



# The geo-politics of sustainable development: bureaucracies and politicians in search of the holy grail

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## Abstract

Debates about implementing ‘sustainable development’, ‘sustainability’ or even ‘sustainable futures and resource use’ are now engaging most intergovernmental and national bureaucracies. The notion itself appears to have replaced or become confused with efforts specifically directed at environmental protection, also a vague and contested notion. The origin, academic approaches and use of the idea is documented and discussed with reference to selected bureaucracies engaged in environmental ‘governance’. I ask why and with what impact these bureaucracies have adopted the term in the post cold-war era. The methodology used is political interest analysis: why have bureaucracies adopted the notion so eagerly since the later 1980s? I argue that the sustainability debate served to strengthen bureaucracy during an era when its powers were under attack. The debate promised to extend the role of bureaucracy from that of agent of policy implementation to that of significant political actor, required to select experts as well as futures. But to what purpose and in whose interest? In seeking ‘sustainability’ have governments found more than a new tool for governing? I wish to stimulate theoretical and empirical investigations that replace the ubiquitous ‘policy-maker’ of much academic research with an ‘actor’ whose spatial nature, political roles and ambitions, as well as legal and resource limitations, are not ignored. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

## 1. Introduction

You don’t have to be an expert to realise that sustainable development is going to become the greatest challenge we face this century (Tony Blair, UK Prime Minister, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

What did Tony Blair mean by ‘sustainable development’? Who is included in ‘we’ – nobody else, his Cabinet, the British public service, the global public? Were he and advisors listening to what academic experts were telling them, or were they “there not to think but to cherry-pick whichever phrases suit their current pur-

poses” (Swift, 2001). According to Kohler-Koch (1993), those “who can give the conceptual discourse direction . . . thereby shape ideological hegemony by producing leading conceptions”. By appropriating discourses, the interpreters and users of their leading concepts are themselves engaging in politics.<sup>3</sup> From the perspective of a policy analyst mainly interested in energy policy and climate change science, I ask where the conception ‘sustainable development’ came from and why it achieved prominence even in current energy-environment policy debates. While this is done primarily for bureaucracies,

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<sup>1</sup> The author has worked on environmental policy-making from an International Relations perspective since the mid-1970s, with emphasis on science and politics in marine pollution control, acid rain and climate change. This is my attempt to understand the ‘sustainability’ dimension of the resulting policies and to present my observations to a geographical audience.

<sup>2</sup> The Rt. Hon Tony Blair, Prime Minister, UK, from an address giving at Chatham House, 2002, note from RIIA, 16 July 2001.

<sup>3</sup> It may be noted that the agenda itself is shaped by the English language. Translation is difficult. E.g. in German seven distinct translations competed for ‘sustainable’ and none is quite right: *zukunftsfähig* – future-capable, *durchhaltbar* – resilient/having stamina, *dauerhaft* – lasting/permanent; *tragbar* – bearable/continuing carrying capacity; *langfristig tragfähig* – permanently capable of bearing harvests; *naturhahe Nutzung* – utilisation/use close to nature, and *nachhaltig* now the official term – made up from keeping and after: keeping on going afterwards. *Nachhaltig* was first used in the early Middle Ages in German forestry to ensure replanting. The current sustainability debate in Germany dates back to the mid-1990s and reflect international influence: Agenda 21 (Beuremann and Burdick, 1997).

business could also have been chosen.<sup>4</sup> Somebody needs to translate ‘sustainability’ into actions that are justified by legitimate instruments.

