

Editorial:

Governance Innovation for Sustainability: Exploring the Tensions and Dilemmas

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Governing For Sustainability

THIS SPECIAL EDITION OF *ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AND GOVERNANCE* COMPRISES PAPERS THAT OFFER CRITICAL insights into various attempts to achieve sustainable development through governance innovation, and into the difficulties of ensuring sustainable policy outcomes in complex or newly-established governing regimes.

The question of how we govern has recently become more significant in the light of perceived governance failings: failings that include political inefficiencies, poor policy implementation, democratic and accountability deficiencies and, of course, growing environmental problems. Indeed, many of today's environmental problems are attributed to 'failures of governing' (Griffin, 2008). That is, they are blamed, *inter alia*, on flawed political contexts, on ineffective regulatory mechanisms, on the inappropriate scales at which policy is made and on the unaccountability of existing mechanisms for policymaking.

In response to these shortcomings, states and other institutions have introduced governance reforms at all scales of policymaking and across several sectors (Griffin, 2009). However, the growing commitment to governance reform comes not only from high profile policy proclamations such as world summits: it also derives from increasing social complexity, resulting from the new ways in which we live together and the need to manage unwieldy environmental problems such as climate change, pollution or biodiversity loss. Indeed, it is often what we think of as environmental problems that provoke governments and regulators into developing new ways of governing, since these problems often prove to be the most intransigent, complex and risky threats we face. And now, the move towards governance reform – what is sometimes called the 'turn to governance' (Jessop, 2000) – has become so ingrained that a discourse has emerged that projects the idea of a self-reinforcing relationship between democratic mechanisms (such as accountability) and sustainable development and governance reforms.

It is no surprise, then, that the forms and ways in which societies are governed, a central concern of governance theory, have figured prominently in recent policy and academic debates. Indeed, attempting to make sense of changing political landscapes under the turn to governance is a chief concern for theorists today. Governance is an elusive and much debated concept, but many agree that the current 'era of governance' marks a departure from traditional forms of government. Government's 'connotations of a legally based, centralised, sovereign state authority, formally elected and possessing constitutional powers' are thus distinguished from governance, with its 'more informally based, decentralised, shared, collective and inclusive decision-making structures' (Gray, 2005, p. 2).

Moreover, sustainable development is 'replete with governance questions' (Farrell *et al.*, 2005, p. 143). This is because sustainable development, where the present use of environmental resources for development does not detract from their value and availability to future generations, requires simultaneous consideration of each of the

social, economic and environmental ‘pillars’ of policymaking. Previously these pillars have generally been regarded separately by policymakers, and to approach sustainability through now integrating them requires innovative decisionmaking in the context of new governing arrangements. Sustainability is said to require a climate of ‘dialogue’, ‘partnership’ and ‘shared responsibility’, rather than centralized ‘command and control’ policies. Shared responsibility should involve stakeholder participation and partnership between policy levels, institutions and actors. What is more, genuine sustainability must take the long term into account – it cannot be achieved within simple short-term political and economic cycles.

Additionally, it is often argued that sustainable development can never be achieved in conventional policy environments because thorny problems such as forestry governance, waste disposal, genetically modified organism management and climate change mitigation extend across existing political boundaries. Thus managing them may test the capacity and the reach of traditional government institutions. Furthermore, tricky issues related to the social and economic pillars of sustainability – such as social cohesion, urban development and transport policy – have prompted decisionmakers, often in search of public legitimacy and policy effectiveness, to develop new governance forms. These include public–private partnerships, regional development agencies and stakeholder panels.

Hence we might say that the very institutionalization of sustainability has driven a range of novel arrangements and technologies for governing. Such arrangements sometimes function outside, or parallel to, traditional government institutions, and they are now likely to involve the participation of diverse actors, from policymakers, economic interest groups, consumer organizations and NGOs to scientists. These actors may operate in newly significant political spaces such as ‘urban regions’ or ‘sustainable communities’, and across geographical territories in collaborative networks, or ‘vertically’ in multilevel frameworks created by EU directives.

