

Constructing and Institutionalising ‘Sustainability’

The concept’s ‘relevance’ from the perspectives
of economic and political geography

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1 Introduction: Sustainability as a Construction

Almost two decades ago, the concept of sustainability was postulated in the so-called 'Brundtland Report' (WECD 1987), which was the starting point for a remarkable career in political and societal discourses. In fact, the formulation of the sustainability concept can be traced back to the late 1960s, when there was quite a strong focus on developing countries and on ecological issues. Although not before 1987, the Brundtland report 'Our Common Future' has claimed sustainability as a universal norm that combines intergenerational justice with equivalent consideration of social, economical and ecological concerns worldwide. Subsequently, the global diffusion, adaptation and reconstruction sped up enormously and was fuelled by the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, so-called 'Rio Summit'), when almost 200 nations agreed to 'implement' sustainable development and enacted the "Agenda 21" (for historical details see e.g. LENSCHOW 2002; KIRKBY ET AL. 1995). The vagueness and the abstractness of this sustainability concept can be considered as a precondition for such a broad political acceptance (RICHARDSON 1997).

This world wide 'implementation' process consisted of a vast variety of reconstructions of sustainability (for some internationally differing interpretations see e.g. O'RIORDAN/VOISEY 1997, LENSCHOW 2002, KRUEGER 2005). The concept had influence on a lot of policies, and the scientific community accompanied the diffusion process by means of countless normative, critical and application-orientated analyses and positions in almost all disciplines. Today, the notion of 'sustainability' is omnipresent, and some say a new paradigm has been established.

The appraisals of the sustainability concept and its relevance are quite heterogeneous. But regardless of how to value the establishment of the sustainability concept(s), the questions remain a) *how* this process has worked out and b) how to operationalise the *importance* of the sustainability idea.

Our starting point is the assumption, that 'sustainability' is a social construction. Following this perspective, notions of 'sustainability' are negotiated within comprehensive societal discourses; each 'definition' and each proposed way of 'implementation' is attached with specific values, interests, and aims (more on discourse analyses of sustainability concepts, e.g. in BROOK 2005, DINGLER 2003, BRAND/FÜRST 2002, MAIER 2000, RYDIN 1999, MYERS/MACNAGHTEN 1998, DALBY 1996). Obviously, some conceptions of sustainability are more successful than others, and these have been 'institutionalized' to a higher extent.

As geographers with a strong environmental focus, we refer to a) prominent theoretical concepts within our subdisciplines and b) reinterpreted results from current research projects. We argue that combining constructivist and institutionalist approaches helps to operationalise the establishment process. After discussing the conceptual framework, we illustrate this with two case studies. The first one scrutinizes enterprises that claim to be part of a 'greening industry' process and often refer to 'sustainability'. Second, European nature conservation policy claims to be part of 'sustainable development' and seems to have *institutionalized* a specific framing of 'sustainability'.

2 Theoretical and Disciplinary Framework: 'Discourse' and 'Institutions'

2.1 Institutional Turn

Economic Geography

In Economic Geography, the vision of an 'institutional' turn is proclaimed by a growing number of scholars since the late 1990s (cf. BARNES 1999, MARTIN 2000, SCHAMP 2002, HAYTER 2004). Mostly, a clear overlapping with respect to cultural (CRANG 1997, BARNES 2001), relational (BATHELT/GLÜCKLER 2003) or evolutionary (BOSCHMA/LAMBOOY 1999) 'turns' within this subdiscipline becomes evident. With a definite distinction from the neo-classical understanding of transaction costs in rational choice models ('new institutional economics'), institutionalism in Economic Geography strongly recognizes the importance of societal and political factors within economic processes. Thus, a 'dissenting' institutionalism refers to earlier concepts developed in 'old' institutional economics by Veblen, Mitchell, Innis, Commons and others, who have experienced a certain renaissance in economics since the 1970s (see overviews in HAYTER 2004, SCHAMP 2002). Its recent reception within economic geography is at least partly intertwined with both the debate on neo-classical economic geography (or better: 'geographical economics') provoked by Krugman's work and resulting in intense border work among economic geographers (see critical contributions by MARTIN/SUNLEY 2001, BATHELT 2001 and others), as well as to the increasing popularity of evolutionary approaches. The latter seem to offer an ideal theoretical strand to conceptualise the process character of changing institutional regimes, characterised by mechanisms of variation, selection and mutation (BOSCHMA/FRENKEN 2005).

Even if one does not share this evolutionist determinism, a process oriented perspective certainly contributes to a better understanding of the emergence, development and spread of firms' behaviour. It thus allows the framing of corporate decisions and strategies, as the results of learning processes, which in general are strongly influenced by the enterprise's industrial, political and societal environment. Such contextualised, corporate routines become institutions themselves, constantly exposed to and affected by external factors such as market response, competitors' behaviour, legislative and political changes, societal pressure etc.