After very briefly outlining the origins of and research interests in the concept, the paper identifies some of the major human ‘agents’ (UK government, EU, World Bank and UN Agencies) who have exercised their power of appropriating this intellectual concept for policy relevance. I make no claim to comprehensiveness, my own field of research since the 1970s having been environmental politics.<sup>5</sup> It is argued that prevailing notions of sustainability are primarily arenas for policy contests and hence politics. The very vagueness of the term has empowered bureaucracies to enlarge or reaffirm old roles, as in planning and economic regulation, and encouraged them to invite broader participation in the process of governing. However, as long as the political purpose of sustainability remains as poorly defined by academics as: ‘the primary focus of national and international environmental policy’; seeking ‘to achieve environmental protection without confronting tough choices’ or even as requiring fundamental change in ‘political economic systems’ (Fischer and Black, 1995; citations from back cover-page), actual policy-makers may do no than use the notion to expand ‘turfs’ and influence. Engineering of systemic change can surely not be part of their mission, while struggles over access to resources, information and finance are. Is the sustainability ‘discourse’ more than a new veil over old battles? Three basic questions are to be explored:

- Where did the term come from and why was it so widely adopted after the Brundtland Report?
- Who is now negotiating ‘sustainability’ at national and international scales?
- Is ‘sustainability’ more than a slogan to legitimate planning, economic intervention and technology forcing by States?

If sustainability is *the* goal of the post-communist One World, including the advocated participatory democracy, what meaning is it being given *de facto* by practitioners?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> E.g. the mining industry is engaged in the Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development Project which is ‘to ensure that these industries make the optimum contribution to the transition to sustainable development’ in preparation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, 2002. Contracted by industry to the International Institute for Environment and Development, it will ‘not offer a definite set of answers and dynamic breakthroughs’. It is to generate insights that ‘will identify but not necessarily solve key problems and tradeoffs’ (*Ecoal*, 38 June 2001).

<sup>5</sup> I support scientific scepticism without denying that many benefits, most non-environmental, that promise to flow from the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol to bureaucracies and other groups.

<sup>6</sup> This is question is but a first step to a debate I hardly dare to raise: will the notion disappear again as fundamentally flawed because it is in essence: anti-humanistic, backward-looking and class biased?

## 2. Origin: sustainability as research agenda and environmental mission

While the planners of the International Human Dimension of Global Environmental Change Programme (IHDP) managed without the term in 1988, by 2001 they were proposing ‘sustainability science’ as a new global research agenda for collaboration between the natural and social sciences.<sup>7</sup> Debates about the meaning of sustainability and its relationship to other ideas and agendas, such as ‘globalisation’, ‘ecological modernisation’ and ‘industrial transformation’ continue (Gibbs, 2000; Buttel, 2000).<sup>8</sup> Given its ubiquity, the notion has attracted the attention of many. The sources I have consulted range from political scientists (Meadowcroft, 1997), ‘post-modern’ international relations theorists (Doran, 1997), and students of organisational studies (Bäckstrand et al., 1996) to the multi-disciplinary volumes edited by Fischer and Black (1995) and Becker and Jahn (1999). The last mentioned volume promotes the concept not “as some talisman opening the road to a unifying paradigm, but instead as a generator of problems to which responses must be found” (on backcover). While responses here refers to research rather than policy, the ultimate aim remains a link with practice, namely, ‘the development of forward-looking and actor oriented sustainability strategies’.<sup>9</sup> The authors admit that the meaning of the concept remains contested but accept ecological crisis phenomena as reality (p. 4). Who identifies this reality? Who is to apply these strategies, who to execute? Are officialdom and the research enterprise feeding of each other in the hope of mutual support and, perhaps, policy innovation?

### 2.1. *The concept: Brundtland and the global research enterprise*

Research agendas attracted to sustainability now range from law and engineering to medicine, with geography as a major contributing discipline. Their findings are needed, it would appear, to provide information, models and technologies to ‘policy-makers’ who require them to justify and implement the ‘precautionary’ environmental treaties negotiated by intergovernmental

<sup>7</sup> For the announcement of the programme and its development, see newsletters of the IHDP, especially No. 2, 2001, obtainable for its Secretariat in Bonn, staff.ihdp@uni.bonn.de. IHDP works closely with IGBP and climate researchers.

<sup>8</sup> These two authors come to opposite conclusions: Gibbs sees sustainability as the broader, inclusive concept, Buttel sees it as a synonym for ecological modernisation. A divergence in European and American thought is indicated. I see sustainable development as the less meaningful terms though of greater political utility.

<sup>9</sup> Cited from the back cover page of the paperback edition.

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