National strategies for sustainable development – translating international discourse to local realities

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Introduction

Sustainable development is widely accepted paradigm – in theory it the reconciliation of environmental, social and economic concerns seems common sense. Yet, the reality does not reflect this objective.

Not least the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and its follow-ups document the general commitment to foster sustainable development. However, this commitment cannot be regarded as sufficiently translated to action since actual results of the three "columns" are unsatisfactory. The global norm does not reach the local level.

The discrepancy between global decisions and local implementation in the field of sustainable development is illustrated in this paper. For this purpose, the South African 'National Framework for Sustainable Development' is analysed in order to determine why implementation is not successful. Two possible explanations – veto player theory and the lack of capacity – are applied. Veto player theory examines the possibility of policy reform as a result of the structure of partisan, institutional and other veto players (Tsebelis 2000, 2002). Also, a lack of capacity (financial and human resources, information, cooperation capacities) can hinder implementation even if responsible actors are supportive of the norm. In the emerging market South Africa sustainable development policy-making might face both obstacles, while the latter is likely to be more severe in economically less stable countries.

In addition to the analysis of the obstacles, it is asked which impact the business sector has since it is in a crucial position concerning economic, social and environmental developments and companies have been integrating more and more "corporate sustainability" programmes into their own strategies over the course of the past years.

The paper is structured as follows: First the term of sustainable development as a global norm is summarized; then we propose an approach to analyse the translation of this global norm into national policy-making. Possible action of the business sector is outlined and a brief case study of the South African sustainable development strategy follows.

Sustainable Development as a global norm

Following the adoption of the Brundtland Report in 1987 and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio Earth Summit) in 1992, sustainable development has become a key word for international policy-makers. It is included in numerous agendas, agreements and frameworks and has motivated the foundation of various committees and working groups. Although the term's use has dramatically increased, the concept of sustainable development as such remains imprecise with regard to its exact meaning. Definitions have been widely discussed and criticized. The concept as such has been regarded as too vague, allowing for divergent interpretations. An exact idea of how to cover the three elements meant to be combined in sustainable development policies – economic, environmental and social factors – has not been established (see for an overview e.g.: Lafferty 2000: 9-13). Still, this meaning as the integration of environmental, social and economic development can be considered a consensual minimal definition and it has become more than the intuitive understanding of the term.

Irrespective of the criticism that the concept is just another policy prescription according to the understanding of the developed world vis-à-vis developing countries, sustainable development has become an indispensable term in the global arena. In the past 20 years sustainable development agendas, although varying in wording, have been adopted by governments and other policy-makers. The European Union, for instance, as a regional actor and global player, has included the sustainable development objective into its treaties and has a Sustainable Development Strategy, which was renewed in 2006 and reviewed in 2009 (COM 2009). Also, the World Trade Organization's founding agreement and following documents contain the principle of sustainable development. Economic factors are meant to support social development while "seeking both to protect and preserve the environment and to enhance the means for doing so" (WTO 1995). The United Nation, as the most inclusive international organisation, has integrated the sustainability approach into its policies since the Rio Declaration was adopted (UNGA 1992). The Commission for Sustainable Development supports the "integration of social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in policy-making at international, regional and national levels" (DSD 2010). In addition to these and various other international institutions, like OECD and World Bank, national agendas and frameworks have integrated the goal of sustainable development.

Hence, despite debates and criticism on its exact definition, policy-making fostering sustainable development has become a practice which is widely considered adequate. As behaviour regarded as appropriate for policy-makers, sustainable development can be seen as a global norm (see for theory on norms e.g. Finnemore 1996; Finnemore/Sikkink 1998; March/Olsen 2006). Although, different from Finnemore and Sikkink's analysis (1998: 898), the norm of sustainable governance is genuinely global and has not emerged from the national level, we can assume it at the state of internalisation in the "life cycle" of the norm[1].

A global norm going national?

