The Discourse on Sustainable Development:
How Political and Scientific Codes Go along with Each Other

Jobst Conrad, IÖW

My presentation is limited to discuss one specific aspect of the discourse on sustainable development, namely the features of its science-policy interface, focusing on Germany. That I do in three steps:
1. A short introduction of key terms and conditions of social discourse
2. Summary of general characteristics and development of the sustainable development discourse
3. Resuming properties and underlying reasons of the science-policy interface of the discourses on sustainable development

A discourse can be defined as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" In scientific discourse analysis it is common to distinguish between frames, story lines and a discourse-specific interpretation repertoire. Frames refer to how an issue is defined or problematized. The interpretation repertoire focuses on underlying basic assumptions of a discourse. Story lines refer to the internal linkage of these basic assumptions (Keller et al. 2006, 2010). Different parallel discourses take place simultaneously in modern societies. They can be found in various socio-functional systems including science, politics, or the media. Depending on their corresponding discourse profiles and dynamics, discourses may mutually influence each other (Weingart et al. 2002).

Discourse participants compete over the enforcement of specific problem interpretations and lastly struggle for discourse hegemony. The unfolding discourse dynamics in particular depend on (1) the resonance ability of the frames presented among the discourse participants, (2) the plausibility of story lines presented, (3) the possibility to link frames and story lines with prevailing meta narratives which are culturally rooted world views and narratives, (4) the communicability of interpretation repertoires used, (5) the cognitive acceptability of arguments, i.e. their actual trustworthiness, (6) the credibility of the actors presenting the arguments, and (7) the positional acceptability of the contents and goals mediated in discourse, i.e. how far they reinforce or threaten personal/institutional positions (Conrad 2012, Hajer 1995).

If and how specific social discourses are adopted and get effective depends on various factors: (1) the (changeable) social relevance of the discourse theme, (2) the pattern of interest of the actors organizing the discourse, (3) the (subsystem-specific) communicative connectiveness of the discourse, and (4) its resonance ability in other social subsystems. This, in turn, is strongly determined by the framings and story lines shaping the discourse.

One may distinguish two phases of the sustainable development discourse. During the first phase until about 2000 questions of conceptual unequivocalness, specification, analytical structure as well as public publicity and potential implementation strategies of sustainable development were in the foreground, whereas in the second phase definition and measurement of indicators, concrete (political and sectoral) implementation strategies and measures to overcome their barriers dominated.

During the 1990s a plethora of scientific and policy-related publications dealt with the problems, substantiation, critique and perspective of the concept sustainable development (vgl. Conrad 1993a, Enquete-Kommission 1998, Klemmer et al. 1998, Petschow et al. 1998). The global societal and political debates, conferences and activities around sustainable development induced a growing establishment of organizations and programs (e.g. UN-Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), United Nations Millennium Declaration, local Agenda-21 programs; in Germany the German Council for Sustainable Development (Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung),

national sustainability strategy (Nationale Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie)) which served to substantiate the concept and to work towards realization of sustainable development. Therefore these manifold local, national and international acitivities led to an increasingly self-supporting dynamics with raising of consciousness, ongoing stabilization and institutionalization of sustainable development beyond mere window dressing.

For instance aside from 10 management rules the progress report 2012 of the German sustainability strategy (Bundesregierung 2012) denominates 38 indicators and objectives for 21 themes under the cross-sectional dimensions intergenerational equity, quality of life, social coherence, and international responsibility. Figures attributed to these indicators and their changes are published biannually by the Federal Statistical Office (Statistisches Bundesamt).

