, Wiggering and Sandhövel 2000, Lundqvist 2004). Influenced by the literature on strategic management in the private sector, guidelines recommend that the objectives formulated in SD strategies should be SMART, i.e., specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timed (UNDESA 2001, 12ff; OECD-DAC 2001, 18f; IIED 2002, 33-36; Steurer & Hametner 2013). Because formulating SMART (and to a lesser degree vague) objectives implies addressing trade-offs between pillars (or sectors) of SD, levels of government, different stakeholders and generations, the formulation of an integrated strategy itself is anything but trivial. In contrast to previous environmental plans that have been written by a few (sometimes even non-governmental) experts, most SD strategies have been negotiated in lengthy processes, sometimes by large expert groups consisting of public administrators from different ministries and non-state stakeholders. However, to what degree are the objectives of SD strategies actually SMART?

SD strategies differ widely in this regard. While some documents (e.g., of Estonia) communicate a bold vision with a few objectives over some dozen pages, others (e.g., of Lithuania) state hundreds of

"intentions", sometimes over more than 200 pages (Steurer & Hametner 2013; see also European Commission 2004, 11-14). While most of the objectives formulated in SD strategies are vague ("To promote a healthy society with a good quality of life" is a typical example; see Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Environment 2007: 29), the few SMART objectives (such as "10 per cent of the agricultural area is to be converted to ecological farming by 2010", FFG 2002: 113) usually do not arise from SD strategies but from legal obligations stemming from EU regulations or international agreements. Consequently, only very few strategies (in particular, those of Sweden and the UK; see Swanson et al. 2004: 39) represent a goal-oriented steering approach, whereas most represent a vision-based approach with vague objectives that are usually neither new nor ambitious. The fact that the content-related shortcomings of first-generation SD strategies summarized above can still be found in the most recent strategy documents (e.g., in those of Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Latvia, Norway, Romania, and Switzerland) implies that these are not easy-to-mend beginners' mistakes but almost insurmountable challenges that arise in formulating multi-sectoral strategies: Politicians usually prefer vague targets because they are easier to formulate, provide greater flexibility in implementation, and leave more room for positive interpretation in case somebody wonders about their fate later on (Nordbeck 2001: 10; Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005). We conclude that after approximately 15 years of "SD strategizing", comprehensive multi-sectoral strategies are usually not capable of formulating and implementing new high-priority policy objectives in meaningful ways. If such objectives and respective measures emerge, the connection to SD strategies is usually limited to the fact that they (aim to) coopt them ex-post, which brings us to the next point of critique.

How do SD strategies relate to the objectives and policies pursued in sectors relevant to SD? Regarding actual policies, major decisions are usually taken without reference to SD strategies. For Germany, Tils (2007) mentions the social reform program, Agenda 2010, as an example, and recent energy and climate policies (including the current "Energiewende") of the last decade are also far beyond the scope of the German SD strategy. In Austria, high-profile decisions (e.g., on subsidies for alternative energies and energy tax changes) were not discussed in the context of the SD strategy (Steurer 2008: 106). Similarly, the review of the Finnish SD strategy emphasizes "that key sustainable development themes are managed through other strategies", so that "the contents of the strategy for sustainable development are determined by decision-making processes steered separately from the strategy" (Finnish MoE 2009: 26).

Altogether, the attempt to steer multiple sectors based on objectives agreed upon jointly and enshrined in a single strategy has failed. In general, target setting in SD strategies does not follow a problem-driven rationale but mainly a political logic that coopts policies that would have been formulated anyway. Consequently, major policy changes and transitions are far beyond the scope of predominantly vague SD strategies.

4 SD STRATEGIES AS GOVERNANCE AND CAPACITY BUILDING PROCESSES

Apart from providing orientation via policy objectives, SD strategies were expected to orchestrate the implementation of a broad variety of policy instruments in systematic, participatory and reflexive ways and to build respective capacities. This section reviews governance arrangements that were expected to serve the governance and/or capacity building function of SD strategies. It shows that SD strategies have failed not only as policy documents that provide guidance but, even more so, as governance processes. With regard to capacity building, the performance of SD strategies is slightly more positive, at least with respect to participation and feedback.