The majority of states regard the concept of sustainable development as appropriate. Government actors appear to have internalised it on the global level, it has reached the national level and it has been integrated in national strategies (Dalal-Clayton et al. 1996; Jörgens 2004; Lafferty 2000, 2004). However, the acceptance of the concept has not led to corresponding results and it has not been sufficiently translated into actual policy-making. None of the three elements has been sustainably advanced. Many countries could not improve their economic situation. In addition, economic inequalities have increased despite of trade expansion which had originally been regarded as a key instrument for a global "positive-sum game". Correspondingly, social development has not been realized: Inequalities within countries have been increasing and poverty alleviation has not been successful. Including after the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals, progress can at most be considered mixed (UN 2010). Lastly, the global environmental picture is likewise sad. Climate change becomes more and more acute and mitigation initiatives are far from promising serious remedy (IPCC 2007). In addition, policies hardly exist that coherently integrate these elements in order to promote comprehensive sustainable development.

One problematic aspect of sustainable development lies in its nature: It is a global concept and the goal itself is genuinely global but the actual measures to reach the goal cannot be taken at a global scale. The norm has to be transported to national or local level policy-making where public policy reforms can be conducted.

A way to explain the probability of policy reform is to examine the policy arena with regard to veto players (Tsebelis 2000, 2002)[2]. According to Tsebelis, individual and collective actors have to agree to a proposed change before it can be realized in the political system. For the purpose of analysing these actors, Tsebelis identifies institutional, partisan and other veto players. These actors stem from parameters laid out in the constitution or from features of the political system. Hence, a president or parliament chambers (institutional) as well as the different parties and their coalitions (partisan) are veto players. In addition, he speaks of possible other veto players like the judiciary, the central bank,

1 Stages in the life cycle comprise norm emergence, norm cascade, norm internalization.

2 For a case study example see e.g.: Merkel (2003).

the military, interest groups or options like referenda. These veto players are decisive for policy stability which is defined as the impossibility for significant change of the status quo. In other words, the reform capacity of a country depends on the structure of veto players. The possibility of political change is smaller: 1. the higher the number of veto players; 2. the lower the policy congruence, i.e. the higher the ideological distance among the veto players; 3. the higher the internal cohesion of a collective veto player. In addition, he formulates an "absorption rule" which means that veto players and their blocking potential are absorbed e.g. when the government party is also the majority in parliament. After analysing all these factors – the number of veto players, absorption, policy congruence and internal cohesion – the reform probability can be predicted.

Concerning the introduction and implementation of national sustainable development strategies, different veto players influence the process and outcome. First of all, decision-making can be challenged by partisan veto players when parties represent different views on the topic and share power, e.g. in a bicameral system. Also in the decision-making process, executive and legislative actors might have certain institutional powers (right of initiative, vetoes etc.) that can hinder introduction. However, even after introducing a strategy similar arrangements can impede effective implementation. Especially sustainable development, representing a cross-sectional topic, might provoke different and even competing attitudes of departments and administrations on different levels. Rival agendas of various institutional and other veto players might impede effective realization of sustainable development strategies.

However, in addition to veto players, other factors might also be responsible for the lack of policy change. Reforms might be unrealised not because decisive actors are unwilling to reform but because they are not capable to do so. This is essentially a question of governance capacity as the necessary connection between the regime or the corresponding internalised norm and actual implementation. This lack of capacity is especially found in areas of limited statehood[3] (Risse/Lehmkuhl 2006). Even if political actors or veto players are in favor of certain policies, they might lack the ability to enforce political decisions (Risse/Lehmkuhl 2006: 4). Hence, a lack of capability might be another reason why governments do not implement certain policies even though they have shown general support at the global level. Institutions, or the lack of effective institutions, can therefore become a veto player in the sense of veto by incapacity – irrespective of a meta-

[3] "[T]he term "areas of limited statehood" covers "failed/failing states" in the crisis regions of the world, "weak states" in developing and transition societies and many of the so-called "newly industrializing countries" (NICs) if they are not able to effectively enforce a monopoly on the use of force and implement authoritative decisions throughout the state." Risse/Lehmkuhl (2006: 5).

normative willingness. The question of reform probability gets another aspect in addition to willingness-veto players.