Thus accepted wisdom in policy and academic circles says not only that the causes of many sustainability problems lie within governance arrangements, but also that their solutions are likely to result from institutional, i.e. governance, reform.

However, although the turn to governance should theoretically deliver more sustainable policy solutions, as well as enhanced legitimacy and accountability, to date there have been relatively few critical studies that have tested the potential to *actually* achieve such aims. Moreover, many governance and sustainability scholars (e.g. Jordan, 2008) have argued that governance work is short on studies that assess the sustainability potential along with the actual outcomes of new governance initiatives. Yet, while there is a burgeoning and established literature on governance, *governance for sustainability* has only recently received concerted attention from academics (see Adger *et al.*, 2003; Farrell *et al.*, 2005; Griffin, 2008; Jordan, 2008; Adger and Jordan, 2009, Russel and Jordan, 2009).

Exploring the Issues Through Case Studies

Hence the present collection of papers seeks to augment this nascent body of work by providing a fascinating exploration of some of the most important themes in governance and sustainability studies. The papers span the urban (Cochrane), forestry (Weiland), transport (Book, Eskilsson and Khan) and food and waste sectors (Joss), and they take in diverse case studies from all over Europe. However, despite their different empirical foci the papers address a number of similar themes. In particular, they all explore the changing patterns of governance for sustainability. Together, they examine

- new modes of co-ordination across policy scales and how political space is reordered or assembled in the process of reform,
- the emerging discourses around recent efforts to govern sustainability and
- how this pursuit of sustainability has resulted in innovative governance arrangements operating outside the traditional nation state.

Every one of the papers addresses the role of the state in a context where the private sector has a greater role in governing than it did a decade ago. Moreover, to a greater or lesser degree, they all examine the continuing tensions between environment and development, in new governance milieux designed to reconcile them. Additionally, most of the contributions highlight the ways that existing democratic and accountability mechanisms are found

wanting as far as new governance processes for sustainability are concerned. All contributions are theoretically informed but policy relevant; and all offer valuable insights into the difficulties, paradoxes and tensions involved in pursuing governance innovations for sustainability.

Cochrane's paper explores the role that 'sustainability' has played as a complex technology of governance in the UK's South East region. He does this through a critical investigation of the UK Government's 2003 Sustainable Communities Plan. The plan is intended to help foster regional economic growth that is both environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive. One of its most significant aspects is that it is meant to unify existing policy agendas while also representing a novel set of governance technologies (or assemblages as Cochrane calls them) designed to meet new policy priorities, including 'liveable cities' and 'social responsibility'. In this context governance for sustainable communities has broadened the discourse of sustainable development so that it now encompasses a wider set of policy priorities than was previously the case. Cochrane identifies other interesting aspects of the Sustainable Communities Plan, such as the new geographies and spatial imaginaries that have been brought about by it. For instance, the plan now emphasizes that the South East is no longer being taken for granted as the economic engine of Britain's development. Cochrane also describes how the regional policy scale is being re-emphasized in what he describes as the desperate search for overlapping institutional forms which are somehow intended to draw the sustainable communities agenda together.

In all this, Cochrane argues that the UK state's role in facilitating sustainable communities is far from consistent. For example, it favours neoliberal private enterprise while at the same time offering public investment in infrastructure projects, and it advocates a policy of voluntarism while simultaneously becoming involved in Foucauldian 'disciplining' of individual citizens. Thus, as Cochrane describes them, the shifting assemblages of governance for sustainability in the UK are more complex than ever before. This notion of 'assemblage' provides a useful method for investigating the ways in which ostensibly different policy priorities can be drawn together and negotiated in practice. It also enables us take a more contingent view of the politics involved in governing for sustainability. A contingent approach asks that we do not take the outcomes of new initiatives for granted, but rather investigate them in practice.