The sustainable development discourse is a worldwide discourse, specific according to regions and functional systems of society, which reflects the global fundamental search for an ecologically and socially sustainable development model of modern civilization solving the problems generated by modernity itself. As a compromise formula and catch-all phrase the term sustainable development contributes to consensus formation on the stage of public discourse because counter positions appear illegitimate. The controversial interests and worldviews thereby concealed result in competing interpretation frames and story lines which allow to interpret individual cases differently and yet to assess them as (indirectly) promoting or hindering sustainable development. Whereas differing frames become significant for instance in substantiating sustainability rules (e.g. degree of substitutability of nature capital), different story lines for example reflect opposing attributions of responsibilities and funding obligations. Furthermore the story lines reflect differing concepts of measurement theories and governance models in indicator formation and sustainability strategies which become relevant in the operationalisation and implementation of sustainable development. Typically, there is a consensus on sustainability tasks and objectives in sustainable development discourses, and controversies primarily relate to the appropriateness, reliability and validity of methods and procedures (to be) applied to realize these sustainability goals.[1]

In accordance with the structurally installed division of tasks among different socio-functional systems science primarily investigates problems, possibilities and limitations of defining and operationalising sustainable development, and up to the present politics mainly deal with questions of classification and dimensioning in monitoring (success in) sustainable development as well as window dressing and marketing of sustainable development labels and issues. For instance, one finds a certain priority of intergenerational justice and a lot of methodological caveats in the scientific discourse on the various dimensions of sustainability. In (German) politics the national sustainability strategy and the corresponding monitoring system of sustainability indicators, established after 2002, exhibits a preference for intragenerational justice and a lot of optimistic window dressing.

For various reasons scientific and political discourses on sustainable development are characterized by intentional mutual interference (e.g. Brundtland Commission; Hauff et al. 1987). One reason is that the underlying concept promoted by (ecologically, economically and/or socially) engaged scientists was always conceived of as a normative approach (Carlowitz 1713, IUCN 1980). Furthermore, the various sustainability councils were deliberately created for the purpose of continuous science-policy interaction, too. During the first phase scientific debate on the basic feasibility, problems and (methodological) limitations to specify and to operationalise the concept of sustainable development prevailed, but being pushed in the political arena (Rio Conference 1992) the political discourse always strongly influenced direction and scope of public debate on sustainability issues. In the second phase, development of sustainability indicators, pragmatic sector-specific and company-specific operationalisation of sustainable development, monitoring activities measuring progress, and corresponding policy evaluations

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[1] So in the sustainability discourse discursive contests occur within the meta-frame of a generic term more or less agreed upon.

(cf. Stigson et al. 2009, Swanson et al. 2004) implied that political or economic organizations commissioned scientific investigations funded by them. Besides that the huge amount of literature on sustainable development published and the establishment of a 'sustainability science' with corresponding courses of studies generated sufficient self dynamics that scientific research and teaching of sustainability issues continuously developed. Similarly, once established, councils and organizations for sustainable development, installed in the political sphere, tend to create their independent existence and activities. As long as they do not seriously affect ordinary politics, they mainly serve symbolic uses of politics required for legitimizing purposes. If they (gradually) get more opportunities to influence political decision-making, sustainability aspects start to penetrate everyday politics (and life).

Studying the science-policy interface of sustainable development discourses supports the conclusion that – in a systems theoretical perspective – the different codes of the science system and the political system play a quite limited role in separating the scientific and the political discourse because the politically welcome breadth and vagueness of the concept sustainable development and its primarily symbolic use in politics can be neither dissolved by the scientific code addressing truth nor standardized by the political code addressing power. So the rather intense interplay of scientific investigation and policy-determined monitoring and evaluation in sustainability studies and politics is no surprise. Asking for problem oriented research by definition connects scientific studies and political programs. Nevertheless, policy strategies and programs aiming at sustainable development and scientific investigations trying to measure and to design sustainable development schemes and strategies remain different tasks carried out by different people in different socio-functional systems.

So on the one hand, sustainability discourse and activities in the science system and in the political system clearly mutually influence each other by explicit and implicit communicative exchange. Whereas scientific studies have an impact on the cognitive framing of sustainable development in politics, political interests, orientations and programs influence research directions on sustainable development by funding priorities and prescriptions. On the other hand, the scientific discourse on sustainable development develops relatively decoupled from the corresponding political discourse, and vice versa.

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