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## Editorial

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Joachim H. Spangenberg holds a PhD in Economics, with an academic background in natural sciences (MSc in Biology, post-graduate in ecology). He is an interdisciplinary researcher by education and dedication. He works for the Sustainable Europe Research Institute Germany and the Helmholtz Centre for Environment Research, and teaches at the Bochum University of Applied Sciences. His work focuses on ecological economics, degrowth, ecosystem services and their (non-monetary) valuation, sustainability ethics, environmental conflicts and sufficiency and sustainable consumption. He is a steering committee member of the Ecosystem Services Partnership ESP, and a board member of the International Sustainable Development Society ISDRS.

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## 1 Introduction

Environmentally as much as socially, the world system is moving into an unsustainable direction – the need for more sustainable solutions is only increasing, and the quest for sustainability concepts is more important than ever. The unheeded needs of the impoverished and many other social and environmental problems not only remain acute but have become so much more serious that they represent a threat to the survival of human civilisation on this planet. Despite the fact that during the past couple of decades, notably since the publication of *Our Common Future* in 1987 (WCED, 1987), sustainable development has become a central concept of global policy and a subject of much debate in social and environmental sciences, the need for sustainable solutions to social and ecological crises has never been so pressing. However, despite a broad international debate, there are still underexplored ‘missing points’ (Söderbaum, 2012); this special issue addresses some of them.

## 2 Sustainability

Sustainability, as is the case with any political idea, is essentially a contested concept. Thus, sustainability and democracy or justice have certain features in common: they are not unambiguously well-defined, all-covering ideas or concepts that can be applied straightforwardly to any situation, problem or issue. Their societal meaning is not pre-defined, being rather a reflection of the discourses and disputes about their role and meaning. Like notions of democracy, freedom, or justice, sustainability is constituted by a variety of discourses (Dereniowska et al., 2015; Bosselmann, 2008). Each of them represents a shared way of comprehending the world (Dryzek, 2005); as any discourse, it is constructing a reality, thus, constituting a truth of its own (Foucault, 1969). When referring to the whole spectrum of sustainability discussions and disputes, we use the notion of ‘sustainability debate’ rather than ‘sustainability discourse’ in order to emphasise the crucial aspects of the sustainability challenge: to think, communicate, learn, and act collectively across a diversity of competing discourses. Values, ethics and

ideology, shaping different epistemologies and ontologies, are important, yet not always acknowledged, parts of the sustainability debate, forming, framing and constituting discourses. Any particular view is based on (often not explicit) attitudes and procedures that include canons of thought, notions of what counts as legitimate foci of concern, ideals of valid argumentation, and views on what should be excluded from the discourse (Papuziński, 1998). For example, moving from an unsustainable to a sustainable development path is a matter not only of explanation and facts but also of values and ideology, institutions and power relations that may condition what facts we are focusing on and which measures are considered realistic options (Söderbaum, 2008). Therefore, considering just one perspective among others, one of the partly distinct, partly overlapping discourses within the sustainability debate, runs the risk of excluding important and valid input and perspectives that lie outside the perspective chosen (usually the mainstream one).

The understanding of sustainability emerging in a discourse shapes the respective concepts of sustainability economics, prescriptions and indicators (Spangenberg, 2015). The complexity of sustainability issues is increasing with our ever more complex understanding of ontologies, epistemologies, and values. There is a strong correlation between the complexity and multidimensional character of the environmental, social, economic and institutional problems of sustainability, on the one hand, and the need for a reasonable pluralism of perspectives, on the other hand: “the more complex a situation, the larger is the number of plausible perspectives upon it” [Dryzek, (2005), p.9].

Procedurally, equitable dialogues based on a pluralism of opinions and analyses, and thus discursive democracy, would be relevant conditions for a fruitful and potentially problem-solving dialogue among economists and with other concerned actors. An open, pluralistic debate in line with normative ideals of democracy entails some disagreement; we can hardly expect any lasting, overarching consensus, especially pertaining to urgent environmental, financial, and social matters. However, a policy transforming power of the sustainability debate can only unfold to the degree to which all inherent tensions are made visible and thus debatable. Alternative perspectives need opportunities to be articulated to become part of the debate and the search for a constructive way of dealing with multifaceted crises. Such a disclosure of so far mostly hidden and implicit values and world views is challenging, forcing academia to develop both criteria for which discourses are legitimate elements of the sustainability debate, and new modes of learning, cooperation, and action across the diversity of substantial sustainability discourses (Spangenberg, 2011). This illustrates the difficulty and challenge of dealing not only with complex real world problems, but also with pluralism (of perspectives, schools of thought, paradigms, etc.). Not only are there diverse views on how to solve our crises, how to define sustainability, etc., but it is also the case that many of these are more or less plausible; among those we can also find alternative views and values that are equally legitimate but incommensurable and rationally irreducible (Benjamin, 2003; Rawls, 1999).