Integrating policies across sectors

The importance of balancing the three pillars of SD in general and of integrating environmental concerns into other sectors in particular has been formally recognized by the EU and its Member States (Pallemaerts

2012; Steurer & Berger 2011; see also section 3). However, actually achieving environmental policy integration has proven very difficult (Jordan & Lenschow 2008, 2010), including in the context of SD strategies (Steurer 2008; Steurer & Berger 2011).

The trouble with integration usually begins with the fact that most SD strategies are coordinated by comparatively weak Environment Ministries (Steurer 2008, Gjoksi, Sedlacko and Berger 2010: 7). In some countries and at the EU level, the SD strategy is coordinated by the Prime Minister's Office or State Chancelleries (e.g., Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Slovakia and Poland) or by the European Commission's Secretariat General, respectively. However, the main problem with this polity setup is not that these institutions lack political salience but that SD is usually not high on their agendas (for the EU, see Steurer & Berger 2011). Although other ministries rarely play leading roles, most countries have institutionalized their involvement through some sort of inter-ministerial arrangement (Gjoksi et al. 2010: 22). Most of the inter-ministerial groups involve low- to middle-level civil servants from different ministries (e.g., in Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Romania, Spain and Switzerland), some involve high-level administrators and/or politicians (e.g., the "Green Cabinets" in Germany, Norway and the UK), and a few join middle to high-level government representatives, businesses and civil society stakeholders (e.g., the Sustainable Development Strategy Group in Finland; see Zwirner, Berger and Sedlacko 2008: 15). In addition, some countries have established departmental units or ministries for sustainable development (France, Belgium and Sweden – the latter two revoked this decision and later returned to Environment Ministries).

These polity innovations have used or promoted various instruments to facilitate horizontal policy integration across sectors. Such instruments include informational tools, such as policy guidelines and educational or training activities, and procedural tools, such as strategic or environmental impact assessments and work programs or action plans (European Commission 2004: 15). The latter were supposed to translate the visionary aspects of SD strategies into short- and medium term policy objectives and measures (Gjoksi et al. 2010: 24; Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005).

Summarizing the findings of several assessments (Carius et al. 2005, Finnish MoE 2009, Dalal-Clayton and Krikhaar 2007, Rüegge et al. 2011, Stigson et al. 2009) and case studies (Lafferty et al. 2007; Ross 2005, 2010; Russel 2007; Tils 2007) of the performance of these governance innovations across Europe, all of them fall short as means of better integrating sectoral policies. The national assessment for Finland (MoE 2009: 6) is particularly telling in this regard. It concludes that the Finnish SD strategy "has not succeeded in establishing a role for itself as the steering document for inter-administrative activity". The Swiss evaluation report also concludes that the SD strategy contains too few binding conditions for sectoral policies. The measures in the Action Plan are "too sectoral, arbitrarily selected, and the majority of them would have happened anyway" (Rüegge et al. 2011: 13). Hence, these (and most other) SD strategies provide no additional value.

The reasons behind these failures are manifold, and some of them have already been addressed in section 3. Above all, SD strategies simply lack the political grip necessary for noteworthy policy changes (Steurer 2008: 102). The fact that most multi-sectoral strategies formulate policy objectives in general terms enables all actors to focus on elements that coincide with their sectoral interests and ignore conflictual aspects. With regard to the Austrian SD strategy, an external evaluation concluded that its implementation was mainly a self-referential process during which the involved organizations focused on their own interests and target groups (Carius et al. 2005: 38). When "everything is sustainable development", a strategy no longer provides orientation regarding what it actually stands for and what its key priorities are (Finnish MoE 2009: 23). Overall, SD strategies are clearly not capable of perforating sectoral boundaries and approximating sectoral logics - certainly a difficult task in any case.