This capacity challenge is then constituted by a several aspects, such as in the first place the lack of financial resources to implement and or monitor certain policies, invest in necessary infrastructure and bring about the programmatic change needed for sustainable development (Schwartz 2003). This also points to the question of the respective source of financial resources and whether these are procured through tax collection, rents or in cases of many developing countries, external development aid (SFB 700 2010). The availability of these resources and the degree to which the state is capable of allocating and assigning these towards sustainable development is also decisive in discussing the uptake of global norms.

Furthermore in discussing effective institutions, we need to discuss the potential lack of human resources capacity, i.e. sufficient training and understanding to address emerging challenges. Especially with regards to sustainable development, the complexity of the tasks requires significant skill and knowledge, but also the capability to effectively liaise and cooperate with a broad range of actors (Kranz 2010).

This hints to two additional aspects that constitute capacity. In the first place, information resources allow for effectively assessing a situation, defining the status-quo and designing development trajectories accordingly.

And finally, it is necessary to consider the capacity to engage and interact with a broad range of actors, facilitate consensus and a commonly shared vision. This links back to the considerations with regard to veto players. While veto payers might exist, engaging those who oppose and facilitating a mutual exchange might contribute to overcoming or weakening their veto position (Börzel 2010).

New modes of governance?

Assuming that not all reform failure can be attributed to a lack in willingness or interest of certain veto players but also to a capability or resource veto, the question arises if other actors step in and function as alternative governance entrepreneurs. These actors can both compensate for material incapacities as well as bypass institutional and political veto players.[4]

In fact, van Zeijl-Rozema at al. (2008) argue for the case of sustainable development, that the multitude of challenges, the inherent complexities and issues that need to be addressed in a concerted way, the support and contribution of non-state actors is inevitable, thus introducing sustainable development as a showcase for new modes of governance.

[4] This can certainly provoke questions of legitimacy.

This statement then triggers two additional questions, which a.) pertain to the type of actors involved and b.) to the mode of interaction, which actually guides this involvement.

Possible alternative governance actors can be found in the business sector. Having influence on all three elements of the "triple bottom line" – environmental, social and economic development – businesses are crucial with respect to sustainable development. Also, businesses might be able to close the material resource gap where governments are unable to finance certain policy changes.

The role of business with regards to sustainable development is however rather contested or ambiguous at best. There are many instances where business behavior and rationale has proven detrimental to at least one pillar of the sustainable development paradigm (Bansal 2002). Business is usually perceived as a problem in the sustainability context, with digressions ranging from environmental pollution and degradation to social exploitation and human rights violations.

At the same time, there is evidence and a burgeoning body of literature on positive contributions of business to sustainable development (Elkington 1998; Laszlo 2003). It is increasingly argued that business is in a unique position to play a particular role in promoting sustainable development due to its innovative potential in terms of developing new technologies, its outreach through global markets and last but not least its financial leverage. Firms thus also increasingly engage in the provision of public goods, going beyond traditional profit-maximizing behavior, while still performing successfully on competitive markets (Bleischwitz 2003; Gunningham et al. 2002).

Generally, the business sector has an ambiguous but decisive role: Business can either have a damaging impact on social and environmental development or positively contribute to sustainable development. Hence, the question of the actual impact is essentially empirical. Taking into account the shortcomings in sustainable development, case studies can help to identify the actual impact of business practices and explore possibilities and limits of these alternative actors.

The case: South Africa

Case selection logics

The question of sustainable development governance is analysed for the case of South Africa. As this country is an emerging market it has greater capacities compared to many developing countries and fragile states. Problems that are associated with incapacities in the field of policy making can therefore be expected in an even stronger dimension in less consolidated countries.