And such a contingent approach helps to illuminate the tensions still present, despite its utopian rhetoric, in the Sustainable Communities Plan. Cochrane identifies several of these tensions. For instance, in spite of the ostensibly win-win discourse of sustainable communities, doubts over the achievement of sustainability in actual places have brought back into focus old questions about social division and limits to growth. Cochrane explores how such tensions, between economic development and environmental sustainability, are negotiated locally, in specific places and contexts, and he suggests that the variables affecting these negotiations are both discursive (i.e., sustainability's meaning is interpreted differently in different contexts) and geographical (i.e., the specific articulation of the conflicts depends on broader scalar patterns of policymaking). These agendas change geographies of governance, so much so that the spatial patterns of governance reform for sustainability are clearly in question.

Like Cochrane, Book, Eskilsson and Khan explore attempts at reconciling policies of economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability within an urban context. And they, too, talk about some of the tensions involved in trying to achieve both policy agendas. They also discuss the role of the state in new governing arrangements for sustainability. However, unlike Cochrane, they do not perceive the state simply as an ambiguous actor. Instead they show how development planning in Orestad, Denmark, is facilitated by the state, albeit in the guise of a private actor, the 'Orestad Development Corporation'. The ODC is neither public nor private, but 'hybrid'. This hybridity is meant to embody not only the efficiency of the market but also the public ethos of the state. However, despite some advantages of this, the authors point out that governance hybridity comes at a price: such organizations are difficult to steer politically, conflicts between policy sectors remain, sustainability problems such as increased traffic have largely not been addressed, and the hybridity of the organization has meant some loss of accountability. This latter problem is also noted and explored for different policy sectors by Joss in this collection.

Weiland's paper on efforts to attain sustainable forest governance in European transition countries explores the challenge of achieving sustainability, development and democratic accountability within a 'multilevel' polity that also incorporates private and 'hybrid' interests. Forests are important assets for most countries, providing sources of economic development together with carbon sinks, and their successful management is crucial for maintaining biodiversity and achieving the social and economic goals of sustainable development. Weiland explores three different and novel governance models for sustainable forestry in three post-socialist countries: Albania, Croatia

and Slovenia. They all have experienced exploited or overexploited forests and a lack of public participation in their management. What is more, they, have joined, or hope to join, the EU, a complex multilevel institution. In the EU forestry remains a member-state competency, but many pan-EU policies and some international ones also have to be applied to forest management. At the same time, while EU countries are subject to the same supra and international governance regimes, they have all experimented with their own new institutions, or have introduced novel practices in their own natural resource management. Weiland discusses these practices in the three countries, and she explains that although in some instances aspects of forest management have been transferred to local communities, a major reform in forestry governance in post-socialist states has been either privatization or some variety of hybrid arrangement (cf. Book *et al.*).

However, neither of these has signalled a significant diminution of the state. As in the Orestad case, so-called state enterprises have had a significant role in managing forestry privatization strategies because these strategies require sophisticated legal mechanisms and institutions to safeguard the public interest. Weiland argues that while community management in Albania has significantly *increased* accountability to the public, privatized forest governance produces a fragmented forestry polity that is still expert driven and all this gives the public little opportunity to hold managers to account. And this, as in the Orestad case, has had implications for the effectiveness of those policies designed to secure sustainability.

Like Book *et al.*, Joss analyses the corporatization of public sector agencies and the rise of public–private partnerships. He also explores how these trends have in some circumstances undermined public accountability. He looks at three UK endeavours to govern for sustainability: the national public consultation over genetically modified crops, the South East London combined heat and power waste incinerator and the London Underground Public–Private Partnership. In different ways, each of these three cases exemplifies shortcomings in accountability. These shortcomings stem from the compartmentalization of decisionmaking processes (as we also see in Weiland's study), the blurring of boundaries of responsibility (see also Book *et al.*) and (as in Weiland's paper) the prevalence of technocratic discourses.

However, under governance arrangements for sustainability, public accountability is imperative. As a relationship between governors and the governed, accountability enables criticism of the former by the latter before and during decisions, and so it can enhance the *effectiveness* of policies, which, as we have seen from the discussion above, often have conflicting imperatives (e.g. economic and environmental). Moreover, crucially, accountability also means that decisionmaking institutions, including the government bodies, the private sector and civil society organizations, who are all more involved in governing than before, must be answerable to a public that is not usually present during decisionmaking. For this reason accountability is particularly significant in environmental sectors such as forestry and waste, where management and exploitation occur largely beyond public view.

