
The governance of sustainable development: taking stock and looking forwards

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Abstract. The number of books and papers bearing the terms ‘sustainable development’ and ‘governance’ in their titles has grown exponentially in the last decade or so. The main purpose of this paper is to explore what meanings have been attached to these two essentially contested terms and to assess the extent to which the material on them constitutes an important, coherent, and cumulative body of scholarship. The first half explores the existing literatures on the two terms, and draws out some of the main similarities and differences. Drawing on papers that have been published in this journal over the last decade or so, the second half focuses on the attempts that have been made to build empirical and/or theoretical bridges between the two terms. The concluding section identifies a number of key themes and explores future research needs in what is evidently a vibrant and highly policy-relevant area of environmental social science research.

1 Introduction

The more effort that society has put into developing more sustainably, the more clearly it has started to comprehend the full complexity of that task. The very acute feeling, expressed in the *Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2002), the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005), and the *GEO 4* report (UNEP, 2007), that things have got worse—not better—since the publication of Brundtland’s landmark report (WCED, 1987) on sustainable development, has strengthened the demand for systems of governance that are capable of putting society on a more sustainable track. The number of books and papers which include the words ‘sustainable’, ‘development’, and ‘governance’ in their title, has grown enormously in the last decade. However, the manner in which these words are juxtaposed exhibit a number of differences. For example, sometimes the demand is for more “sustainable governance” (ECFESD, 2000); sometimes it is for “governance for sustainable development” (Ayre and Callway, 2005; Newig et al, 2008). Others have called for “reflexive governance for sustainable development” (Voß et al, 2006). And still others have substituted the word ‘sustainable’ for other words to produce titles such as “earth system governance” (Biermann, 2007) or “global environmental governance” (Speth and Haas, 2006). What are we to make of these differences? Are they relatively small semantic matters or are they underlain by much more fundamental differences in approach, opinion, and, ultimately, human value?

In some ways it is hardly surprising that the world is still struggling to solve the riddle of sustainability twenty years after the landmark Brundtland report. After all, the tense relationship between the two central themes of sustainable development—the simultaneous desire for economic prosperity and environmental protection—has lain at the heart of environmental politics and policy making since time immemorial (Carter, 2007, page 207). Brundtland tried to address these tensions by “sending out the intuitively appealing message” that it is possible to have both at the same time (pages 207–208). Her committee’s report succeeded incredibly well at popularising this particular interpretation of sustainable development, creating a “veritable industry of

deciphering and advocating” (Kates et al, 2005, page 11). These discussions have, in turn, helped to trigger and inform a host of international meetings, first at Rio in 1992 and then ten years later in Johannesburg, which have powerfully reaffirmed sustainable development as *the* overarching objective of human development internationally, regionally, and more locally. However, Brundtland did not, as I shall explain below, precisely explain how sustainable development should be achieved. Or, to use the terms identified above, how society should govern itself so that the sum total of human development becomes more sustainable in the long term.

The scholarly debate about whether sustainable development is a well-honed principle, a concept, a ‘meta fix’, a positive vision, a normative idea, or a focus of discourse (see, for example, Dryzek, 2005; Kates et al, 2005; Lele, 1991; Meadowcroft, 2000) remains as lively as ever. The more pragmatic and policy-focused debate about how to put sustainable development into effect has been just as energetic, with the vexed issue of *governing* often appearing centre stage. In the last decade or so issues of governing and governance have assumed a “central place in contemporary debates in the social sciences” (Pierre and Peters, 2000, page 1). However, like sustainable development, it is often used loosely to describe and explain a host of different things (Pierre and Peters, 2005). In their widely cited review article, van Kersbergen and van Waarden (2004) argued that there is not even a “consensus on which set of phenomena can properly be grouped under the title of ‘governance’” (page 165). To say that “[w]e are still in a period of creative disorder concerning governance” (Kooiman, 2003, page 5) is almost certainly an understatement.

In ‘sustainable development’ and ‘governance’ we possibly have two of the most essentially contested terms in the entire social sciences—hardly a good foundation, one might think, for solid and insightful scholarship. The main purpose of this paper is to explore what is meant by ‘sustainable development’ and ‘governance’, and, following on from this, to assess the extent to which academic work on the links between them constitutes an important, coherent, and cumulative body of scholarship. At one level their enormous popularity does seem to imply that governance ‘matters’ not just a little, but a lot, in the transition to sustainable development, although obviously when, how, and why it matters remain the focus of intense scholarly as well as societal debate. But, at a deeper level, ‘governance’ and ‘sustainable development’ are also potentially highly ambiguous terms, which if used too loosely may inhibit rather than facilitate cumulative research. The obvious danger is that any consensus on their presumed importance (either individually or in combination) may be more apparent than real.