It is examined according to veto player theory to identify political and institutional veto players in the process of realizing a sustainable development agenda. In addition, it will be asked if hindrances due to a lack of capacity influence the process. Finally, alternative governance actors might come into play.

South Africa's state

South Africa is often referred to as the African economic giant. In terms of business, political and economic ratings, South Africa ranks top among other African countries and well within the peer group of other emerging economies, such as Brazil, China and India (Hughes 2006). The country had a steady economic growth over the past years (between 3 and 5.5 %) until the global financial crisis also hit South Africa by the end of 2008 (Campbell 2009). At the same time, South Africa is still one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of income distribution, as demonstrated by a high Gini coefficient of 0.64[5]. This inequality prevails in spite of government initiatives to address both the challenge to reintroduce South Africa into the global economy and to reduce economic inequality after the collapse of the apartheid government (Pycroft 2000).

The first initiative, the so-called Reconstruction and Development Programme, was soon replaced, while not officially discontinued, with GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution), which foresaw greater economic growth through improved international competitiveness[6] (Nattrass 1999). The achievements of GEAR however have been considerably disappointing; the targets such as GDP and export growth and the reduction of the budget deficit were largely missed. One of the most problematic failures however was the loss of millions of jobs, resulting in an unemployment rate of up to 40 % by 2002. Black South Africans were more affected by unemployment than the white population; rural areas were more struck by the negative consequences than urban areas. Even though South Africa is considered an upper-middle income country with a per capita GDP of around 3.900 (1998 dollars), one finds significant levels of food insecurity and poverty, particularly among the black population.

Weighing in heavily on the development potential of the country is furthermore the HIV/AIDS pandemic leading to the highest prevalence of the disease worldwide (about 25 % for adults in 2001). Resulting in a considerable shortening of life expectancy, the disease is impacting negatively on human capital in terms of the availability of skilled labor for industry as well as the public sector (Van Aardt 2002). Hughes (2006) argues that the effects of the pandemic might even aggravate South Africa's second largest issue: the high incidence of crime (DEAT 2008), which is compromising social security and thus stifling development, particularly in the rapidly growing informal settlements

5 The Gini coefficient denotes income equality. While 0 represents perfect income equality; 1 represents a situation of perfect inequality in income distribution.

6 It also proclaimed the promotion of private investment, increased privatization as well as a reduced overall budget deficit, fiscal discipline and labor-market flexibility. It thus reduced government intervention and forbore government's ability to influence poverty reduction and income distribution.

(Hamann 2008). Besides these obvious weaknesses of the South African state in the areas of stable and equitable poverty eradication, the provision of sustainable human settlements, and the combat against HIV/AIDS, other problems occur with regards to a stable and affordable supply of energy and the maintenance of key municipal infrastructure (Lawless 2007), let alone keeping-up the skill level necessary to address and manage these challenges.

Sustainable Development in South Africa

Corresponding to the outlined economic and social weaknesses, Patrick Bond and his co-authors examine the at times deeply unsustainable practices followed in South Africa in the pre and post apartheid period (Bond/Vogel 2002). The authors cite inadequate access to water and other services, unsustainable modes of energy production, neoliberal tendencies with regards to granting access to services and overreliance on foreign donors and their growth paradigms as symptoms for this unsustainable approach.

While unsustainable practices prevail in the country and are partly aggravated by major global trends, such as climate change and globalization (DEAT 2008), the paradigm of sustainable development has been strongly received as a discourse in South Africa since democratization. Sustainability as a norm is widely accepted and supported. Not only is the concept enshrined in the constitution[7], but the National Environmental Management Act contains a clear commitment to sustainable development as well (Fig 2007). In addition to the general internalization of the norm, the awareness prevails that local implementation is essential for any realization of sustainable development. The concepts of Local Agenda 21[8] have been formally adopted by the South African government, highlighting the role of the local dimension (Urquhart/Atkinson 2000)[9]. As a reaction to its commitment to paragraph 162 of the JPOI South Africa embarked on the development of a