Consequently, prior to a much needed integration of knowledge, understandings and perspectives, values and ideologies need to be made visible and understood in order for anyone to make an informed choice. The sustainability dialogue must be conducted in a way that is open, diverse, and subsumed to the normative principles of democracy.

### **3 Economics**

One reason for the past failures is that much of the sustainability debate has been dominated by neoclassical economics, which in connection with neoliberal politics and an unwarranted focus on economic growth, has proven insufficient to deal with sustainability in its all dimensions. Sustainable development poses a challenge to all economists (and other scientists and practitioners) requiring a continued debate of the complex challenges of sustainable development, their interactions, mutual conditionality and reinforcement (Söderbaum, 2008). Economics plays an important role in the sustainability debate, in politics, and in the mental maps of influential actors. Sustainable development as a normative concept is meant to give the economy a purpose: serving human needs while respecting environmental limits (WCED, 1987). Thus, what is needed is not just an economics for (certain sub-goals of) sustainability, but a new economics of sustainability, aware that the economy is just a part of the social and natural systems it is embedded in, and rules by social processes and laws of nature over and above the economic rules. This sustainability economics needs to make its ideological and normative orientation visible when putting the sustainability principles into practice. Understanding its distinctive features requires not only a deep rethinking of the basics of current economic thought, but also looking at the very perspectives and paradigms that frame discourses, and communicating across them.

Such a reflexive approach is so far missing in the economics debate on sustainability. Just as the tendency to limit the search for solutions to neoclassical economic receipts and to base the analyses on neoclassical models is a problem in the financial domain, it represents an equally serious problem in relation to sustainability issues. In sustainability, for example, non-monetary aspects are very important but frequently not accentuated by economists. Economic concepts remain meaningless for sustainability if it is assumed that people act only as individuals, not as social beings concerned about impacts on other individuals, groups and societies, or on nature in a local, regional, or global context. Individuals as actors are concerned in their roles as citizens, politicians, or professionals, and as representatives of civil society organisations, business groups, labour, political parties, etc., to participate in a debate about what a future sustainable society should look like. Conceptually, the economic man of neoclassical theory needs to be replaced by a political economic person, a broadening of the perspective towards reality long advocated by Söderbaum (1999, 2012).

Mainstream neoclassical economics as a conceptual framework and ideology has established its own sustainability discourse. With its monopolising position at most universities, this discourse strongly influenced the societal, and in particular the political sustainability debate over the years. However, it failed to deliver solutions: the multifaceted crisis in the social, ecological, and economic spheres is more severe than ever. Given the multidimensional nature of current sustainability crises – including both the financial domain and non-market issues – alternative perspectives must not only supplement the sustainability debate and complement mainstream economics perspectives and policy advice, but have to break the Procrustean bed of neoclassical thinking, freeing economics to confront the problems of sustainability without being limited by only individualistic interpretations and equilibrium models.

Methodological individualism, economic man and omnipresent equilibria concepts are complexity blinders and need to be replaced with approaches adapted to the nature of the problems at hand (Norgaard, 2010). Instead of simplifying the sustainability

framework to adapt it to economic theory, the complexity of environmental, social, economic and institutional problems needs to be accepted and taken into account (Söderbaum, 2012).