I shall begin this stock-taking exercise by recognising that, ultimately, sustainable development is “a political concept, replete with governance questions” (Farrell et al, 2005, page 143). What sorts of questions might these be? The first one is deceptively simple—namely ‘what is sustainable development?’ Brundtland was very careful to present sustainable development in only the most “general terms” (WCED, 1987, page 46)—more as a set of guiding (and in practice often highly contradictory) principles and values than as a clearly defined blueprint. Some observers have argued that this ambiguity has always been the term’s greatest weakness (eg Lele, 1991). For others, however, sustainable development is not an “objectively determinate quantity” (Stirling, 1999, page 112): “the creative tension between a few core principles and the openness to re-interpretation and adaptation to different social and ecological contexts” is what has given sustainable development its staying power (Kates et al, 2005, page 20). Crucially, if—following Brundtland—there is to be no centrally determined blueprint for sustainable development, its practical meaning will necessarily have to emerge out of an interactive *process* of social dialogue and reflection. If this is the case, systems of

governance will be needed to guide and steer these collective discussions towards a satisfactory level of consensus. Initially, the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio was asked to explore what these governance systems might look like. It came up with a sprawling document known as *Agenda 21* (United Nations, 1992). More a piece of international soft law than a binding set of international legal obligations, it had 40 chapters spanning over 600 pages. As this hardly constituted a neat and tidy blueprint, the debate about how to ‘govern for sustainable development’ continued to run and run.

The second governance-related question is ‘how will sustainable development (however defined) be implemented?’ One lesson that has been painfully learnt since 1987 is that sustainable development does not just ‘happen’ in an automatic or preordained way. It needs to be carefully discussed, openly debated, and possibly even centrally “planned” (Carter, 2007, page 224). Crucially, these governing processes are unlikely to take place in an institutional and political vacuum. On the contrary, they will need to be embedded in systems of governance, and targeted at particular steps in the policy-making process such as options appraisal, decision making, and/or implementation. The literature on governance identifies three main modes of governance: hierarchies, markets, and networks. Despite Brundtland’s own centre–left political beliefs, the Brundtland committee’s report was relatively agnostic about which of these should be relied upon most. Clearly, the choice of which governing mode or instrument to adopt will never be a totally open or value-free activity, given that the prevailing systems of governance are themselves very deeply implicated in unsustainable patterns of development (Cowell and Owens, 2006). Similarly, if the literature on governance is to be believed, these systems will always be in a state of flux, very often for all sorts of ‘nonsustainability’ reasons. Any attempt, therefore, to govern society towards a specific goal, namely sustainable development, will need to be fully cognisant of this evolving context.

The remainder of this paper seeks to explore the role that ‘governance’—very broadly defined—does and, just as importantly, *should* play in the way that society addresses these two questions. The next section (section 2) explores the meaning of sustainable development in a little more detail, identifies the most critical principles and values, and discusses what they imply for those seeking to govern. Then, section 3 examines what is meant by ‘governance’, a term which is enjoying unprecedented attention right across the social sciences as well as in wider society, but which invites a number of different interpretations. Drawing on papers that have been published in *Environment and Planning C* in the last decade or so, section 4 examines the literature which explores the intellectual territory between ‘governance’ and ‘sustainable development’, both from an empirical and a more conceptual/analytical perspective. The final section (section 5) draws together a number of key themes and identifies emerging research areas in which papers published in *Environment and Planning C* have made a particularly distinctive contribution.

2 What is sustainable development?

The Brundtland report (WCED, 1987) popularised the term ‘sustainable development’, but did not coin it. What it did do, however, was relaunch it in a way that significantly broadened its appeal (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000, page 10).⁽¹⁾ This required the commission to unite two different worldviews and their associated political groupings, notably those representing the countries of the industrialised North and the industrialising South. Brundtland did this by stressing the need for common but differentiated change—that is, a new era of economic growth in the South to alleviate chronic poverty,

⁽¹⁾ There can be no doubt that its title—*Our Common Future*—was deliberately chosen with this goal in mind.

and much more resource efficient growth in the North to address mounting social and environmental concerns.

With hindsight, *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987) was a bold attempt to sidestep the ‘growth versus the environment’ dichotomy which had preoccupied and greatly bedevilled international discussions since the 1972 Stockholm environment conference. While aspects of this debate undoubtedly remain, they are no longer expressed in such a polarised manner, hence the claims that sustainable development is “a grand compromise” (Kates et al, 2005, page 19) or a “multi-dimensional bridging concept” (Meadowcroft, 2000, page 381). So, instead of talking about trade-offs between the three main ‘pillars’ of sustainable development—namely society, the economy, and the environment—after Brundtland, the (not always successful) search for synergies between the three became more urgent.

The literature on sustainable development is truly vast [to get a sense of its scale and broad scope, see Redclift (2005)]. In 1987 Brundtland famously defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without comprising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, page 43). It may surprise some readers to discover that the Brundtland Commission did not actually define sustainable development any more precisely than this. Lele (1991, page 613), amongst others, regarded this as a significant problem because it left sustainability being about everything and therefore potentially nothing. Although the debate about definitions and meanings continues, it is nowhere near as intense as it was in the 1980s and 1990s. Most scholars now accept that searching for a precise definition of sustainable development that pleases everyone would (if it were even possible) only take society so far. For a start, there are simply too many to choose from. Second, precision may come at a cost: Hajer (1995, page 14) made a very powerful point when he observed that the coalition for sustainable development would collapse if it were it ever defined precisely, given its potentially unstable mixture of radical and conservative elements. Third, as Brundtland herself pointed out, the very act of contesting and debating the meaning of sustainable development in concrete decision-making situations itself has enormous value, and is thus a hugely important aspect of governing for sustainable development.