Integrating policies across jurisdictions

Because many sustainable development issues cut across levels of government, not only horizontal but also vertical coordination is important for maximizing synergies and avoiding trade-offs between policies, in

particular, in federal states where sub-national entities have considerable powers. Against this background, most SD strategies acknowledge the importance of vertical integration on paper but fail to fully act on this commitment. Although Gjoksi et al. (2010: 12) perceive comparatively strong vertical linkages in some countries (e.g., Austria, Finland, France, Germany and the UK), two problems emerge upon closer inspection: first, these linkages are exceptions to the rule of no vertical coordination at all (Berger and Sedlacko 2009: 7); second, even these exceptions are not capable of coordinating noteworthy policies (Steurer 2008: 101). At best, they can formulate common objectives and initiate small, sometimes collaborative measures such as awareness raising events or pilot projects. The Austrian federal SD strategy from 2009 (BMLFUW 2009a), one of the few multi-level strategies in Europe (Jacob et al. 2013), is a telling case in point. If one does not look below the surface, the mostly symbolic federal SD strategy can be misread as one that facilitates vertical policy integration (Quitzow 2011, 137-139; Jacob et al. 2013, 24-35). Although federal and Laender representatives have pondered the 10-page strategy for almost four years (not because it was so difficult to agree on its mostly vague contents but because the federal and regional governments played a "federal politics game" that had nothing to do with the substance of SD), the strategy as well as its action programs from 2009 and 2011 (BMLFUW 2011) are far from facilitating vertical policy integration meaningfully. While the strategy itself replicates objectives already formulated in the national SD strategy from 2002 (now with the official consent of the Laender governments), the action programs list several small-scale projects (BMLFUW 2009b, 2011), most of which resemble not conventional government regulations but soft regulations concerned with promoting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Although facilitating CSR through public policies is relevant to SD (Steurer 2010), an SD strategy limiting itself to such policies falls short of its key purpose characterized in section 2.

Overall, "only a few OECD governments have attempted to catalyze and fully coordinate the sustainable development efforts at sub-national government levels" (OECD 2006: 23), and none has come very far with these attempts: national and sub-national policies relevant to SD remained as fragmented as they always were - if no additional "strategy-independent" integration efforts took place (see, e.g., Steurer & Clar 2015).

Involving stakeholders

According to Agenda 21, governments should formulate and implement SD strategies with "the widest possible participation", i.e., by involving a wide variety of major societal groups, including businesses, trade unions, civil society organizations, academics, and civil society representatives (UNCED 1992). The rationale behind this request is that participation can inform and facilitate policy integration and build capacities (mainly awareness and ownership) among stakeholders. However, the extent to which stakeholders are actually involved in SD strategy processes, in terms of timing, institutionalization and breadth, varies considerably across countries (Swanson et al. 2004, OECD 2006, Gjoksi et al 2010).

With regard to timing, participation is most common in the formulation phase and often ceases afterwards (Gjoksi et al. 2010: 50; von Raggamby et al. 2010: 165). While a few countries (e.g., Bulgaria, Denmark, Lithuania, Spain, and Romania) relied on ad hoc participation via roundtables and conferences, most countries opted for an institutionalization of stakeholder participation via National Councils for SD. According to Gjoksi et al. (2010: 49), 15 of 29 European countries established such Councils as their main platform of participation (see also Niestroy 2012: 19). However, very few of the Councils were successful in advising governments and raising awareness of SD among the public. While the activities of most Councils has faded in recent years, one of the most successful ones in Europe, the SD Commission in the UK, which had "an official watchdog function, scrutinizing progress on implementing [the UK government's] sustainable development strategy"[3], was abolished by the incoming Cameron government in 2011 (Niestroy 2012: 20).

With regard to breadth of participation, most countries involved well-organized societal groups such as social partners, businesses, civil society organizations and academia, and only a few also attempted to

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[3]   http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/our-role.html, retrieved on 19 April 2013.

engage a broader variety of stakeholders or even the public at large (e.g., Estonia, France, Germany). However, an analysis of 94 participatory processes related to SD strategies in twelve EU countries shows that all formats failed to involve citizens (von Raggamby et al. 2010: 151).

Clearly, the sustainable development concept had little mobilizing potential, at least in the context of national strategies. Only countries with a strong participatory culture were able to involve selected organized interest groups in their SD processes, but even they failed to secure attention by the media and the public (von Raggamby et al. 2010: 167).