With regard to sustainability issues within the economic realm, it becomes more and more obvious that formal institutions become supplemented (and gradually replaced) by informal institutions. Formal or 'hard' institutions are codified norms and rules such as traditional command-and-control instruments (e.g. anti-pollution laws and norms, occupational health and safety regulations etc.), whereas informal or 'soft' institutions emerge in form of voluntary initiatives, codes of conduct, corporate governance and 'good corporate citizenship' approaches, often strongly referring to the firm's social responsibility and ethic values. Informal (or 'soft') institutions can be regarded as not legally codified, but, nonetheless, potentially similarly effective 'rules', which are the outcome of societal discourses and conventions. More concretely speaking,

corporate sustainability performance is both the result of and a driving force for direct or indirect bargaining processes between different societal actors and stakeholders, hence leading to a perpetual scrutinising and adjustment of corporate behaviour within an evolving institutional setting (for new forms of environmental regulation see for example ANGEL 2000, DRUMMOND/MARSDEN 1995, GIBBS et al. 2002).

Political Geography

The institutional turn within Human Geography has been largely focused on economic issues. It is true that there is an immense overlap of economic, urban and political geography research, namely, as within regional studies (e.g. MACLEOD/GOODWIN 2000). However, the conceptual input can mostly be traced back to the economic perspective.

Quite surprisingly, Geography has merely joined the debate on institutions in a political sense, though there has been a broad debate within political sciences during recent years (see MARCH/OLSEN 1989, PETERS 1999; KATZNELSON/WEINGAST 2005). In this context, too, institutions have been debated as – more or less – informal ‘rules of the game’ that researchers should consider in addition to formal institutions. The so-called ‘historical institutionalism’ has turned out to be the more prominent approach over rational choice institutionalism (KATZNELSON/WEINGAST 2005): the former is turning out to be conceptually very close to the evolutionary perspective, which is broadly applied in economic geography, as mentioned before. Following this approach,

“political actors are not perfectly knowledgeable about the full implications of their participatory actions in institutional venues, and institutions tend to lock into place and create path dependencies. Decisions taken at particular times, although context specific, can shape the nature and content of political agendas over much longer periods” (JONES/CLARK 2002: 118).

Any kind of institution can be an intrinsic item in political geography research. However, political geography rarely reflects on ‘institutions’ explicitly, and reference to new institutionalism is seldom found (however, see exceptions like BERNDT 2003). Current debates within political geography focus rather on scale, networks, territoriality etc. (overview s. AGNEW ET AL. 2003, JONES/WOODS 2004; for the environmental focus BULKELEY 2005).

Nevertheless, many geographers working on regime theory (e.g. NEUMAYER 2001) and governance approaches (e.g. LIVERMAN 2004) have often been influenced by the ‘new’ understanding of institutions, whereas the conceptual framework is mostly carried out beyond the geographical community (e.g. PATERSON ET AL. 2003; PAAVOLA 2005). As governance concepts stress the importance of non-state actors and of informal decision-taking, key elements of neo-institutionalist thinking are taken into account. This tendency might be seen as a part of a broader trend of ‘contextualisation’. With regard to environmental research, ADGER ET AL. state that

“Environmental problems and decisions occur within and are influenced by particular economic, political, social, cultural, and ecological contexts. [...] Approaches that emphasise the universal overlook the specificity and contextuality of environmental decisions. Yet it is instrumentally and intrinsically important to understand how the subject and context of

environmental decisions influence them” (ADGER ET AL. 2003: 1099f).

These ‘contexts’ can only be understood when considering soft institutions that are embedded in the specifics of culture, history, and social practices (ADGER ET AL. *ibid.*).

In order to avoid a conceptual fuzziness in stressing the trend of ‘contextualisation’, a more explicit way of operationalising these contexts with reference to (‘new’) institutions could help political geography (with or without environmental focus) to more transparency.

Moreover, referring to contexts of ‘culture’ and ‘social practices’ as soft institutions or rules of the game leads us to shed light on discourse orientated approaches.

2.2 Constructivist Turn

Political Geography

The constructivist (or discursive) turn has been a strong trend at least in Anglo-Saxon Geography. Geographers have been fascinated by the idea that ‘space’, too, is somehow socially constructed and is not just a physical entity (e.g. GREGORY 1994, MASSEY 1999, RICHARDSON/JENSEN 2003, RYDIN 2005). The insight that geographers – as all scientists – are part of a societal discourse that (re-)constructs space daily, is a little scary for the geographical community, too. Nevertheless, political geographers have been protagonists of the constructivist turn, which has taken place parallel to strong trends in political sciences (overview CHECKEL 2003).