It is telling that very few authors and policy makers actively interrogate and critique Brundtland’s ‘baseline’ definition; the vast majority are more interested in understanding how and why it is used by social actors operating in a variety of different governance contexts to realise their political objectives (Baker, 2005, page 22; Dryzek, 2005, pages 146–147). The constant process of redefinition and interpretation that has taken place since 1987 has mostly been concerned not with fixing a precise definition of sustainable development in one or two lines of text, but with exploring the interplay between different *subprinciples* of sustainable development. These include the following: improving intergenerational and intragenerational equity; alleviating chronic poverty; encouraging public participation in decision making; observing important environmental limits to growth; and integrating an environmental dimension into all sectoral policy making. This list was subsequently extended and further elaborated in a number of internationally endorsed documents, including the 1992 Rio Declaration, Agenda 21 (United Nations, 1992), and the *Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2002). These principles can and often do conflict sharply with one another, hence the need for systems of governance to resolve conflicts and to arrive at coordinated policies. Indeed, some scholars believe that systems of governance can and should be configured in ways that not only encourage societal dialogue, but also transform attitudes and beliefs in ways that actively facilitate sustainable development (hence the references to “governance for [sustainable development]” (and even “*reflexive* governance for [sustainable development]”))

(Newig et al, 2008; Voß et al, 2006). The next section therefore investigates the meaning of the term ‘governance’, which was of course conspicuously absent from *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987).

3 What is governance?

Governance is undoubtedly a term in good currency, but it is often used very loosely to refer to a host of what can in practice be rather different things. The combination of conceptual vagueness and loose application has boosted the term’s popularity as well as raised questions about its utility (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2006, page 28). However, it would be quite wrong to conclude that it has “too many meanings to be useful” (Rhodes, 1997, page 15). The first and most important thing to say is that governance is not the same as governing. ‘Governing’ refers to those social activities which make a “purposeful effort to guide, steer, control, or manage (sectors or facets of) societies” (Kooiman, 1993, page 2). ‘Governance’ on the other hand describes “the patterns that emerge from the governing activities of social, political and administrative actors” (page 2). The second is that governance is not the same as government: while government centres on the institutions and actions of the state, the term governance allows nonstate actors such as businesses and nongovernmental organisations to be brought into any analysis of societal steering (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006, page 298). This important difference in scope and perspective was very well summarised in one of the first and most seminal publications on contemporary governance:

“Both [terms] refer to purposive behaviour, to goal oriented activities, to systems of rule; but government suggests activities that are backed by formal authority ... whereas governance refers to activities backed by shared goals that may or may not derive from legal or formally prescribed responsibilities Governance, in other words, is a more encompassing phenomenon than government. It embraces governmental institutions, but it also subsumes informal, non governmental mechanisms ... whereby those persons and organizations within its purview move ahead, satisfy their need and fulfil their wants (Rosenau, 1992, page 4).

What encourages so many social scientists to use the term governance instead of government is its ability to “cover the whole range of institutions and relationships involved in the process of governing” (Pierre and Peters, 2000, page 1). The third thing that can be said is that governance is not normally tied to a particular period of time or geographical place; it is a concept that travels easily across these categories. In fact, its lack of geographical specificity has allowed scholars operating at totally different spatial scales—international, national, and/or subnational—or even across many scales [hence ‘multilevel governance’ (Bache and Flinders, 2004)], to use it. This ability to ‘bridge’ disciplines and distinct areas of study has undoubtedly boosted the popularity of governance (van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004), but has also contributed to the lack of precision noted above.

It is fair to say that, at first, the literature on governance was “eclectic and relatively disjointed” (Stoker, 1998, page 18). But by the 2000s it had consolidated around two core meanings (Pierre and Peters, 2000, page 24)—the first theoretical/analytical and the other more empirical (Bache and Flinders, 2004, chapter 12). The conflation of the two has proved to be a constant source of confusion, as the term has been used both to describe different empirical phenomena *and* to explain why they occur.⁽²⁾ Before continuing, it is also worth noting that these two interpretations (as well as a third—more normative—interpretation) are present across a very broad swathe of governance research, covering a variety of spatial scales and policy sectors.

⁽²⁾ It is not really surprising that analysts have done this, because many of the theories and analytical frameworks have emerged out of and have been informed by perceived empirical changes.