Monitoring, reviewing and adapting strategies

The OECD recommended that SD strategies should be monitored and evaluated regularly, "based on clear indicators and built into strategies to steer processes, track progress, distill and capture lessons, and signal when a change of direction is necessary" (OECD-DAC 2001: 27). Indeed, monitoring policy implementation with quantitative indicators became a core function of most SD strategies (Swanson et al. 2004: 21; Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005). Because there is no blueprint for this kind of capacity building, actual monitoring practices vary, again, widely in terms of what is monitored and how (Steurer & Hametner 2013). Regarding what is monitored, Volkery et al. (2006: 2054) distinguish between monitoring progress in implementing the strategy (process monitoring) and monitoring economic, social and environmental trends that are relevant to the strategy (outcome monitoring, here referred to as trend monitoring because observed trends were not shaped by SD strategies and therefore cannot be regarded as outcomes). Interestingly, most monitoring schemes provide data on socio-economic and environmental trends in two fundamentally different ways, without reference to the implementation of the strategy they are supposed to monitor (Swanson et al. 2004: 41). While most countries have developed their indicator sets based on the strategy's policy objectives, 4 of 24 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Norway and Switzerland) developed them based on normative models of SD (for pros and cons of the two approaches, see Steurer & Hametner 2013). Irrespective of the approach taken, the number of indicators ranges widely, from 12 in France or 28 in Germany to more than 100 in several other countries (among them, Italy, Latvia, Switzerland and the UK). In addition, a few countries (e.g., the UK and Austria) publish selected headline indicators alongside comprehensive indicator sets (Steurer & Hametner 2013). Overall, however, linkages between policy objectives and indicators are mostly nontransparent in the countries that derived their indicators from policy objectives. Exceptions to this rule are Germany and the one-dimensional strategies in Italy and Slovenia (Steurer & Hametner 2013). Consequently, SD monitoring usually provides a sense of the sustainable or unsustainable trends in a country but is rather remote from strategy implementation and outcomes, or, as the evaluation of the Swiss strategy pointedly states, "the indicators float in an empty space" (Rüegge et al. 2011, 48; own translation).

Many countries complement regular quantitative monitoring with occasional qualitative assessments. While most European countries oblige their inter-ministerial bodies to conduct regular internal reviews and document them in progress reports (Gjoksi et al 2010: 32), a few also commissioned external evaluations (Austria, Finland and Switzerland) and peer reviews (France, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway) or delegated this task to SD councils (the Czech Republic and, until 2011, the UK). As many quotes throughout the present paper have shown, most of these assessments were very critical.

On the positive side, indicators used to monitor trends relevant to SD provide a uniquely comprehensive overview of current socio-economic and environmental conditions in a country, and qualitative assessments (internal or external) provide important insights into how SD strategies have failed to better integrate sectoral policies. On the negative side, however, monitoring is detached from the strategy as a policy document and as a governance and implementation process, and qualitative assessments lead only to micro-management of changes when SD strategies are renewed (Gjoksi et al 2010: 34). As Wachter (2010) highlights exemplarily for the elaborate Swiss monitoring system and the external evaluation of the Swiss SD strategy, both feedback loops find recognition among a few public administrators and a small non-state expert community but are largely ignored by politicians and the public. Nevertheless, these efforts may have raised awareness of SD in parts of society.

5 ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES OF SD STRATEGIES

The empirical findings presented above undercut the once reasonable hopes that SD strategies represent a promising "new pattern of strategy formation in the public sector" that has the potential to navigate policymaking between day-by-day incrementalism and overly rigid one-off planning (Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005). This section concludes that SD strategies may have succeeded in raising awareness of SD but failed in one of their core functions: shaping the governance of policy integration.

Two general achievements of SD strategies are worth mentioning. First, as the discursive qualities and the awareness raising aspects of SD strategies as policy documents have never been assessed, we can only speculate that they played a role in popularizing long-term holistic thinking within the public sector, at least in superficial ways (Cox & Béland 2013). This may have paved the way for the recent rise of similarly integrative guiding models, such as green growth, green economy (Ferguson 2014; Tienhaara 2013; Bina 2013; United Nations 2012; UNDESA 2012), and resilience (Benson & Craig 2014). Second, the formulation and implementation of SD strategies also entailed governmental institutionalization of the concept: cross-sectoral working groups (mostly at the administrative level) have been established, non-state actors were engaged in new fora, and indicator reports on sustainable development have been published regularly. Meanwhile, cyclical monitoring of economic, social and environmental trends with indicator sets appears to be one of the few lasting achievements of SD strategies. This and the other achievements have one characteristic in common: they all emphasize SD strategies mainly as awareness raising and capacity building efforts.

