
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Joachim H. Spangenberg, born 1955, is Vice President of the Sustainable Europe Research Institute SERI, Vienna, and Professor Invite at the C3ED, Université de Versailles St.-Quentin-en-Yvelines. He studied Biology, Mathematics and Ecology and holds a PhD in Macroeconomics. Before joining SERI he worked at the Wuppertal Institute and the Institute for European Environmental Policy.

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Sustainable development is probably one of the most challenging policy concepts ever developed. It can be described as comprising four interacting dimensions: the social, economic, environmental, and institutional one. These are to be integrated in a strategic perspective, i.e., with changing weights over time and on different geographical scales. It furthermore implies delimitation – the responsibility for our activities wherever and whenever their impacts will be felt. Rather obviously, such a demand to leave the trodden path, be it in science or politics, poses a serious challenge to current mechanisms of policy making, and it is of little surprise that decision makers either try to downplay the challenge, or to water it down by claiming the term, but not the spirit for their actions. However, its character as a contested concept even more underlines its relevance.

But also amongst those who are seriously involved in the pursuit of sustainable development, there are more open questions than ready made answers, in particular on how to bring it about. What kind of governance do we need for sustainable development? How are policies for a healthy environment, a thriving economy, a coherent society and for individual self-realisation society and opportunities for individual self-realisation to be combined? Which institutions are necessary and what are the responsibilities of different actors, politics, administration, business, civil society, consumers, and individuals? How are gender, labour and justice integrated into strategies of substantial sustainability and their implementation?

The authors of this volume are collaborating in a unique transdisciplinary research initiative called 'Governance for Sustainable Development' (GoSD), which is unique in several senses. Since more than two years, it brings together participants from different disciplines (social and natural sciences, economics and humanities) and from old and new EU member states on a regular basis. The group produced a series of discussion papers (some of them published in this volume, others available for download at the initiatives' website at www.gosd.net), integrating the different dimensions of sustainable development with a focus on governance. The debates, attended by a varying composition of participants, the intensive e-mail discourses and the resulting papers were enriched by the different backgrounds and flavoured by the different personalities, but always constructive and forward looking.

The result is not a new, all-encompassing concept of sustainability governance. Instead, it is a starting point and platform for future research, including first ideas on how the landing place of an exploration towards governance for sustainable development might look like.

The introductory paper by Meadowcroft and colleagues sets the framework for this special issue, describing the principal orientation and central themes of the GoSD initiative. Kemp and colleagues develop a conceptual framework for policy making and action taking towards sustainability, considering key elements of governance for sustainability, and integration into the concept of transition management. The next four papers each focus on governance aspects within one dimension of sustainable development. Giljum and colleagues present European policy strategies and instruments for absolute decoupling of economic growth from environmental pressures as a core goal of governance for environmental sustainability. Taking a system analysis perspective, Spangenberg evaluates concepts and indicators for assessing the economic sustainability of socio-economic systems. Littig and Grießler expand on social sustainability and present a new sustainability concept based on needs and work, as an activity to fulfil these needs and as the principal exchange process between society and nature. The article of Pfahl explores the notion of formal and informal institutions and links them to sustainable development and good governance principles in the European Union. International aspects of governance for sustainable development are covered by the following two contributions. Ruddy evaluates progress made forging a sustainable development strategy of the European Union with regard to relations to other world regions, focusing on the key issues of trade, investment and knowledge transfer. In the light of current and future enlargement processes of the European Union, Wolf scrutinises the notions of 'transition' and 'transformation' and illustrates, why current processes provide a significant chance for developing a new overarching European sustainability strategy. Based on the outcomes from the individual papers of this special issue, the final contribution by Farrell and colleagues develops future research hypotheses and questions that will allow the GoSD research initiative to develop useful policy recommendations towards governance for sustainable development.

The editors wish to thank all authors for their contributions not only to this volume, but also to the overall research initiative. Sustainable development as a multi-criteria optimisation process in dynamically co-evolving systems cannot result in clear-cut optimal solutions. Instead, based on pluralism and critical reflection, emerging consensus is paving the way for future research. To have achieved progress towards this challenging goal is the collective achievement of the GoSD community.