However, as Joss explains, accountability in governance arrangements is not straightforward. In his exegesis of the three cases he identifies three kinds of accountability that are either lacking in governance for sustainability or are in tension with one another. For instance, the rise of managerial accountability mechanisms in privatized governance regimes and the professional accountability of technocratic elites are often in tension with traditional state-based mechanisms of accountability. Moreover, as indicated, this lack of accountability not only undermines democratic principles, it also has serious consequences for sustainability (see also Weiland). For instance, London's combined heat and power waste incinerator did not, despite the policy rhetoric surrounding it, produce any useable heat. This fact was not able to come to light for the lack of adequate accountability mechanisms, and therefore it was not remedied in the opaque governing structures within which the incinerator was managed.

Joss also notes that the reforms in each of his cases have what might be thought of as their own 'geography' of accountability. For instance, since experts derive authority from specialist knowledge rather than from delegation of power – as in traditional government models of governing – accountability here is directed neither 'upward' in the political sense, nor 'downward' in the managerial sense, but essentially only toward one's peers. Joss adds that the confluence of political, managerial and professional accountability norms and practices under new governing regimes has taken place not in hierarchical structures, but rather in 'multilevel' and 'overlapping' contexts. These findings about the changing geographies of governing under governance for sustainability mirror some of the findings discussed by Cochrane, Book *et al.* and Weiland.

New Governance, but Old Politics?

We can see from this collection of papers that governance innovations designed to produce more effective and sustainable outcomes very often fall short of their anticipated outcomes due to their 'messiness', complexity, hybridity and unevenness. And despite discourses of reconciliation, tensions often persist between environment and development in the wake of governance reforms that are actually designed to resolve them. Almost as problematic, as all the papers to an extent suggest, is the fact that sustainability governance can actually work to 'normalize' or depoliticize problems. Cochrane and Book *et al.* both hint that governance reform is itself a way of appearing to manage conflicting agendas, and of allowing 'collective' goals to be agreed ostensibly rather than in reality.

That said, however, Cochrane argues that the messiness, impreciseness and contested nature of new arrangements can nonetheless open up space for more radical possibilities. Moreover, while environmental and social goals are still often sidelined in pursuit of governance reform designed primarily to enhance economic competitiveness, new opportunities for effective action, experimentation and debate *do exist* in this new fragmented and messy polity, as some of the papers counsel.

We also see how the pursuit of sustainability has led to innovative governance arrangements. These result not merely from the sum of the existing policies and institutions, as discussed by all the papers: they often produce new hybrid arrangements that operate outside the traditional nation state, in regional, horizontal or non-hierarchical formats. As all the cases show, the state remains an important player in governing for sustainability. However, its role is always contingent. For some (Weiland and Joss) successful governance reform is partially about striking an appropriate balance between the public and private sector, but for others (Cochrane and Book *et al.*) the public and the private are not pure entities; rather they are both 'transformed', 'assembled' or 'hybridized' by governance reforms.

Finally, as all the papers demonstrate, context, place, prior political trajectories and the very nature of the issues at stake all make a difference to the precise articulation and geographies of governance for sustainability. Any particular set of governance practices for sustainability must be understood as contingent. This understanding helps us to see that there can be room for a new politics in new governance regimes, despite the constraints and tensions. Moreover, there is the potential for actors to exert agency amidst the disciplining discourses of governance for sustainability.

We can say that, although similar themes and issues have emerged from all case studies in this collection, there is no single pattern or model of building sustainability governance. There are no predetermined outcomes or trajectories that we can simply 'read off' from these new arrangements. However, while all this may make the jobs of scholars in the field more difficult, it perhaps gives us reason to be optimistic about the future, as governance innovation over the coming decades might open up space for radical action or encourage the kind of experimentation that has the potential to deliver real sustainability.

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