The very strong trend to analyze environmental issues has often been labelled with the “signifier ‘nature’” (CASTREE 2002). Whereas ‘environmental’ matters are in many cases perceived as more technocratic or even neo-liberal notions (*ibid.*), the ‘construction-of-nature-debate’ provides a new arena. The starting point here is the thesis, that ‘nature’ can never purely be seen ‘like it is’. Instead, human or societal perceptions, valuations, and constructions must always be taken into account. There surely is a broad variety of conceptual and methodological strands within this debate (e.g. SOPER 1995, HAJER 1995, HARVEY 1996, McNAGHTEN/URRY 1998, CASTREE/BRAUN 2001, NATTER/ZIERHOFER 2002, DEMERITT 2002, BULKELEY 2005). Nevertheless, the common ground in research is the postulation that established storylines and discourse structures affect communication processes on the individual level. Moreover, competing constructions of ‘nature’ (or ‘environment’) might serve particular interests. The challenge for political geography and ecology is to reveal these hidden motivations and, at the same time, to reflect the individual contexts of the ‘revealing’ (and re-constructing) researcher himself.

During the last decade, a broad variety of particular ‘natures’ has been scrutinized by means of discourse analysis. One of the early strands of investigation has focused on ‘nature’ in developing countries, which has often been constructed by Western stakeholders and scientists with a view to their own interests (e.g. PEET/WATTS 1996). Research on ‘vulnerability’ and ‘natural hazards’ (e.g. BLAIKIE ET AL. 1994) has shed light on hidden planning mistakes and social segregation. The reference of gender

issues to pretended 'natural' facts is a further example (e.g. NESMITH/RADCLIFF 1997), as is the analysis of 'urban nature' (e.g. LEES 2004) or 'biodiversity' and 'nature conservation' (e.g. HAILA 1999). This enumeration of 'socio-nature' issues that have already been examined is incomplete, and the work is still going on.

Economic Geography

Despite its success in political and social geography, constructivist approaches are only hesitatingly received by economic geography. Only a few scholars - strongly influenced by the debate in the political sciences - have recognised the added value of a discursive perspective while analysing corporate behaviour and economic structures (e.g. HAJER 1995, SOYEZ 2002, BERNDT 2003, SCHULZ 2002, 2005).

There is, however, a growing consensus on the fact that entrepreneurial decision-taking is not only contextualised (see GRABHER 1993), but also undoubtedly influenced by the way that specific issues are perceived in the political realm and how they penetrate processes of framing and agenda setting:

“Shared concerns may be constructed and communicated through Trade Associations, trade literature, and via government initiatives, particularly in regulation, directed towards particular issues [that] produce an awareness of an issue coupled with a perception of the necessity to act” (HUNT et al. 1997:10).

One of the most striking examples for these constructivist and agenda-setting mechanisms is the way in which environmental disasters or polluting accidents lead to a high degree of public awareness and the search for short-term remedies, while other (potentially more threatening) problems remain ignored despite having been identified by scientists or professionals. In other words, the agenda, both in public policy as well as in the enterprises' strategies, is narrowly related to the current social discourses dealing with particular sustainability issues. It is hence important, firstly, to consider the existence of such discourses as informal institutions (as conceptualised above), and, secondly, to have a closer look at the processes behind those emerging (and disappearing) discourses. As to the latter, it is of great interest which societal actors create, share and reproduce particular discursive elements and what types of discourse coalitions or alliances are established and impact corporate behaviour (HAJER 1995).

However, despite some obvious parallels on the conceptual level, there is little effort to relate this conceptual strand with the new institutionalism approach. For example, a powerful discursive 'framing' of 'nature' – like gender, biodiversity, etc. – can be characterized as 'hegemony'. It is necessary to refer to these established framings in order to achieve one's goals, including political power, research funding etc., regardless of whether this reference is made consciously or unconsciously. Thus, discursive framings might be characterized as a 'soft institution' – it seems worth to have a closer look.

2.3 Missing Links between Institutional and Constructivist Approaches?

Although the theoretical origins of the aforementioned concepts are quite different, a discussion of, at least, the obvious interfaces and overlapping between 'institutions' and 'discourse' (cp. HAJER 1995) appears to be overdue (see fig. 1). If one agrees that "discourse matters" in the economic and political sphere – and the literature quoted above clearly provides empirical evidence for this assumption (as do the case studies discussed below) – it seems appropriate to investigate how discourse is institutionalised and to what extent it determines decision-taking and strategies. From our point of view, however, within constructivist literature, there is a temptation to consider discourse as *automatically* powerful. A more differentiated look is needed, in particular taking into account trajectories and issues of path dependencies shaping and re-shaping particular discourses. Thus, an understanding of these processes is useful not to be tempted to take discourses as irreversible and for granted.