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7 At the core of the legislative apparatus in South Africa is the most fundamental legal provision, the Bill of Rights, Chapter 2 of the Constitution of South Africa (No. 108 of 1996). Among other rights it foresees a fair and sustainable management of South Africa's natural resources through the promotion of ownership and empowerment of the people and is therefore often used as a reference for policies documents in relation to sustainable development. Specifically, Section 24 of the Bill of Rights guarantees environmental rights to all people of South Africa by stating the following: Everyone has the right: to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being; and to have the environment protected for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that prevent pollution and ecological degradation; promote conservation; and secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development..."

8 Local Agenda 21 is an international program for the implementation of sustainability in local government. This program emerged from the Rio Summit in 1992 and involves strategic community based planning for development and the involvement of communities in decision-making through local level partnerships (Urquhart and Atkinson, 2000).

9 While these commitments reflect the international discourse in the 1980/1990, the concept received further momentum in the country with South Africa hosting the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, which resulted in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. The plan comprises 37 targets for reaching sustainable development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals.

National Strategy for Sustainable Development. An intermediate step in the process unfolding was a National Framework for Sustainable Development (NFSD) (DEAT 2006, 2008). The NFSD, in its first version of 2008, intended to form a basis for progress with regards to concerted action across all spheres of government and other social partners. The framework furthermore sought to integrate sustainability considerations with the overall development discourse and spell out the national vision for sustainable development (DEAT 2008)[10]. Accordingly, in the South African understanding, the term 'sustainable development' is determined by some distinctive features, which reflect the country's specific development challenges. The NFSD details guiding principles and derives priority areas for strategic interventions in response to the major identified trends, at a global as well as national scale[11].

However, the actual realization of the Framework is confronted with problems, including with regard to necessary institutional mechanisms, planning, communication and monitoring measures. Several institutions have come into play as veto players as it proved to be very difficult to gain sufficient buy-in across various government departments. Already at an early stage these actors inhibited a comprehensive realization which led to the initial issuance of a framework rather than a full strategy (Fig 2007). Furthermore, the NFSD would have to be integrated with other development related strategies at the national and province levels making it necessary for numerous veto players to approve of the implementation. At the national level, the fate of the NFSD is probably most linked the so-called Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative (Asgi-SA), which preceded the formation of the NFSD. Largely developed in 2005, the Asgi-SA spells out South Africa's economic growth targets for the period until 2014 at a level of 5 % on average per year. In addition to these concrete economic growth targets, Asgi-SA comprises social objectives, such as the fight against poverty and the reduction of unemployment as major goals (Presidency 2005). As the strategy is issued directly by the president and key government departments, the initiative enjoys far more visibility than the NFSD[12]. There is no clear reference in Asgi-SA to the sustainable development paradigm, taken up by

[10] T he process is designed to continue with the definition of sustainable development indicators, investments in capacity building as well as the development of a fully fledged National Strategy for Sustainable Development.

[11] Priority areas include "sustainable ecosystems and natural resources efficiency", "economic development through investments in sustainable infrastructure" and "enhanced systems for integrated planning and implementation", "sustainable human settlements" and "appropriate responsiveness to emerging human development and environmental challenges".

[12] The Initiative identifies the major constraints for achieving these goals, such as a volatile South African currency, a lacking national logistics systems, skills shortage, barriers to investment in downstream industries, ill-directed legislation and deficiencies in state organization capacity and leadership. Based on these observations, a number of key interventions are proposed. This includes public sector investment (including bulk water infrastructure), industry-focused initiatives (tourism and biofuel production) a stronger focus on education and skills development and the elimination of the Second Economy. The Initiative furthermore acknowledges that the attainment of these targets requires the buy-in of all social