Particularly illustrative of this need for a change of perspective is the discourse on tipping points – the harbingers of irreversible and large scale impacts in global systems. The notion of tipping points has become a powerful metaphor in both academic and public spheres as it highlights the severity of consequences to the global society and economy. The importance of understanding tipping points has been emphasised in the UN report (United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability, 2012), which was prepared for the Rio +20 by a panel chaired by Tarja Salonen (Finland) and Jakob Zuma (South Africa). Yet, despite the usefulness of the tipping points metaphor for articulating environmental, social, institutional and economic sustainability risks, the debate suffers from the fact that the very character of the scientific models used for explaining the climate and the human world leads to a kind of reductionism (for instance, climate or economic determinism contributing to waiving the meaning of moral responsibilities) that overly simplifies the understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment (Nuttall, 2012). This epistemological tendency to reduce the complexity of sustainability issues is not limited to climate sciences, and has also practical consequences. As Söderbaum diagnoses, the report emphasises the seriousness of the problems faced, identifies potential tipping points, and proposes a large number of recommendations for action. However, since the document is a consensus report it reflects the mainstream perspective, which limits the kinds of issue discussed to incremental modifications of the present political-economic system. For example, scrutiny of neoliberalism, or discussions about the urgencies and problems of democracy, were not a part of the considerations. Consequently, the approach undertaken by the report's authors represents a kind of reductionism with serious omissions of alternative perspectives on complex and multifaceted crises in our world. Thus, in addition to discussing tipping points, it is important to identify and analyse the 'missing points' in the sustainability dialogue, generating understanding by reflective deliberation (Söderbaum, 2012).

#### **4 Selection of papers and framework for the special issue**

In the selection of papers for this special issue, the guest editors paid specific attention to scholarly quality, a representative diversity of perspectives on economics, the contributions of each paper to the debate on missing points in the sustainability debate, and how well the proposed vision or ideas fit the goals and objectives of the volume. Following this criteria, we have brought together a variety of perspectives on sustainability economics that, at the same time, can be read as complementary and competing views on sustainability as a multidimensional challenge.

Earlier versions of the papers included in this special issue had initially been submitted to the 2012 online Sustainability Conference of the World Economics Association, organised by Peter Söderbaum (Conference Leader) and Małgorzata Dereniowska in collaboration with Grazia Ietto-Gillies.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the conference was to seek a broad range of perspectives on what the current crises call for from sustainability economics and to foster a thoughtful, pluralistic debate on unexplored

territories outside the mainstream discourse. This special issue represents these efforts in a rich and varied intellectual landscape, mapping ‘missing points’ in the sustainability debate and providing diverse directions worth considering for future sustainability economics discussions.

The underlying question addressed in this special issue: ‘what is needed of economics to meet the challenge of sustainability?’ is the common denominator of diverse approaches towards rethinking economics.

By bringing them together, this issue aims at contributing to the sustainability economics debate by refining approaches to sustainability economics. It seeks to:

- 1 identify some of the missing points in the sustainability economics debate
- 2 raise issues from and about fundamental perspectives, broaden the debate through an articulation of alternative or complementary perspectives, and provide policy advice
- 3 bring in actors from different, country-specific discourses or ideological orientations
- 4 strengthen the capacity for conducting pluralistic, cooperative, inter- and transdisciplinary dialogues for sustainability
- 5 showcase efforts to fill gaps and deal with so far missing points, as well as their limitations
- 6 analyse what sustainability economics consists of and what a transformation process would require.

The first of the papers presented is Sanders’ theoretical overview of the failure of the neoclassical paradigm to meet the challenges of sustainability (R. Sanders, ‘The flawed paradigms of economics and sustainable development’). The paper continues addressing some of the important missing points by providing a visionary, alternative approach to resource allocation and human welfare, with an emphasis on inter- and intra-generational equity. This contribution represents a US perspective on ecological economics, focused on the steady-state perspective and reflecting a particular context and theoretical background.

Next, the discussion moves to an in-depth critical and illuminating investigation of the most recent shift in emphasis of global political discourse from sustainability to green economy ideas, inspired by the German sustainability economics discourse. Spangenberg’s analysis of the green economy discourse illustrates the decisive role of ontological assumptions in analysis and policy recommendations (J.H. Spangenberg, ‘The world we see shapes the world we create: how the underlying worldviews lead to different recommendations from environmental and ecological economics – the green economy example’). The paper illustrates how distinct world views in the social sciences, much more significantly than in the natural sciences, are reflected in different paradigms and models. These often tend to be mutually exclusive, leading to a polarisation of the discourse and the exclusion of minority positions regardless of how valid their claims might be. The author concludes that the green economy paradigm is bound to fail as it represents a mere modernised version of the substantially unchanged neoclassical model.