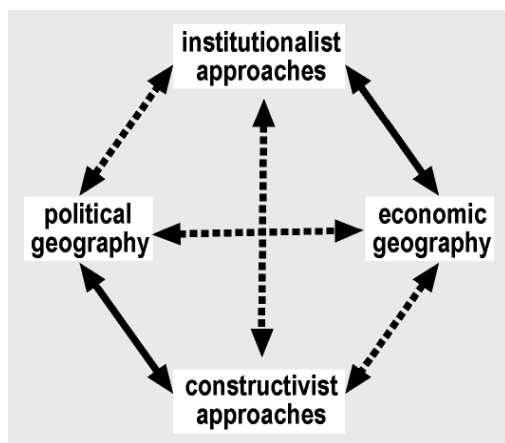


Fig. 1: Missing links between institutional and constructivist approaches? (Draft: Chilla/Schulz)

If, on the other hand, "institutions matter" – and in particular "soft" or "informal" institutions are acknowledged to increasingly impact specific political/economic regimes – their linkage with discourse is twofold: First, institutions are the result of societal bargaining processes, which are themselves constituted by competing discourses, storylines and discursive hegemonies. Second, institutions themselves affect discourses, while strongly defining individual actors' attitudes, awareness and the way problems are tackled not only discursively, as underlined by BERNDT (2003:293): "[...] the situation is one of real power struggles rather than linguistic power games". In other words, institutions are often contested or replaced by discursive reconstructions and reinterpretations. To maintain their relevance, they need to be reconfirmed symbolically and discursively (BRANDT/FÜRST 2002:66ff.). Here discourses are both constituting elements for various institutions, as well as results of existing institutions. Thus "double faced", discourses cannot be handled separately from institutional approaches, as we will show in the following empirical section.

3 Case Studies

3.1 Environmental Consulting in the “Greening of Industry”

As HAJER pointed out, „environmental discourse is an astonishing collection of claims and concerns brought together by a great variety of actors” (1995:1). Given the fact that economic development represents one of the three pillars in the common understanding of sustainability, corporate actors should be hence more than expected to partake in related discourse. Furthermore, clear tendencies towards more comprehensive strategies like “good corporate citizenship” or “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) led to considerable changes in the communication and framing patterns of firms both in their outward oriented public relations activities and in more internal environments (intra-firm communication, negotiations with clients, partners, and various stakeholders). In the following section, a recent case study on the role of environmental producer services will be presented, a particular industry which is, on the one hand, gaining importance in the “greening of industry” process, due to a growing need for external specialist services in the manufacturing industries, and on the other hand, due to its consultant status/expertise, working very much with an own terminology or specific arguments to convince potential clients and to achieve certain measures. The results stem from qualitative surveys conducted in Germany and France between 2000 and 2003, and which were based on semi-structured interviews as well as the analysis of firm documents such as annual reports, web sites, press releases etc. (see SCHULZ 2002, 2005).

3.1.1 Predominant Elements of the Environmental Producer Services' Discourse

The everyday business of environmental producer services is very much interactive with regard to the client firms (the latter being considered 'co-producers' in the case of knowledge intensive kinds of services, see O'FARRELL/MOFFAT 1995:121). Among the different discourse patterns characterizing the communication between the partaking actors, a couple of storylines or discourse strands can be distinguished. As the following examples will show, they are at least partly contributing to the way how sustainability issues are communicated.

Responsibility Discourse

Probably the most astonishing way the service providers approach their manufacturing clients, in order to suggest investments in environmental improvement measures, clearly refers to corporate responsibility – both in social and ecological terms. In an integrative way, environmental (e.g. pollution impacts) and social (e.g. occupational health) issues are framed to be crucial elements of a successful corporate strategy, which additionally should be as transparent as possible regarding their information policies, as the following quotations might illustrate:

“Starting with the audit and review of the current environmental status of your facility we will draw attention to weaknesses and the potential for problems to arise – so that you can sell your product with a clear conscience.” (*German Engineering Consultant*)

“A professional and sustainable corporate communication has to be transparent and responsible. Critical stakeholders are more and more expressing this claim. Particularly the issue of sustainability is a crucial indicator for a company's clever and intelligent forward planning.” (*German PR Consultant, translated from German*)

An integrative understanding of sustainability has become part of contemporary business strategies, no longer neglecting social and environmental aspects to the profit of economic interests (at least rhetorically). Although this certainly does not imply that corporate actors have abandoned to predominantly search for economic success, sustainability is increasingly identified as being a core concept, also to assure economically sustainable (i.e. long-term) corporate development. The latter is very much related to an anticipation of upcoming legal and institutional constraints that manufacturing firms increasingly tend to comply with pro-actively.

Compliance Discourse

A second obvious strand in the acquisition discourse used by environmental service providers tries to convince their clients of the aforementioned necessity to adapt as early as possible to foreseeable requirements in the realm of technical, environmental and social norms, standards and legal

obligations. Following this so-called 'beyond compliance' argument, early adapters are told to prevent time-consuming conflicts with public authorities, short-term investments, as well as too incremental and less coherent modernisation strategies, producing evitable costs. Furthermore, the notion of 'sustainability' is extended towards aspects of risk minimization, planning reliability, let alone the importance of expected gains of reputation in political institutions and with authorities.