While several shortcomings have compromised the achievements described above, they have above all discredited SD strategies as governance processes. In 2008, many SD strategies resembled "'administered strategy processes' […], that is, fragmented processes driven by a few administrators, who are not capable of shaping key policy decisions in line with sustainable development objectives" (Steurer 2008, 106). At the same time, some of the strategies that had been administered (including the one at the EU level) have been abandoned - if not formally, then at least de facto (Pisano & Berger 2013; Quitzow 2011, 143).

As we have shown above, many shortcomings lie behind the decline of SD strategies. To make a long story short, we condense them to one substance- and one governance-related explanation. Regarding substance, most SD strategies were unable to translate a general vision into a concise, multi-sectoral policy program. Across Europe, SD strategies remained too vague, and respective work programs were too broad, to be politically relevant to solving concrete problems. Although SD strategies may have played a role in strengthening awareness of sectoral interdependencies (see above), they did not help resolve sectoral turf battles but concealed them, inter alia, by employing win-win rhetoric that made it difficult to tackle trade-offs strategically. As Kambites (2014, 336) shows for the UK, the SD concept "has been used to avoid rather than to facilitate radical action". Regarding governance, a key shortcoming is that SD strategies never became political processes: because they were delegated to a few dedicated public administrators, the SD strategies were kept away from significant policymaking within and across sectors (Steurer 2008). The strategies were thus unable to build on a multi-sectoral policy community sharing sustainable development as a core idea, and more importantly, they did not succeed in establishing one. The political marginalization of the SD strategies was most obvious in the detached relationship between the EU's Lisbon and SD strategies: while the socio-economic agenda of the former dominated policymaking, the environmental dimension of the latter remained symbolic (Steurer & Berger 2011). Meanwhile, the Europe 2020 process succeeded the Lisbon Strategy, and the EU SD strategy has been abandoned (Pisano & Berger 2013).

Overall, we conclude that SD strategies have largely failed as governance processes and partially failed even as communication and capacity building efforts. They have therefore provided weak guidance as policy documents. With few noteworthy measures implemented, SD strategies have become crumbling remnants of a once promising "new pattern of strategy formation in the public sector" (Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005) and of the failed institutionalization of a once omnipresent guiding model. At the same time,

sustainability has lost ground to new, less ambiguous concepts (among them, the green economy and resilience) and "finds itself in a serious crisis of meaning, wondering what it did wrong. What has happened is that it failed to deliver" (Stumpp 2013; see also Bulkeley et al. 2013). Against this background, one may wonder how the post-2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs) and related governance efforts will perform. Clearly, breaking with the bleak past of SD governance as portrayed here will require considerable innovations.

6 HOW TO REVERSE IN A DEAD END?

Because SD strategies were one of the first approaches intended to implement a once promising new pattern of strategy formation, their failure revives the puzzle of how to navigate between day-to-day incrementalism and rigid one-off planning (Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005). This puzzle is highly policy-relevant because governments around the world pursue many other similarly multi-sectoral strategies (e.g., on climate change mitigation and adaptation; see Casado-Asensio & Steurer 2014), and they will soon develop action plans in pursuit of the UN-SDGs. As cyclical strategy processes have become a significant part of contemporary environmental governance (Howlett & Rayner 2006a), the importance of learning from the demise of SD strategies goes well beyond this instrument.

What lessons can be learned from SD strategies, in particular for the implementation of the UN-SDGs and other comprehensive strategies? First, the fact that the "new pattern of strategy formation" (Steurer & Martinuzzi 2005) failed not only in the context of SD but also in other multi-sectoral settings (Casado-Asensio & Steurer 2014) suggests that comprehensive policy integration cannot be achieved with a single multi-sectoral strategy, no matter how well it is designed. Thus, we conclude that it is not the pattern of strategy formation as such that failed but the attempt to apply it to virtually all sectors at once with a single instrument. Accordingly, it seems that iterative strategy formation is more effective in (sectorally) focused exercises with clear priorities (for climate change adaptation, see Bauer & Steurer 2015). This leads to a second lesson. Because policymaking has always and most likely will continue to follow sectoral (and sometimes even narrower) rationales, "the project to rid policy practice of incoherence is too heroic" (Jordan & Halpin 2006). Thus, the (pragmatic) challenge governments face is not to overcome sectoral policymaking (certainly not with a single strategy) but to engage with it constructively. One possible way of achieving this is to replace "one-size-fits-all" integrated strategies with tailor-made governance approaches that thrive on sectoral ownership (for a similar conclusion, see Bauer & Steurer 2015). Because SD strategies usually replaced narrower environmental strategies and plans,[4] they robbed the environmental policy field of its sectoral strategy, while economic and social ministries still have theirs in place. With the demise of SD strategies, it may be time to correct this imbalance by reviving environmental plans - although not as one-off expert documents that target all sectors at once but as cyclical strategy processes that focus on a few key priorities (SRU 2012: 623f).