3.1 Governance as an empirical phenomenon

Analysts seized on the term ‘governance’ because they thought it was better able to capture important phenomenological changes in contemporary processes of governing than the term ‘government’. In particular, governance is now used as a shorthand phrase for encapsulating the changing form and role of the state in contemporary industrialised societies, the essential change being the decreasing popularity of hierarchical modes of governing. The perception that we are living in a more ‘centreless’ society is often seen to derive from macrolevel processes such as globalisation, Europeanisation, and devolution (Helmsing, 2002; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2003), as well as more specific policy reforms (such as new public management) that have sought to ‘roll back’ the state and to provide more services through markets and networks (Pierre and Peters, 2000, pages 83–91). By using the term ‘governance’ instead of ‘government’, analysts have tried to draw attention to the empirical fact that these processes and reforms have meant that many contemporary policies are now implemented by a wider array of public, private, and voluntary organisations than would traditionally have been included within a purely ‘governmental’ framework (Flinders, 2002, page 52). Consequently, if the extreme form of government was the ‘strong state’ in the era of ‘big government’ (Pierre and Peters, 2000, page 25), then the most extreme form of governance is a much flatter and essentially self-organising network of societal actors (Schout and Jordan, 2005).

One of the more obvious empirical manifestations of governance is the appearance of what are often referred to as “new modes of governance” (Treib et al, 2007), especially those that rely on the coordinating power of networks [such as voluntary agreements and the kinds of benchmarking techniques popularised by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)] and markets (eg market-based instruments such as environmental taxes). Networked-based modes of governance differ from hierarchical ones in at least one crucial respect: in a network the participating actors are expected to work out how to steer society for themselves; hierarchical modes aim to instruct them on how to achieve greater coordination (Schout and Jordan, 2005; Treib et al, 2007). In the international sphere, scholars of international relations believe that governance is manifest in the increasing prevalence of interstate agreements, multinational institutions and organisations, and new forms of public–private and private–private cooperation (Levy and Newell, 2004). These phenomenological changes are taken to imply that there is such a thing as ‘global governance’ in a global system which has traditionally been viewed through the prism of sovereignty and undiluted statehood (Biermann, 2006, pages 241–243; Dingwerth and Pattberg, 2006, pages 189–193).

However, the extent to which any of these changes has had a long-term impact on the steering capacity of the state remains a very moot point. Marks et al (1996) have identified two different views that can be taken on this issue: state centric and society centric. The society-centric view suggests that the state has been progressively ‘hollowed out’ in a new era of ‘governance without government’ (Rosenau, 1992) and its steering capacity severely denuded, as more and more policy competences have moved up to international bodies, down to regional organisations and/or out to nonstate actors (Marks et al, 1996; Rhodes, 1996). Conversely, the state-centric view holds that, while the state may have weakened in the sense that it delivers fewer services than it did (say) in the 1960s and 1970s, it remains a critical actor, and a key site of political accountability and public legitimacy (Gamble, 2000; Mann, 1997; Pierre and Peters, 2000, pages 4–5; Sbragia, 2000). The jury is still out on which of these two views provides the most realistic description of reality.

3.2 Governance as theory

For some authors, governance is and will for ever remain a ‘descriptive label’ (Biermann, 2006, page 241; Richards and Smith, 2002, page 3). However, other commentators have sought to use it in a more theoretical manner to try and explain some of the empirical patterns described in the previous section. Flinders (2002, page 70), for example, has sought to advance a “governance theory”, which he believes raises important issues of control, coordination, accountability and political power. It should now be apparent that many discussions of governance theory are couched in terms of the three main modes of governing, namely markets, networks, and hierarchies. The increasing empirical prevalence of networks as the preferred mode of governing in many states as well as the EU (Treib et al, 2007) has in turn encouraged scholars to elaborate and refine the theoretical precepts of these three (Schout and Jordan, 2005; Thompson, 2003), thereby emphasising the extent to which the development of new empirical and theoretical understanding of governance have in practice been subtly interlinked. For example, the increasing empirical prevalence of network-based modes of governance in the EU has generated new typologies (Treib et al, 2007) and attempts to measure their coordinating performance (Jordan and Schout, 2006) vis-a-vis hierarchical modes of governing.

That these empirical manifestations of governance have triggered much theoretical reflection is one thing, but to say that it adds up to a coherent and fully fledged ‘theory of governance’ is something altogether different. It is hardly surprising to learn that sceptics have concluded that there is not and never will be a grand ‘theory of governance’ (Young, 2005), but it is worth noting that the chief exponents of ‘governance as theory’ are relatively modest in their claims. Flinders (2002, page 52), for example, concedes that governance theory is in an embryonic form; Pierre and Peters (2000, page 7) admit that it is in ‘a proto’ state—that is, governance research is mainly a set of puzzling empirical observations looking for a theoretical explanation, which can in turn be supplied ‘off the shelf’ by existing theoretical frameworks (Pierre and Peters, 2000, Chapter 2).⁽³⁾ Similar remarks have been expressed by those studying global governance (Dingwerth and Pattberg, 2006, pages 199–200; see also Biermann, 2006; Hewson and Sinclair, 1999) and global environmental governance (Young, 2005).

