

## Deutscher Rat für Landespflege

# Die verschleppte Nachhaltigkeit: frühe Forderungen – aktuelle Akzeptanz

### Summary

In the year 2002, the World Summit "Rio+10" took place in Johannesburg. That same year the Deutscher Rat für Landespflege (DRL, German Council for Land Stewardship), founded in 1962, celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Both events were occasions to deal with the subject "Neglected Sustainability: Early Demands – Contemporary Acceptance".

"Sustainability" is not a new idea. Forestry coined "sustainability" roughly 300 years ago, even if the term was long used merely in reference to the timber harvest. It also recalls the central ideas of the 1961 "Green Charta of the Mainau", the working principle of the DRL. The Green Charta encompasses a catalogue of twelve targets aimed at establishing and preserving a healthy landscape for living and recreation as well as for agriculture and industry; the text cites the word sustainability in a number of places.

Environmental protection became established as a field of policy in Germany in the 1970s. In 1971, the first environment programme was presented, the most important pillars of which were the polluter-pays principle and the precautionary principle, both of which imply sustainability. At the first UN Environmental Protection Conference (United Nations Conference on the Human Environment) held in Stockholm in 1972, it was agreed that the ever more urgent environmental problems could not be solved without consideration to social and economic aspects. Since 1976, German legislation (the Federal Nature Conservation Act) has anchored the principle that responsibility for future generations demands the *permanent safeguarding* of the productivity and functionality of the ecosystem, preservation of its regenerative capabilities and the sustainable usability of natural assets.

The report "Our Common Future" by the so-called Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), initiated the globally observable and contradictory sustainability debate and the career of "Sustainability" began.

The report morally anchored our responsibility for future generations and the need to decrease the gap between poor and rich or between north and south. It dealt with globally felt environmental as well as energy issues, with the global economy and international trade, and foremost with their interdependencies as well. Environmental protection in the broadest sense and economic growth should both be mutually possible, in every social system at every existing economic level. This showed that the formula of "Sustainable Development" was a compromise that would prove difficult to fill in with weighted and valid interpretations or to put into operation.

In the early 1990s, the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the military power blocs and more relaxed global communication generated a mood of resurgence allowing the demands and proposals of the Brundtland Commission for sustainability to be implemented in more binding agreements. This occurred in 1992 at the "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro.

What came after Rio and the euphoria it triggered? Under the pressure of the neo-liberalism that made its triumphant entry after the welcomed breakdown of state Socialist economies and with globalization ("markets first"), were the 1990s a lost decade, the years of "neglected" sustainability? The question is not easy to answer; all the same, countless participative Agenda 21 processes were launched around the world and successfully concluded as well.

The term "sustainability" is emotionally charged and in the meantime is in danger of remaining a mere catchphrase. The expression is interpreted very differently by social groups and often used in day-to-day speech with an entirely different meaning.

One of the main reasons for the neglect of sustainability is the lack of a clear, understandable definition. The central idea of "sustainable (in the sense of long-lasting) development" is long-lasting use of the biological resources. This is a fundamental problem: from an *ecological* viewpoint, the only resources that can be used sustainably are *renewable* resources, and these are –

measured in human time standards – always *biologically* produced or – in other words – resources that "grow back". The development of national economies in the *pre*-industrial ages normally was based on renewable resources. The transition to the industrial age was made primarily possible by the exploitation of *non-renewable*, i.e. finite resources, which, in the strictest sense *cannot* be sustainable. Finite resources, today primarily energy sources such as petroleum and natural gas as well as coal, can be "stretched" through moderate, economical use, however this only delays their exhaustion. In the foreseeable future, all finite resources will have to be replaced by renewable resources. No way taken by sustainable development can avoid this fact.

Commonly, three pillars are cited to elucidate the term "sustainability": the ecological, economical and social pillars, linked with the assumption that they are equal in rank. Yet the basis for this assumption of equality is unclear. Furthermore, this static and balanced understanding is problematic for the concrete implementation of the idea of sustainability in a number of aspects.

The image of pillars is one of juxtaposition, not of interconnectedness. Yet, precisely the interconnection of the ecological, economic and social aspects may not be lost from our view when implementing the idea of sustainability, since otherwise we are in danger of a terminological dissolution ranging as far as arbitrariness. In the end, every measure can reasonably be deemed ecological, economical or social. In this magic triangle, ecology should not be allowed to become a guise for development that is called sustainable. Rather, the leading function of the ecological component must be distinctly emphasized, yet not understood as a directly value-associated implementation of ecological facts, but as an alignment to ecological relationships.

Corresponding to the thematic breadth of the term sustainability, a number of strategies (some of them opposing strategies) need to be interlocked on the actual level of action and implementation and made to complement one another:

- Informal, "soft" versus formal instruments: "soft" or informal strategies and

incentives alone are not sufficient to implement sustainability. Instead, an additional institutional safeguard is needed through formal instruments, e. g. of planning and regulatory law.

- "Bottom-up" versus "top-down" strategies: participative processes can serve as examples for the former, e.g. local working groups of citizens in the scope of local Agenda 21 initiatives, an example of the latter is the EU ordained requirement of national implementation of the FFH Directive and the Framework Directive on Water. Both approaches need to be interwoven: bottom-up approaches, such as the ideals drawn up in participative Agenda processes, are in danger of ineffectuality. Conversely, when the top-down approach was used to implement the FFH directive this indisputably was very effective, but at the price that this authoritarian act shattered a great deal of the acceptance that had been won locally for nature conservation.

To prevent continued neglect of sustainable development, the DRL supports the implementation and further development of the national sustainability strategy of the Federal Government of Germany. It proposes enhancements to the fields of action of nature conservation and landscape management, agriculture, forestry, traffic, housing, tourism/recreation, education/science, economics/industry from the perspective of land management. Moreover, it states which tasks should be the responsibility of different actors in society.

The implementation of sustainability is a lengthy development process that can only succeed if

- the traditional egoistical idea of growth is overcome in all fields of politics and all institutions; this is especially important for planning, which must adjust to entirely new demographic developments;
- specialization and one-sided ways of thinking in many disciplines are eliminated, and action is increasingly taken in an interdisciplinary, networked and dialogued manner and
- each individual is moved to battle thoughtlessness, convenience, passivity and egoism every day anew when essential lifestyle changes are at issue.