In view of these lessons, how can governments proceed in implementing other multi-sectoral strategies and the post-2015 UN-SDGs? We see two extreme options and a middle ground: namely, improved institutionalization of the governance of multi-sectoral strategies, abandoning them as a failed attempt of policy coordination, and recalibrating them as communication and capacity building tools in support of sectoral strategizing.

The idea of strengthening strategy processes in political, organizational and legal terms is not new. All international guidelines for SD strategies request strong institutionalization (see, e.g., UNDESA 2002), e.g., via cyclical implementation and monitoring mechanisms. However, as shown above, this did not prevent SD strategies from failing. More recently, Ross (2010: 1119) argues that the currently inadequate UK approach to SD should be amended with a strong legal foundation that turns SD into the central organizing

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[4]   Except for the EU, where Environmental Action Programmes always co-existed side-by-side with the EU SD strategy, although not without inconsistency and rivalry problems (for further details, see Steurer 2012).

principle for all governmental bodies and/or that reiterates the UK SD strategy as the central framework for implementing sustainable development. Based on the findings of the present paper, we doubt that a legal basis for a fuzzy concept such as sustainable development would provide the substance necessary for meaningful policy implementation: so far, neither strong institutionalization of cyclical strategy features nor constitutional provisions for SD (e.g., in the EU, Switzerland or France) have strengthened the implementation of SD strategies.

Second, governments could fade out multi-sectoral strategies and divert their attention to more focused governance approaches (for climate change adaptation, see, e.g., Bauer & Steurer 2015). A glance at table 1 and the explicit abandonment of the EU SD strategy (Pisano & Berger 2013) suggest that several governments have already put this option into practice, at least for sustainable development (see also Quitzow 2011, 143). Although this option is certainly preferable to beating a dead horse, it nevertheless implies losing functions that even weak multi-sectoral strategies can fulfill. This leads us to the middle ground option, described next.

Multi-sectoral strategies could be recalibrated towards their communication and capacity building functions. As such, they would not be concerned with coordinating policies but with communicating long-term visions. Although most contemporary SD strategies are either symbolic or serve, at best, communication purposes (Quitzow 2011), they never realized their full communicative potential, inter alia, because coordination was regarded as their core function. If multi-sectoral strategies were designed as communication tools, they could provide orientation to more focused (sectoral) short- to medium-term strategies with a few priorities (such as the brief German "Energiewende" strategy; BMWI & BMU 2010) but also to businesses and civil society actors (SRU 2012: 608, 636). If done properly, such strategies could also facilitate networking, shape the framing of problems as well as solutions, and lead to policy learning. As Peters (2013) and notes, these are important prerequisites for effective policy coordination in non-hierarchical settings.

Experiences with SD strategies and similar findings for multi-sectoral mitigation and adaptation strategies (Casado-Asensio & Steurer 2014; Casado-Asensio & Steurer 2015) suggest that multi-sectoral governance arrangements can at best communicate a vision and respective priorities. As Mulgan (2009) highlights with examples from around the world, reflexive and cyclical strategy formation and implementation can work, but it requires clearly defined (often sectoral) approaches that focus on a few priorities. When they conflict with the priorities of multi-sectoral visions (which is very likely), political struggle and bargaining is indispensable. As Jordan and Halpin (2006, 22) emphasize, based on Lindblom, better policies usually emerge from conflicts between specialists advocating competing solutions, not from a vague consensus. Whatever role multi-sectoral strategies can play in this regard, as they clearly represent a dead end with respect to policy coordination they must come to terms with the fact that policymaking is and will most likely continue to be dominated by sectoral logics that can neither be dissolved nor joined together by a single strategy process.

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