3.3 Governance as a normative prescription

The third way in which governance has been used is much more prescriptive and/or normative in nature—that is, as something which should be adopted to achieve some preferred end point (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2006, page 29). One of the most well-known formulations is that of ‘good governance’, which is strongly associated with the work of development organisations such as the World Bank (World Bank, 1992) (Smith, 2007; World Bank, 2002), but also a wide array of other public and private bodies. This formulation associates governance with an efficient public service, an independent judiciary, a publicly accountable system for collecting and allocating funds, a respect for law and order, as well as human rights. The OECD seeks to propagate ‘good governance’ by employing a particular network-based mode of governance which has come to be known as ‘the OECD technique’ (Lehtonen, 2007). This technique involves states benchmarking and sharing best practices in relation to the performance of their administrations and the ability of their policies to handle sustainability (OECD, 2001; van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004, pages 144–145). Flowing from these activities are numerous case studies, OECD performance reviews, and checklists.

⁽³⁾ Or, to quote one paper recently published in this journal, “a thoroughly discussed theory looking for better [empirical] methods” (Gissendanner, 2003, page 664).

Here is another example of how one interpretation of governance (the normative—how policy should be conducted) is subtly interconnected with the other two (ie the collection and dissemination of empirical evidence via a network-based mode of governance—the OECD technique). Another example can be found in the EU. In 2001 the EU issued a white paper on governance, which identified a number of normative principles, namely openness, participation, coherence, efficiency, and proportionality [COM(2001)428]. It also identified the need to extend the range of policy instruments in the EU to encompass more network-based and market-based modes of governance [COM(2001)428, page 4]. This in turn encouraged scholars to develop better typologies of old and new modes of governing (Treib et al, 2007), and to explore the theoretical and empirical conditions in which they worked best (Jordan and Schout, 2006). Finally, reference should also be made to the term ‘corporate governance’, which relates to the various ways in which private companies are directed, administered, or controlled, in ways which are accountable to their stakeholders. It has received considerable attention since the high-profile collapse of firms such as Enron and Worldcom. Empirically, this term is suggestive of many different forms of governance, not simply the more hierarchical ones (for example, legislation) that have traditionally been issued by sovereign states operating in less-globalised times.

Normative applications of the term governance are also to be found in the International-relations field, where they offer a “vision of how societies should address the most pressing global problems” (Dingwerth and Pattberg, 2006, page 193). Chief amongst these is globalisation, for which a “global governance architecture” is seen as a potentially important antidote (Biermann, 2006, page 240). Here, the EU is often held up as a potential role model. The Commission on Global Governance (1995) has provided one of the most detailed and comprehensive explanations of how this vision could be put into effect.

In the next section I use these three interpretations to disentangle and make sense of the literature on governance and/or sustainable development. What follows is by no means an exhaustive or comprehensive review, but rather is an attempt to identify and explore a number of dominant themes. Throughout, references are made to papers that have appeared in this journal since 1997.

4 Governance and sustainable development: taking stock

The first and probably the most important point to make is that the literature covering these two terms has undoubtedly burgeoned in the last five to ten years, very much paralleling the enormous growth in the governance literature. The second is that the vast majority of contributions are either empirical (‘governance as an empirical phenomenon’) or normative (‘governance as a normative prescription’), or some combination of the two. Some authors have deliberately highlighted the differences between these two interpretations, by distinguishing between “governance *and* sustainable development” and “governance *for* sustainable development” (Farrell et al, 2005, page 127, my emphasis). While the former is more interested in exploring how sustainable development has been variously interpreted and pursued in different policy/governance systems, the latter seeks to identify and prescribe what governance systems should be employed to make sustainable development not only a reality but also “in a way that is true to the gravity and complexity of the task” (page 130).

The third point is that—like the broader field of governance research—very few attempts have been made to produce a dedicated ‘theory of sustainable development governance’.⁽⁴⁾ On the contrary, the vast majority of empirical accounts of how

⁽⁴⁾ Although many attempts have been made to discuss the state’s role from a green political theory perspective (for example, Dobson, 2000; Eckersley, 2004).

sustainable development has been governed make little or no reference to what currently passes for ‘governance theory’, or simply import what theory or theories they need from the broader field of social science research on policy and political systems. Consequently, the remainder of this section is devoted mainly to the empirical and the normative interpretation of governance and/or sustainable development.

4.1 Normative interpretations

Sustainable development is, at root, a “fundamental normative idea” (Meadowcroft, 2000, page 371) and a great deal of effort has been expended on trying to identify what governance changes are needed to put it into effect. For instance, the EU’s Consultative Forum on Environment and Sustainable Development has called for “sustainable governance” based on “full information, an open public discourse and stakeholder dialogues at all levels [and] [m]otivating rather than prescriptive measures” (ECFESD, 2000, pages 6, 8). These attempts have even been formally defined as “sustainability governance”, namely “the deliberate adjustment of practices of governance in order to ensure that society eventually proceeds along a sustainable trajectory” (Meadowcroft et al, 2005, page 5).