the NFSD. The latter however explicitly proposes the mainstreaming of the identified priority challenges in Asgi-SA and related programs. It remains questionable if the relatively new NFSD headed by the relatively weak Department for Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) and now Department of Water and Environmental Affairs[13] will find equal consideration as the strongly promoted Asgi-SA is already serving as the main reference for any growth related discourse and activities in the South African context. This is also reflected by the relatively low profile of sustainability concerns with other government portfolios, such as the Department of Trade and Industry or the Treasury. Hence, various institutional and powerful veto players hinder the implementation of the sustainability framework. It is therefore even legitimate to ask, whether the government follows and promotes the path of sustainable development itself, or whether the approach is rather fragmented and reflected by some rather marginal departments. It might be the case that unsustainable practices are merely hidden behind a 'sustainable development' rhetoric (Büscher 2008).

In addition to these veto players, capacity deficits are also hindering the realization of the NFSD. A crucial lack of capacity has been lying with DEAT. It has been the primary custodian of the environment and also overseeing the implementation of the right of all South Africans to an environment that is not harmful to health and well-being. In this function, DEAT has been responsible for administering e.g. the National Framework for Sustainable Development.
Over the past years, DEAT has been considered a rather weak or junior department, compared to senior departments like the Department for Minerals and Energy. As such, it has been criticized for simply giving the nod to environmentally controversial projects pushed by industry and those departments in favor of those developments (Mail & Guardian, 2007). Hence, NFSD has been left in the responsibility of this rather weak department, which does not possess enough own capacities and is not expected to develop the necessary clout to create broad-based buy-in from other government departments (Fig, 2007).

This weakness at the national level is then in many cases propagated at lower planning levels, with government capacity being noticeably lower at provincial as well as local level (Kranz 2010). At these levels, administrations in many cases massively lack the financial, but also human and information resources to address complex problems related to implementing policies conducive to sustainable development (Swilling 2007, Cloete 2002). Most decisively, there is only limited capacity to engage in

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partners, including the national development finance institutions as well as civil society. Asgi-SA makes explicit reference to the at times stifling effect of weak and inefficient local planning systems and the demanding Environmental Impact Assessment.

13 With the formation of the new government in the wake of the 2009 elections DEAT and the Department for Water Affairs were re-organized and combined into a new Department of Water and Environmental Affairs.

an encompassing dialogue with the wide range of societal stakeholders necessary for arriving a broadly accepted sustainable solution.

As a result, South Africa is still carrying an almost overwhelming burden of unsustainable practices and their ramifications have not yet come to bear. This situation necessitates a fundamental change in order to embark on a sustainable trajectory. Is the business community in a position and willing to step in and contribute to sustainable development through their own means?

To begin with, in South Africa unsustainable behavior emanates largely from the business sector. Especially the mining industry and related processing industries set a negative record in this regard. Apart from substantial ecological impacts, the adverse social impacts of mining companies' practices, especially those related to the migrant labor system, have long been documented (Granville 2001)[14]. In terms of the actual mining operations, worker health and safety as well as the issue of human rights emerged prominently (Stephens/Ahern 2001). In addition, the severity of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa is partly attributed to the migrant labor system as well (Elias/Taylor 2001)[15]. As Hamann and Bezuidenhout (2007) point out, the impact of mining on social and community aspects and its repercussions on the South African society are hard to grasp, rendering an assessment of the mining industry's merits in terms of job creation and economic development almost impossible. At the same time the mining industry epitomizes the challenge inherent to sustainable development in balancing the environmental, social and economic "pillars".

However, there is a paradigm shift currently underway among business towards more responsibility with regards to environmental, social and economic issues. This is for example documented through the emergence and adoption of new codes and initiatives (DEAT 2008).