Economic Discourse

A much more unbalanced understanding of sustainability can be observed in discourses only framing the direct economic advantages of voluntary corporate investments in environmental and/or social measures (e.g. eco-efficiency strategies). Short-term economies, such as reduced expenditures for energy provision, waste and waste-water treatment etc., should legitimate a modernisation of the respective production processes. Still this argument seems to be most convincing at least for the vast majority of rather hesitant firms, paying little attention to environmental and social compliance, while favouring reactive strategies:

"You will ask yourself how our activities can pay off for you. Of course we can design your effluent treatment plant. But before we begin with the design we will optimise the water circuits and check the possibilities of recycling process waters. Just imagine how many hidden savings can be discovered for you in this way!" (*German Engineering Consultant*)

Here, the pay-off of each investment becomes decisive, ignoring the long-term returns of the above mentioned strategies.

Opportunity Discourse

A particular strand of economically motivated sustainability discourses is represented by those firms who have identified beyond compliance strategies as potential market opportunities. This could be the case for those firms experimenting with new production technologies, product designs, and/or organisational innovations, which might later become broadly established and standardised and, thus, could represent a new market for the 'inventing' firm. Related to this, but even more promising, however, are so-called 'early' or 'first mover advantages', expecting the most advanced enterprises to become the least affected by new legislations, non-tariff entry barriers to regional markets or other institutional constraints. Again, sustainability is framed as a mere outcome of entrepreneurial rationality than a societal and ecological necessity.

Alliance Discourse

This notion of sustainability, being an economically given need to adapt, also characterises another common discursive pattern used by environmental consultants. Here they define themselves as being allies of their client firms, suggesting them to set the same target and to be ready to pass through this struggle as a reliable partner. They are able to do so since they have acquired specific experiences with the implementation of legal instruments, the respective institutional landscape as well as regional governance mechanisms. It is evident, that in most cases the purpose of these alliances is rather to avoid or by-pass than to promote adaptation strategies. In other words, service providers, signalling a profound understanding of the problems and constraints of their client firms, are primarily engaged to keep the clients' firms away from any avoidable need to invest or to reorganise with regard to sustainability aspects.

3.1.2 Relevance of the Discourse Variations

The aforementioned discourse elements are rarely found in pure forms according to the suggested classification scheme. There are hybrids, overlapping and even contradictory uses that unfortunately cannot be elaborated on more profoundly in this paper (see SCHULZ 2005:215ff.), but which show a certain gradient as to how far sustainability concepts have become part of the discursive world of economic actors and to what extent they are framed and redefined in order to support particular corporate strategies. Even though one should not overestimate the reach of ethical arguments, it is quite astonishing to find this element in inter-firm discourses, not targeting private consumers, but rather business partners.

Admittedly, these different discourse patterns also vary as to their degree of institutionalisation (see below) which should be evaluated precautiously, particularly looking at the extent to which they have become more than usual (superficial) PR-arguments, but also binding elements in economic behaviour. As a first step, we should distinguish between those elements only used to attract the client's interest for sustainability related aspects of their respective business (e.g. parts of the responsibility discourse) from arguments which have triggered more deeply into the understanding and perception of economic actors. Here most of the 'economic' and 'compliance' discourses have become pervasive elements of business strategies, increasingly formalised in environmental reporting, in supply chain management (e.g. executing an adaptation pressure on supply firms, for example), as well as in the increasingly important interaction between banks, insurance companies and manufactures (see BLÄSER 2002).

3.2 EU Nature Conservation Policy

The interweaving of sustainable development and EU nature conservation policy sheds some more light on basic principles of 'discursive framing' and 'institutionalisation'. Below, we briefly present some results from a research project on the formulation and implementation processes of the EU Habitats Directive, carried out by geographers and political scientists. Crucial factors of this contested policy are scrutinized by means of discourse analysis, process tracing and expert interviewing. The project concentrates on investigating the role of spatial constructions and mainly refers to implementation processes in Germany and one of its federal states, North Rhine-Westphalia (for details see www.raumbilder.uni-koeln.de).

'Ecological Sustainability'

Historically, there has been a close connection between nature conservation discourses and the formation of the sustainability concept: Nature conservation scientists, lobbyists, and politicians have been driving forces within sustainability debates since the early 1970s, particularly the 'International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources' (e.g. IUCN 1980). However, this "world conservation strategy was limited in the sense that its prime focus was *ecological* sustainability, as opposed to linking sustainability to social and economic issues" (BAKER ET AL. 1997: 2). This strong focus on ecological concern has mostly promoted "ecocentric/biocentric" concepts of sustainability (BAKER ET AL. 1997: 8).