The second point to make is that, given the widespread and understandable reluctance to define the outcome—sustainable development—in advance, the role played by governance in any long-term transition to sustainable development is that of steering an interactive and reflexive process of debate and dialogue, not generating and disseminating blueprints, dictats, and other kinds of hierarchical command (Meadowcroft et al, 2005, pages 6–8). Similar, normative “visions” (Biermann, 2007, page 335) have been identified at more global levels. For example, Biermann argues that “earth system governance” should be

“adaptive to changing circumstances, participatory through involving civil society at all levels, accountable and legitimate as part of new democratic governance beyond the nation state, and at the same time fair for all participants” (page 335).

Many of these normative prescriptions can be traced back to *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987). Brundtland was, of course, painfully aware that sustainable development is really only an idea; what matters is what people actually do with it. The final chapter of *Our Common Future* was therefore couched in fairly general terms: *Towards Common Action—Proposal for Institutional and Legal Change*. Later on, a whole annex (Annex 1) provided a summary of proposed legal principles supporting environmental protection and sustainable development. Had her committee been meeting today, the title of both would almost certainly have included the word ‘governance’. The gist of chapter 12 of *Our Common Future* is summarised in table 1.

Since 1987 these prescriptions have been endlessly refined and reformulated by a host of international, national, and subnational bodies. Chief amongst these are the Rio Declaration and *Agenda 21* (United Nations, 1992) (which is often portrayed as *the* definitive blueprint for implementing sustainable development). A decade later world leaders adopted two follow-up documents at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development: a short political declaration (the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development) and a sixty-seven-page ‘Plan of Implementation’, the very first page of which noted that “good governance within each country and at the international level is essential for sustainable development” (United Nations, 2002, paragraph 4).

Policy makers who are interested in securing a plain-language account of what this might entail in practice, need look no further than the checklist produced by the OECD in 2002 (see table 2). It is entitled *Improving Policy Coherence and Integration for Sustainable Development* (OECD, 2002). In this, the OECD is careful to point out that it does not seek to offer “a compilation of ‘quick fix’ solutions or ‘recipes’” (page 1).

Table 1. Towards common action—proposal made by the Brundtland Commission for institutional and legal change (source: summarised from WCED (1987, pages 308–347).

Proposals

- Getting at the source: supporting development that is economically and ecologically sustainable.
- Integrating institutions: ensuring that environmental protection and sustainable development are integrated into the remit of all sectors and levels of government.
- Strengthening international frameworks: ensuring that national and international law keeps up with the scale of environmental and human development.
- Dealing with the effects: enforcing environmental-protection measures and resource management; strengthening the United Nations Environmental Programme.
- Assessing global risks: identifying, assessing, and reporting of risks of irreversible damage to natural systems and threats to human well-being.
- Making informed choices: supporting the involvement of an informed public, nongovernmental organisations, and the scientific community; increasing cooperation with industry.
- Investing in the future: ensuring that multilateral financial institutions make a fundamental commitment to sustainable development; exploiting new and additional sources of revenue to support development in the South.

Table 2. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development checklist for improving governance for sustainable development (source: summarised from OECD, 2002).

Theme	Questions
A common understanding of sustainable development (SD)	Is the concept of SD sufficiently clear and understood by the public? Is it well understood by public organisations and across levels of government?
Clear commitment and leadership	Is there clear commitment at the highest level to the formulation and implementation of SD objectives and strategies? Is this commitment effectively communicated across sectors of government?
Specific institutional mechanisms to steer integration	Is there an institutional ‘catalyst’ in charge of enforcing SD strategies? Are there specific reviews of laws and regulations to check whether they conflict with sustainable development? Is SD integrated into budgeting, appraisal, and evaluation activities?
Effective stakeholder involvement	Do mechanisms exist with government or independent organisations to ensure that consumers are informed about the consequences of their consumption decisions? Are there guidelines on when, with whom, and how consultations should be carried out? Are transparency mechanisms being reinforced at different levels of government?
Efficient knowledge management	Are there transparent mechanisms in place for managing conflictual knowledge? Is the flow of information between the scientific community and decision makers efficient and effective?

However, it claims that its checklist nonetheless draws “attention to the main obstacles to be overcome at the national level” and is therefore “intended to contribute to the building of longer-term governance *for* sustainable development” (page 1, my emphasis). In this, we have another example of how the empirical and more normative interpretations of governance coexist in relation to sustainable development.

4.2 Empirical descriptions and assessments

Those that have adopted the more empirical interpretation are particularly interested to know how the other two interpretations (but especially the second) are interpreted by social actors operating in different settings. Many of those working in this vein would probably share Lafferty and Meadowcroft’s (2000) view that, until recently, the literature on governance and/or sustainable development amounted to “a great deal of discursive ‘smoke’—but little in the way of empirical ‘fire’” (page 2). This gap began to be addressed in the immediate aftermath of the Rio conference, but it was not until the 2000s that the literature really began to take off. Some of the first and most comprehensive empirical assessments were produced by Lafferty, Meadowcroft, O’Riordan, and their various coworkers (Lafferty, 2001; 2004; Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998; Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000; O’Riordan, 1998; O’Riordan and Voisey, 1997).