Partly resulting from this situation is a relative maturity of the South African debate on corporate social responsibility. This manifests itself in the form of South African corporate governance guidelines, such as the King II report[16]. Furthermore South African business players have signed up to a number of national and international codes of conducts. A local platform of the UN Global Compact has been installed and international certification schemes, such as ISO 14001, find broad application, particularly with the more export-oriented industries in South Africa (Bezuidenhout, Fig, Hamann, &

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14 These comprise impacts at the actual mining site as well as repercussions in the sending areas, i.e. the home regions of the mine workers Banerjee (2001).

15 HIV/AIDS is particularly prevalent in the informal mine settlements, partly due to prostitution. Upon returning to their home areas, workers transmit the disease to their wives, thus contributing to a high prevalence of the disease.

16 The King report was issued by the Institute of Directors and represents a formal review of South African corporate governance guidelines and arrangements. It addresses financial as well as non-financial reporting criteria pertaining to health and safety practices, environmental governance as well as social investment (Malan, 2007). South African companies make use of the King code and in some cases also other internationally promoted reporting schemes, such as the GRI to report on their responsibility performance (Du Plooy, 2006).

Omar, 2007). There is a growing awareness for the notion of corporate responsibility among South African business, as well as an interest in more guidance from side of government with regards to CSR (Du Plooy, 2006).

Nevertheless, the discourse on the manifestations of CSR in the South African context continues with view to the needs of an emerging economy, while also taking up tendencies from the global debates. For example, the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development helped to spur the debate on corporate responsibility among the South African business community by showcasing activities of international business. The criticism of national and international NGOs of business practices ‘close to home’ has been another impact of the Summit that activated a national discussion (Bezuidenhout et al., 2007). Currently, international politics and policies seeking to address climate change are receiving considerable attention among the South African business community. The development on climate change is seen as a risk and an opportunity at the same time (Du Plooy, 2006). This indicates that South African businesses are susceptible to the international CSR discourses.

Current research addresses the effects of current corporate sustainability and responsibility approaches and practices. Fig (2005) argues, that in some cases such initiatives are utilized in order to ‘manufacture amnesia’ and cover-up past malpractices. In fact, business practices in many instances remain fundamentally unsustainable, leading among other impacts to an overutilization of water resources, massive climate-relevant emissions as well as the propagation of social injustice. Positive developments are emerging in some instances and selected industry sectors, such as the automotive industry, the food and beverage sector, textile industry (Börzel et al. 2010) and even in the mining industry (Kranz 2010) as well as other sectors based on the extractive industries. Further research into the respective motivations for this behaviour however has revealed that next to an inherent motivation due to resource constraints and possibly also international sustainability discourses as well as brand awareness, government intervention in terms of providing a clear guidance with regard to sustainable development is of the essence (Kranz 2010).

This brings us back to earlier considerations with view to veto payers and capacities at government level, which emerge as decisive factors in implementing the international norm of sustainable development in the national context.

Conclusion and Outlook

This brief case study of South African sustainable development politics shows how the implementation of policies that are in accordance with an internationally recognized norm is hindered by national veto players and the lack of capacities to enforce decisions and regulations. Competing governmental actors prevail over DEAT’s and its successor institution’s agendas. One reason for this is that policies pursued by other players are insufficiently congruent with the sustainability agenda and that there is little effort with regard to improving the alignment of different, however relevant and also related portfolios. Other reasons are the insufficient resources allocated to DEAT and corresponding department at lower administrative levels. Thus, the number of veto players, but also their relatively greater weight, are obstacles for a successful implementation. It is therefore a combination of competing players and a lack of capacities that impede change.

Also does business not fill this implementation gap. Even though corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility programmes are in vogue, business is still doing more harm than benefiting social and environmental development. Hence, in the case of South Africa business is not able to replace governmental implementation of a public policy framework in the field of sustainable development (yet).

Market incentives are not enough to trigger extensive sustainability efforts and incoherent policy making of different government departments as well as the actual resource allocation impede the creation of a framework which effectively determines the development trajectory. Still, due to their potential, companies could positively contribute to sustainable development in a stronger national framework and although budget choices might underlie certain constraints policy coherence and coordination could be improved.

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