The close connection becomes very obvious on the 'Rio Earth Summit' in 1992, when not only the Agenda 21 was enacted but, at the same time, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). This synchrony is not only an indication that this summit might be seen as the peak of the ecological modernisation paradigm. Moreover, the CBD is a very early example of a policy specific 'implementation' of the sustainability principle.

Within the EU, the discursive (re-)construction and institutionalisation of 'sustainability' has been a dynamic process (cp. VOGLER 2005: 844 ff., LENSCHOW 2002, USUI 2002: 51 ff., MAIER 2000). All members of the European Union have joined both the Agenda 21 and the CBD, and already in 1988, first declarations ensured that the EU would promote 'sustainable development'. Since 1992, EU specific definitions have been formulated in the Environmental Actions Programmes – though still in a quite confusing manner (cp. BAKER 1997: 92).

The EU implemented the CBD by means of the 1992 "Habitats Directive" which complemented the 1979 "Birds Directive". Both directives were designed to set up the so-called NATURA 2000 network that will protect about 10 to 15 per cent of the EU territory in the long run. The Habitats Directive, as the key legislation of EU nature conservation policy, has turned out to be a surprisingly strong instrument that has hit serious public resistance since the late 1990s (for an EU-wide overview see CHILLA 2005a).

The late 1980s and early 1990s were the 'prime years' of EU environmental policy as a vast variety of environmental legislation was enacted – among them the Habitats Directive. This height can be attributed to heterogeneous reasons, among them

paradigmatic ideas within society and politics (cp. ZITO 2002). The Habitats Directive explicitly refers to sustainability in the preamble, and PR publications stress the contribution to sustainable development. However, a closer discourse analysis reveals reference to a surprisingly wide scope of constructions of nature and turns out to be quite polyvalent. This can be illustrated by means of the Preamble of the Directive itself, referring to various constructions of nature and very generally to sustainability (emphasis added):

“Whereas, the main aim of this Directive being to promote the maintenance of *biodiversity*, taking account of *economic, social, cultural and regional requirements*, this Directive makes a contribution to the general objective of *sustainable development*; whereas the maintenance of such biodiversity may in certain cases require the maintenance, or indeed the encouragement, of *human activities*.

Whereas, in the European territory of the Member States, *natural habitats* are continuing to deteriorate and an increasing number of *wild species* are seriously *threatened*.” (Preamble Habitats Directive)

This discursive polyvalence with regard to constructions of nature might be seen as a typical outcome of about 5 years of negotiation between representatives of all member states and various stakeholders – a political compromise. But despite discursive reference to economic and social concerns, the juridical regime has turned out to be quite bio-centric: The Directive itself stipulates a three-step approach for establishing the site selection process. In a first step, member states have to compile national lists of ‘proposed Sites of Community Interest’, which should be based on the manifold species and habitats laid down in the detailed annexes of the Directive. The European Commission should then evaluate the national lists and decide upon the final lists of “Sites of Community Interest”. In a last step the member states are to finally secure the adequate protection of these sites. Whereas the directive does not give very detailed specifications about the exact procedure, later court rulings and administrative practice on EU and national level make the procedure a very eco-centric one: Participation – as a process that takes into account concerns of stakeholders, such as land users and owners – has been excluded from the first two steps which were supposed to be purely scientific and bureaucratic. Only in the last step, after many presettings have already been established, is participation ‘allowed’ – so scientification is a major principle within this ‘command-and-control’ instrument and turns out to bear a misfit with national political and administrative routines (for details see SCHOLL/CHILLA 2005, ALPHANDÉRY/FORTIER 2001).

Thus, despite the *discursive* polyvalence within the Directive, a bio-centric understanding of nature and – at the same time – of sustainability has legally been *institutionalised*. Not surprisingly, serious resistance arose during these years when nature conservation claims were localized and territorialized without formal participation. Not only various stakeholders, but also politicians were upset – just one example is the statement of former Prime Minister of the Land North Rhine-Westphalia, Wolfgang Clement (Social Democratic Party), who called this procedure a “fiasco” (cp. plenary session 24.1.2001, Landtag Duesseldorf).

Policy Integration and Cross-Compliance

During the 1990s, environmental policy *integration* was set high on the EU agenda:

“The old regulatory-based approach began to face a serious legitimacy crisis, as it seemed to impose high costs on economic actors without producing the desired environmental improvements” (LENSCHOW 2002: 6). Instead, the EU emphasized the need to take environmental concerns into account within all ‘non-environmental’ policies (cp. JORDAN ET AL. 2004). This trend strongly refers to the ‘official’ sustainability concept of the 1992 Agenda 21, as environmental policy integration “represents a first-order operational principle to implement and institutionalise the idea of sustainable development” (LENSCHOW 2002: 6): Beyond ‘greening sectoral policies’, this understanding of sustainability calls for participation and balancing economic and social concerns with environmental issues.

