



THE CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABILITY IN THE DECISION-MAKING MECHANISM OF DEMOCRATIC STATES

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ABSTRACT

The problem of sustainability is one of the most important and pressing problems of the modern state. Although the history of the so-called green movement that is linked to the emergence of industrial society in the modern age, (to industrialism), in its contemporary form it is existing also a social movement, a political ideology – see, among others, green parties – and a state (international) obligation. What distinguishes the recent green movements today from the earlier conservation movement is its emphasis on science and research. The main aim of this study is to examine how democratic – above all, the participatory and deliberative democracies – political systems are dealing with the new challenges of sustainability and how they are finding political solutions to the demands of civil society. In parallel, the interdependence between social activism, democratic policy decision-making and international cooperation is worth considering, as coordination between sub-state and supra-state actors is needed to address sustainability.

KEYWORDS Paradigm shift, natural contract, social activism, participatory democracy

1. Introduction

The sustainability is a social-nature relations in general, has material and moral connotations, which is to be distinguished from the sustainable development (Barry, 1996; Brown et al., 1987; Caldwell, 1998). In moral terms supposes a particular ethical attitude to the future, what kind of duties has the current generation to preserve the World ecosystem. The diversity and complexity of the concept of sustainability is illustrated by the fact that the *right behaviour* can be about animal welfare, a commitment to the use of natural resources (see green energy), averting climate disaster, or even reducing wasteful consumption. What these behaviours have in common? It is presupposed a conscious individual

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conduct. At the individual level, prior to political decision-making process, appears primarily the ethical citizenship (Bourban, 2022), personal ethical relationship to the world, i.e. from the individual's side, active self-responsibility such as conscious participation in recycling or energy conservation. The ethically correct behaviour requires a change in personal perspective. The environmental philosophy theorizes this change in the terms of deep ecology (Naess, 1973), which means that instead of an anthropocentric perspective, a holistic vision of the world is required. By rejecting the human supremacy, the environment is analysed as an integrated and coherent system. The survival of its component depends on other's one and any damage to the element of the system could threaten the well-being of the whole system (Drengson et al., 2011). At the political level, participation in political decision-making through political organizations (green parties) and political movements is necessary. The Western European liberal democratic state (Grimm, 2016; Caramani, 2017; Sartori, 1962), based on popular sovereignty and the exclusion of arbitrariness of the state, mostly demanded the participation of the citizen in (national) elections, and this was the primacy of the principle of representation. In this government model the individual and the political level operate in a mutually weakening way, with serious feedback.

The aim of the paper is to analyse how sustainability is embodied in participatory and deliberative democracy as a decisive type of postmodern democratic state. Whereas the former model of democracy focuses on the factors that encourage active citizen participation, the latter model emphasizes the need for citizens to be informed in a transparent and multifaceted way (Habermas, 1994). What both have in common is that they seek to draw on the lessons of representative democracy to orient the individual towards public affairs. To do this, it is first necessary to examine the paradigm shift inherent in the term sustainability, which is transforming the relationship between society and the state/political system. There is a vast literature analysing the relationship between the political system and the sustainability, but only partial answers have been found to the questions of how philosophical theories are incorporated into political programs, why democratic systems have a chance to mobilize society, and how the socio-state and international levels are interrelated in the treatment of a global problem.

2. Theory: Paradigm shift in eco philosophy and the social activism

The theoretical foundations of the birth of the modern state are originated in the idea of the social contract, which became the dominant theory of political philosophy from the 16th century onwards, and despite its fictitious nature, it explained the distribution of rights and duties between governors and

governed and focused on the political power's legitimacy (Locke, 1963; Hobbes, 2001; Rousseau, 2001). The source of the exercise of power is therefore the consensus of the governed. One of the most important consequences of the contractual viewpoint is that members of the political community obey decisions taken by legitimate authority. The political development in Europe combined liberal values and the idea of popular sovereignty to create a liberal democracy, whose functioning is guaranteed by the will of the electorate on the one hand and by the institutionalized and guaranteed limits of state arbitrariness on the other. In the decades after the Second World War, the political construct of the liberal democracy was developed in Western Europe and the United States, and after the collapse of the bipolar order, it became a model for the rest of the world to follow. The emergence of sustainability in political programs, parties and movements began in this period. Its appearance has also drawn attention to several previously unseen problems.