It is fair to say that a great deal of this early work adopted a fairly critical tone. Thus, some of the very earliest work focused on the implementation of *Agenda 21* (WCED, 1987) nationally and also more locally. This found pockets of good practice, but also a great deal of business as usual (Lafferty, 2004; Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998; O’Riordan, 1998; O’Riordan and Voisey, 1997). Similarly, recent reviews of national sustainable-development strategies (Steurer, 2007; Steurer and Martinuzzi, 2005) have shown that the majority of countries are still elaborating their first strategy over a decade after Rio. Most of these tend “towards the ‘cosmetic’ rather than the ‘ideal’” (Meadowcroft, 2007, page 161), and were steered by national environment ministries, several steps removed from where the most strategically important decisions are made in the state, to wit budgeting, foreign affairs, and industrial development, etc. In relation to the principle of environmental policy integration, analysts have identified pockets of innovation and solid implementation, but also very many examples of weak and even nonexistent integration (Jordan and Lenschow, 2008; Jordan and Schout, 2006; Lenschow, 2002; Nilsson, 2005). Much the same has been said about various examples of more integrated (Kidd and Fischer, 2007) or sustainability-focused forms of policy appraisal (Gibson et al, 2005; Scrase and Sheate, 2002). Meanwhile, the adoption of new environmental policy instruments such as ecolabels (Mol, 2006), taxes, and voluntary agreements grew massively after Rio, but too little is known about their performance to make any definitive judgments about their effectiveness.

The other point that should be made in relation to this empirical literature is the extent to which states reply on new modes of governance, such as high-level strategies, appraisal systems, and various nonlegislative instruments, to deliver sustainability. These are widely held to be better at dealing with something like sustainable development which, in contrast to more traditional forms of environmental policy, is relatively diffuse, covers multiple targets, and spans very long periods of time. But these network-based and market-based modes of governance often work with rather than in isolation from regulation, which otherwise remains the bedrock of many national environmental policy systems—that is, ‘government’ remains alive and well in the era of ‘governance’ and/or sustainable development (Jordan et al, 2005).

A very similar debate has taken place amongst international-policy analysts with respect to the empirical manifestations of sustainable development in the international system. Naturally, this debate has focused on the international system’s nonstate parts,

such as international agreements, multilateral organisations, private organisations such as multinational corporations, as well as the various parts of the UN (Biermann, 2007; Glasbergen et al, 2007; Gupta, 2002; Levy and Newell, 2004). If we broaden out a little more to look at work on global environmental governance with a sustainability dimension, the scale of the change that is claimed to be necessary is even larger (Jasanoff and Martello, 2004; Lemos and Agrawal, 2006; Speth and Haas, 2006). Whether these empirical manifestations of governance together indicate that there has been a long-term decline in state steering capacity remains a very moot point. From a critical or political economy perspective, many of them are viewed as transitory and epiphenomenal, and do little to change the underlying dynamic of the capitalist economic system. This dynamic sets significant limits on what can be done in the name of global environmental governance or sustainability (Blühdorn and Welsh, 2007; Clapp and Dauvergne, 2005; Park et al, 2008). For Paterson et al (2003) ‘governance from below’, as manifest, for instance, in the actions of social movements and radical protest groups, represents the only significant governance challenge to powerful corporate interests. Jasanoff and Martello (2004) claim that they indicate how globalisation (and the parallel development of international governance systems) has stimulated a “rediscovery of the local” (page 4). These, they believe, need to be better described and accounted for in any empirical study of governance and/or sustainable development.

5 Taking stock and looking forwards

“Put ‘governance’ and ‘sustainability’ together”, observed O’Riordan (2004, page 240), “and you have combined two deeply ambiguous terms”. Unfortunately, although they are undeniably broad and potentially slippery terms, no one who is interested in understanding how sustainable development is—or is not—being put into practice, can possibly avoid them. Moreover, research on governance and/or sustainable development is hugely relevant not only to the large number of academics working on sustainability issues from diverse disciplinary perspectives, but also to the many policy practitioners who are responsible for putting sustainability into practice.

How coherent (and hence cumulative) has the existing and newly emerging literature been? At one level, the terms ‘sustainable development’ and ‘governance’ are both potentially powerful bridging concepts around which interdisciplinary debates can take place. However, they have not always been used in a consistent or a coherent manner, and this has limited the scope for developing a cumulative body of knowledge. The same could, of course, be said about governance research more broadly, but at a deeper level there is undoubtedly something about sustainability which complicates the search for coherence. As the late Donella Meadows, who was one of the authors of the book *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al, 1972) that did so much to define the environmentalist case in the early 1970s, recently put it: the debate about the core meaning of sustainable development is “a mess”, but great “social transformations are messy” (quoted in Dresner, 2002, page 66). This messiness has a lot to do with the fact that sustainability concerns nothing less than the future direction of human civilisation. Is there anything more likely to generate discussion and dissent than this? Even if society broadly agrees on what a more sustainable future would look like, the underlying causes of (and hence remedies for) unsustainability are likely to be so deeply contested that consensus on even the most basic of policy packages will probably always remain elusive. But it is this ‘messiness’ which also makes the governance of sustainable development one of the most dynamic and exciting fields in the environmental social sciences (Biermann, 2007, page 335).