In the case of EU nature conservation policy, however, the attempts of policy integration have primarily resulted in a fortification of the eco-centric approach: The principle of cross-compliance has finally sped up the process after years of delaying debates. Cohesion funding – the important financial resources within regional policy – has been related to accurate implementation of the Habitats Directive during the late 1990s. This strategy has overcome the fierce resistance against the bio-centric site selection in the member states (SCHOLL/CHILLA 2005, CHILLA 2005b). As a result today, the first two steps of the designation process are now mostly done, and the member states currently undertake final protection measures.

With regard to the political emphasis of economic growth following the Lisbon strategy from 2000, a discursive rollback with regard to environmental policy is quite obvious in comparison to the early 1990s and some fear a serious weakening of environmental concerns in general (e.g. HOMEYER ET AL. 2003). So far, this defensive position of environmental concerns – which might already have an obvious impact on chemicals policy etc. – has not influenced nature conservation policy, yet. The early and strong institutionalisation of eco-centric constructions of nature and of related sustainability concepts has proven to be stable and, in that, path dependent. However, the long run outcomes can not be predicted, as implementation deficits and a loss of acceptance might still cause fundamental political consequences.

On the Power of Discourse and Institutions

Summarizing this process, we can state at least two aspects:

First, EU nature conservation policy cannot be seen as a continuously developing issue. Instead, we find an institutionalisation of bio-centric approaches with a strong reference to the ‘early years’ of sustainability debates that has strongly been aggravated through legal interpretation. Thus, we can state a political trajectory or even path dependency.

Second, discourse in and on this political area is a complex issue. Discourse analysis reveals contradictory and competing framings of nature. Critical positions of high ranking politicians and of mass media have had a strong discursive presence in the last years. However, they have not been able to override the ‘harder’ institutionalised power of nature protection actors, including administrations, courts, and funding principles. So – does discourse matter at all? Obviously, it does not matter automatically and not to the same extent at any given time. However, discourse matters a) as a starting point for later institutionalisations. EU nature conservation policy could not have been established like it was without the early years’ debates on sustainability, greening policies etc. And discourse matters b) in terms of keeping

institutional arrangements stable. Notions of 'sustainability', 'natural heritage', 'cultural requirements' etc. within nature conservation policy have often been a pure labelling to, in fact, foster the principles of bio-centric protection. In these cases, 'pure' or just linguistic discourse analysis has to be complemented with e.g. juridical inquiry. And last but not least c), the power of institutionalisation is not inevitable. Discursive framings with a more anthropocentric focus might change the policy cycle in a later stage. Moreover, future nature conservation instruments might be assessed very critically in an early phase etc.

4 Conclusions

Trying to summarize the (already very briefly introduced) case studies, we can state the following:

Our first case study on sustainability discourses in the context of environmental producer services shows that 'sustainability' has established itself as an inevitable point of reference within this economic domain. From an institutionalist perspective, 'sustainability' can be classified as an 'institution' that might not be codified in the 'hard way', but nevertheless is influential as an informal, 'soft' institution. However, discourse analysis reveals polyvalent and sometimes even contradictory meanings of 'sustainability'.

Our second case study on EU nature conservation policy reveals a sustainability understanding that has been strongly formalized. This can be traced back to the early days of the sustainability debate with a restrictive focus on the ecological dimension. Semantic analyses of contemporary discourse, and even of the legislative text itself, show very heterogeneous constructions of nature and, in that, very different notions of 'sustainability'. However, these discourses, 'softly' institutionalising more anthropocentric notions of sustainability, cannot override the more established eco-centric understandings.

We propose that our case studies are quite typical examples for research on topics of sustainability, environmental governance etc. Given this, we furthermore propose that research findings within these topics might be categorised with regard to a) their degree of *discursive* coherence (vs. ambiguity or polyvalence) and at the same time - b) - to their degree of *institutional* formalisation (see fig. 2).

The first case study shows little discursive coherence and only a weak institutional formalisation. Allthought it must not only be seen simply as (sustainability) 'talk' or (green) 'speech', it is rather a form of '**labelling**' economic strategies., The outcomes of such just 'labelled' issues can hardly be predicted.

The second case study can be seen as an example of a '**technocracy**' category: A high degree of institutionalisation that comes along with little discursive coherence is likely to generate outcomes that meet the demands of only a (powerful) minority of societal and political actors. This easily results in severe conflicts.

Beyond these categories illustrated with our case studies, further patterns can be stated: A third category consists of issues of a high degree of discursive coherence and of little formalised institutions. These '**framed**' issues are quite likely to result in higher degrees of institutionalisations. A range of case studies might verify this, as e.g. the early years of forest dieback in Germany ('Waldsterben', see Zierhofer

1999).

Forthly, coherently framed and furthermore highly formalised topics can be considered as **'hegemonial'**. This is the case when a broad societal (and discursive) consensus on a particular issue meets a high degree of formal institutionalisation. The current debate on climate change and the actions agreed upon in the Kyoto Protocol might have – despite the ongoing polemics and opposition – become such a case.