The meaning of sustainable development is a subject of constant debate and adjustments following increasing ecological and social threats. Lioumakis offers insights from a Marxist perspective on theoretical, material, and social aspects of sustainability, recognising that democracy and economic equity are crucial for its achievement

(G. Liodakis, 'Mainstream and alternative theorising of the conditions and policies of sustainable development'). The 'capitalist mode of production' is scrutinised and conditions for an alternative social and institutional structure are identified, accentuating the revolutionary potential of bottom-up societal actions and explaining how his perspective relates to environmental issues.

Benedikt and Oden provide an interesting attempt to go beyond the mainstream agenda from within (M. Oden and M. Benedikt, 'Better is better than more: investigations into qualitative growth'). While still trying to defend the neoclassical perspective and relying on monetary valuation and allocative efficiency, they strive to overcome some of the rigidities of neoclassics. Their key point is an innovative account of quality, leading to first sketches of a new concept of growth in the context of sustainable consumption. The paper illustrates both the possibilities and the limitations of changing standard economics from within.

Sustainable development in the context of democratic societies requires a more open approach to decision making. After all, democracy requires sustainability to maintain the conditions to flourish, while sustainability incorporates democracy, legitimising its values. Democracy, equity and participation are key sustainability principles and necessary conditions to make the concept operational. This territory is explored by Fanning, who discusses elements of decision making and how economic valuation can be properly accommodated in such processes (A.L. Fanning, 'Contrasting values in the sustainability debate: limitations of economic valuations and their role in decision-making'). He uses the two-tiered decision structure developed by Norton et al. (1998) as a way of bringing in diverse ideological orientations, perspectives, and values. However, while starting with a philosophical definition of value, the neoclassical economics background drives the paper into an instrumental interpretation, again illustrating an attempt to widen the narrow focus of neoclassic and the difficulties in doing so.

Dellheim's paper is the second one from a sustainability-oriented, socialist background. It emphasises the practical conditions required for transformation processes and their implications (J. Dellheim, 'In search of possibilities for action'). It presents a political-economy-based approach developing understanding, thinking, action and 'problem-solving oriented communication and cooperation' among all actors concerned with sustainable development in everyday social life. Dellheim stresses the necessity to mobilise solidary cooperation facilitating emancipatory and reasonable demands as well as universally shared normative ideals of equity, dignity, etc.

## 5 Conclusions

A constructive way of dealing with multifaceted crises and an opportunity to address the missing points builds on the ability to think critically across the borders of disciplines, schools of thought, and paradigms, while maintaining one's identity and integrity as a scholar. Such an approach has been followed in selecting the contributions to this special issue; it allows appreciating what is valuable in each perspective, and to treat conflicts (of values, opinions, and expertise) as not only possible, but also necessary to stimulate further progress. For this reason, papers have been presented that identify missing points in the sustainability dialogue both from within and from outside the neoclassical economics paradigm. The choice has been made as we seek not only to challenge the

monopoly of the mainstream, but also to encourage its transformation by pointing to critical perspectives from within. The alternative perspectives include, for example, steady-state economics, Marxian economics, institutional economics, and ecological economics, offering critical insight into the character and role of neoclassical and resource economics, and of elements of neoliberal ideology. Deriving solutions to the vexed problems of sustainable development is work always in progress, including learning by doing, and is thus open to constant evaluation and modification of sustainability ends and means.

Furthermore, the papers have addressed the different challenges of sustainability economics, including:

- economic growth
- theoretical overview and definitional problems with sustainable development paradigms and the economics of sustainability, and attempts to provide a more refined account of these
- ontological, epistemological, and methodological conditions, limits, and possibilities of radical transformation of the political-economic system and of sustainability economics formation
- accommodation of more systemic understanding of issues such as quality, economic valuation, and the non-monetary economy
- the role of consumerist lifestyles and neoliberal values and policies
- social and environmental justice and human equity.

This special issue is of course not the final word in the sustainability economics debate. It is meant as a contribution to putting things (back) into a more systemic and holistic perspective, and to stimulate further debates across schools of thought to this end. These essentials, too often missing in current debates, have the potential to give purpose back to economics and economy. If this special issue will facilitate the ongoing dialogue, it has served its purpose.

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## Notes

- 1 For more information see the WEA website:  
<http://sustainabilityconference2012.worldeconomicsassociation.org>.