That said, more could and should be done to consolidate the field. In this paper I have shown that the relationship between governance and sustainable development can

be approached from a number of different disciplinary perspectives, as well as for quite different purposes—namely building theory ('governance as theory'), describing what has been done to put sustainable development into effect ('governance as an empirical phenomenon'), and what could and possibly should be done in the future ('governance as a normative prescription'). These differences in terminology are not, as I suggested above, simply a matter of semantics; they represent fundamental differences in purpose and approach. In this paper I have shown that the theoretical, normative, and empirical interpretations of governance and/or sustainable development are, in practice, quite subtly interconnected. Unfortunately, the existing literature tends to be mainly either normative *or* empirical. Given the perceived need to base policy making on the firmest evidence base, it is surprising that the dialogue between these two literatures has tended to be relatively limited, at least in terms of learning and applying lessons. Hopefully, the three interpretations I have laid out in this paper will provide a means to make sense of the how the empirical, the normative, and the theoretical link together and coevolve.

Where might the literature on governance and/or sustainable development go in the future? First, there is certainly a need to move beyond grand theories and typologies of governance, and to undertake more detailed empirical testing better to measure the extent to which we are in fact witnessing a shift from government to governance (Kooiman, 2003, pages 4–5; van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004, page 165). Environmental social scientists have already contributed a lot in this regard, by showing that governance has many different manifestations, which are not uniformly spread and/or necessarily that 'new' (Jordan et al, 2005). One stream of papers published in *Environment and Planning C* has added to our understanding of what could be termed the spatiality and temporality of governance and/or sustainable development. For example, Bracke and Albrecht (2007) and Perkins and Neumeyer (2004) have sought to document and explore the uneven spread of 'new' environmental policy instruments such as environmental management standards. Another stream has sought to investigate the extent to which the trend towards more multilevelled governance has made it easier and/or harder for society as a whole to develop more sustainably (Counsell and Haughton, 2003; Gibbs and Jonas, 2001; Jordan, 1999; Tömmel, 1997).

Second, it is significant that sustainable development is being pursued using new rather than older modes of governance. However, analysts need to go beyond this and conduct work that explores the relationship between governance and sustainable development in a more dynamic and interactive manner (Pierre and Peters, 2000, page 22). So, instead of adopting a rather static perspective which simply describes the presence and/or absence of particular modes or instruments of governing, future work could explore the causal relationship between governance interventions and outcomes 'on the ground'. If, to paraphrase Rhodes (1997, page 53), 'the mix between the modes is what really matters' (see also Thompson, 2003), we need to know what forms of governing lead to what sorts of outcomes, whilst ensuring that they remain legitimate and publicly accountable (Bache and Flinders, 2004, pages 204–206; van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004, page 166).

There are at least two features of this gap in the literature that have been addressed by papers published in *Environment and Planning C*. The first concerns public participation—one of the most well-known subprinciples of sustainable development. Public participation is widely and sometimes rather uncritically identified as a 'good thing', but we need to know more about how it should be governed, its opportunity costs, and, ultimately, what it actually delivers in terms of human development 'on the ground' (Beierle and Konisky, 2001; Bloomfield et al, 2001; Buček and Smith, 2000; Kallis et al, 2006; Spash, 2001; Yearley, 2006). The second aspect concerns the performance of new

instruments of governing, not only in an abstract theoretical manner (although of course such work has its value), but drawing on empirical evidence which explores the interrelationships with other modes including systems of regulation and centralised planning. In the past, *Environment and Planning C* has published many papers on these themes, including those by Hanjürgens (1998), Hansen et al (2002), Labatt and Maclaren (1998), and Sunnevåg (2000). Some have been relatively empirical (Cherp et al, 2004; O'Doherty et al, 2003), whereas others have had a more normative flavour (Toke, 2005; Zhang, 2000).

Finally, there is a danger that research on governance and/or sustainable development ends up being a rather dry and technocratic exercise in counting and cataloguing different governing instruments or (in a more normative vein) trying to identify the right governing tool for the job. It is noticeable that a significant segment of the existing literature on governance and/or sustainable development operates within a fairly pluralistic tradition. One way to address this shortcoming might be to engage with the mainstream literature on governance and, particularly, global governance, where more critical-structuralist theories and approaches are in vogue (Park et al, 2008; Paterson et al, 2003). This has the potential to be a mutually beneficial interaction, because the latter has been overdominated by theories, typologies, and analytical frameworks, whereas the former has—as noted above—been much more empirically driven. The problem with adopting a pluralist focus is that it tends to overlook some of the potentially important structural sources of power, which not only cause governance to emerge and change (van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004, page 166) but also affect the ends to which it is put—that is, ‘governance for what and for whom?’

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