

Report:

Advancing the social pillar of sustainability: Insights from the natural resources sector

As a part of the “LunchTimeSeries on Law, Technology and Society” (LTS), Dr. William Nikolakis gave a lecture on the social pillar of sustainability from a natural resources perspective on 17 November 2016. This highly interesting, recent and interdisciplinary topic could not have fit any better into an auditorium at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna.

Nikolakis was born in Australia and now lives in Vancouver (Canada) where he works as a Research Fellow at the University of British Columbia (UBC). He specializes in Sustainability Management and (amongst others) advises Aboriginal collectives, governments and corporations on policy and business issues.

In his lecture on social aspects of sustainability, Nikolakis focused on the Canadian situation: an area the size of almost ten million km², of which 90 per cent is owned by the Crown; ten provinces, each of them having the right to decide over the use of natural resources within their borders; 175 billion barrels of crude petroleum reserves; oil sand deposits almost twice the size of Austria, the mined area being larger than the city of Vienna; exports worth 231 billion dollars and 1.77 million jobs that are associated with natural resources (2015). Needless to say, natural resources in Canada are *big*.

But so are the challenges that come along with the cumulative impacts from these activities: There are approximately 1.84 million Indigenous People in Canada (2011) and numerous unresolved land claims. Such non-market aspects like spiritual and cultural values tend to be ignored in the decision making process. This is why the social pillar of sustainability is often perceived to be less attractive than the economic and environmental pillar.

The Indigenous Peoples of Canada – *First Nations, Inuit and Metis people* – had had sovereignty prior to European colonization, in the course of which they were subjects of the Crown. The application of the terra nullius (“nobody’s land”) doctrine was part of the colonial paradigm, which characterizes long phases of the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the Natural Resources Sector represented by the Canadian Government.

Since then, Indigenous People have been granted more rights little by little, with the *Calder Decision* 1973, the *Constitution Act* 1982 and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) 2007 representing the most important milestones. Moreover, further steps in the right direction have been taken under the first year of the Trudeau-Administration.

The goal – a culture of communication that seeks free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and accepts rather than bypasses objection – may be in sight, but has yet to be reached.

Thomas Buocz/Annemarie Hofer, November 2016