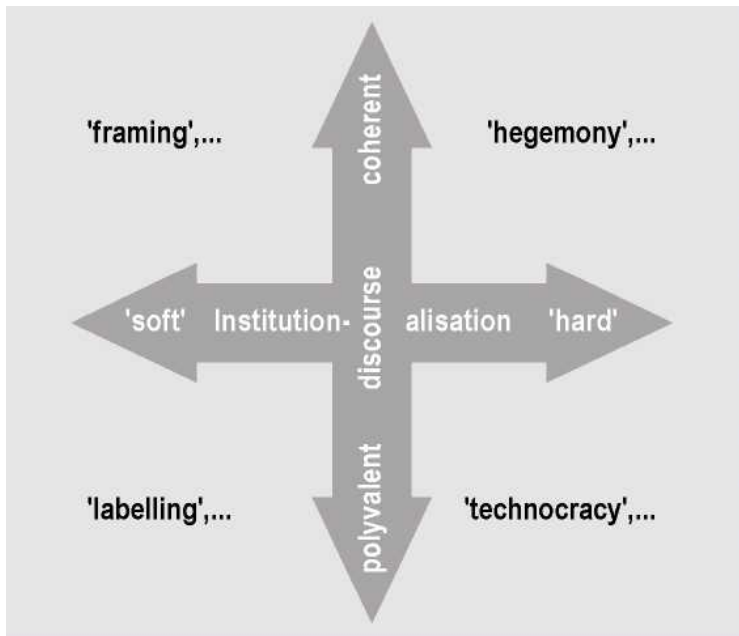


Fig. 2: Categorising empirical findings with regard to constructivist and institutional approaches (layout: Chilla, Schulz)

Attributing empirical findings to these rather simplifying categories does not provide ultimate recognition of the topics' relevance, of course. However, this suggestion might provide the opportunity for rather transparent and differentiating approaches to issues of sustainability and environmental governance.

Summarising this paper, we can draw three conclusions:

Firstly, we come back to the sustainability concept. It is common sense, that the polyvalence and abstractness has been a precondition for enacting this concept on the international scale. Although countless 'implementation' and concretisation processes have taken place in the meantime, things are not getting easier. As, among others, our case studies show the polyvalence of sustainability notions is not necessarily reduced. 'Sustainability-talk' both in nature conservation as in greening-the-industry-discourses can label and support a broad variety of political goals and values, even on the local and single-case level. Discursive reference to the same sustainability concepts might address contradictory aims when environmentalists, administrative planning authorities, and economic stakeholders use the same words.

On the other hand, however, differing sustainability concepts might result in the same consequences. For example, no matter how sustainability is 'sold' within acquisitions of environmental consultancies, the resulting changes in firms' behaviour might be the same. Of particular interest in further research should be those cases, where 'sustainability' is instrumentalised to reach certain goals, which might clearly contradict established understandings of sustainability.

Second, and much more generally speaking – institutions matter. 'Soft' institutions like sustainability discourses in the consultancy sector or 'hard' institutions in nature conservation policy underline this effect. At the same time, the institutionalist perspective can benefit from taking into account constructivist approaches. Purely discursively framed issues can be considered as institutions, too, when they are identified to potentially influence the related actors' behaviour. Moreover, the 'making' of more formalised institutions, too, cannot really be understood without looking at the underlying societal and political discourses. Every formal rule or norm can be considered as the (intermediary) outcome of bargaining and power struggles between the related actors, which are contesting and defending institutions in a highly discursive process. As we stated earlier this paper, discourses are both an expression of certain understandings and attitudes as well as a non-neglectable factor influencing attitudes.

Third, discourse matters – but not automatically and to very different degrees. The value added while taking institutionalist concepts into account, is their capability to differentiate the impact of discourses. This can be done e.g. by categorizing into hard and soft institutionalisations, or by tracing back trajectories and path dependencies, which is not just another empirical tool, but undoubtedly a conceptual broadening. However, the limitations are obvious as it is hard to prove causalities. At the same time, the complex methodological challenges of discourse analysis remain and require much further empirical work (not only in human geography) to sophisticate this promising instrument.

'Implementing' sustainability always means to translate and (re)construct a highly normative and very abstract concept. Thus, critical analyses of both societal discourse and processes of institutionalisation help to trace hidden forces and motivations, and the power of partial societal consensus.

Due to its complexity, the use of sustainability concepts seems to be an ideal playground for such empirical work shedding some light on the imbrications of institutionalist and constructivist approaches – especially with regard to research with a focus on environmental issues. Simultaneously, it clearly shows a convergence between issues discussed and conceptualised in political and economic geography. Hence co-operative research between the two subdisciplines appear probably as promising as interdisciplinary work with scholars in the neighbouring social sciences which certainly should be strengthened, too.

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