The first obstacle is the Western European political construct that seeks to safeguard the socio-economic interests of political communities, fails to activate members of the political community between two parliamentary elections, and fails to promote the need for civic organization and, most importantly, fails to raise awareness of the common good among voters (Arendt, 2018; Putnam et al., 1992). Contrary to the expectations of normative theories of democracy, many representatives of elite theories have pointed out that one of the main characteristics of democratic political systems is the acquisition of the electorate's vote to put political decision-making in the hands of the parties (Mosca, 1939; Weber, 1995; Schumpeter, 1976). Beyond the international and state level of political decisions, the sustainability requires strong social activism, which will not lead to results without a change of mind-set. The arguments from sustainability usually propose wide-ranging changes in the present organization of society. The sustainability as issue involved the translation from a political and ethical concept to a regulative social principle expressed in law and politics, so requires the deliberation, the consent and actions. The second obstacle is the global nature of the sustainability. Above the nation state, there are international organizations and institutions such as the United Nations or the European Union, which has several conventions and action plans. It is enough to refer to two relevant documents. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as the part of United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (European Commission, n.d.-a) adopted by the General Assembly of the UN in 2015 undertook to address the global challenges of: eradicating poverty; finding sustainable and inclusive development solutions; ensuring human rights for all; and making sure that no one is left behind. The Green Deal that covers the European Commission proposals for action contains in several policy areas: clean energy, sustainable industry; building and renovating; sustainable

mobility biodiversity; from farm to fork; eliminating pollution; climate action, which need to be seriously addressed by 2030 ([European Commission, n.d.-b](#)). The third major obstacle is that most states are not liberal democracies or are not democracies, so neither of these obstacles overcome in terms of the effectiveness of policymaking. In contrast to the overconsumption of the developed Western democratic countries in the global economic system, the inequality between underdeveloped or poor regions in most parts of the world is increasing because of the unequal distribution of global goods and responsibilities.

The paradigm shift is about rethinking the relationship – the social contract – between humans and humans, in relation to humans and ecosystem. Society and nature require a holistic approach that expressed among others the French philosopher Michel Serres. As bizarre as Serre's idea of a contract with nature may seem, it points to the essence of a change of perspective. Serres offers a curious vision of Francisco Goya's famous painting. In *The Duel with a Stick* two men are fighting each other with clubs, knee-deep in a quagmire of mud. The outcome seems clear both antagonists will perish. Looking at the foreground and background of the scheme, you can/should see the difference. The armed conflict that is the engine of history is happening before our eyes, while nature is in the background. Foreground and background are swept up in reinforcing feedback mechanisms: "We must decide on peace amongst ourselves to protect the world, and peace with the world to protect ourselves" ([Serres, 2021](#)). Serres' idea of the natural contract is an excellent example for understanding what is now called deep ecology in environmental philosophy. The holistic approach, that encourages an active citizenship's role, was inspired by the negative effects of industrialization in the late 19th century. The theoretical father of civil disobedience, Henry David Thoreau, building in part on Rousseau's love of natural living, himself stressed the importance of individual responsibility and moral dilemmas/choices ([LaFreniere, 1990](#)). Translated into the language of social norms, an ethical system needs to be developed at the global level that focuses not on man's dominance over nature, but on the relationship between man and nature, of which man is only a part. To work and to exist in harmony with nature is a fundamental normative requirement of social activism. The risk to the survival of humanity and the survival of nature on earth. The crisis reflects the fact that the man has completely mastered the nature of the earth, his relationship to it is still based on the old principles that he developed thousands of years ago. The Brundtland Report in 1987 ([General Assembly, 1987](#)) was already the first to deal in detail with the issue of sustainability, and a new holistic approach is a very important part of this. This means, in a narrow sense, looking at the economic system as an emphatically integrated part of a larger whole, which aims to improve the quality of human life within the carrying

capacity of the underlying ecosphere. In doing so, all forms of action are to be included within the framework of a social structure understood in conjunction with culture, the social dimension, the economy and technology. Hans Jonas emphasizes that changes in the field of technology must be followed by changes in the field of ethics, the basic principles of which can be briefly summarized as follows. Therefore, in relation to these entities, each individual actor must consider the consequences of his behaviour. According to Jonas “[h]umanity has no right to commit suicide” (Jonas, 1984). The first condition for achieving harmony is to acknowledge the multidimensional embeddedness of the individual and to mobilize our conscious and mental energies. The individual is part of several micro-communities, cultural communities, the humanity and the whole ecological system of the Earth. Some ancient philosophies (especially Stoicism and Epicureanism) were dominated by the proclamation of a life in accordance with nature. Later, in the teachings and lifestyle of St Francis of Assisi, Giordano Bruno, Rousseau, the German Romantics, Husserl, the critical philosophy of the 1960s, anarchism and feminism, among others, we find elements integrated by green philosophies. The second principle of ecological values is related to needs. Jonas translated Kant’s categorical imperative for eco-ethics: “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life or expressed negatively. Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life” (Jonas, 1984). The evolution of natural systems, while maintaining an initial state of self-organization and self-regulation, is always characterized by the restoration of equilibrium through the principles of cooperation and coexistence of living beings. Jürgen Moltmann argues that classical liberties, socio-cultural rights and the rights of the living environment can be involved into the integrated and coherent system (Moltmann, 1989).

3. Methods: Conceptualizing the relationship between paradigm shift and politics decision making process

The theorization of the relationship between man and nature, particularly the transformation of anthropocentric ethics into bio centric ethics, is an important prerequisite for the analysis of the dimensions of social activism. The following features essentially characterize green political ideals, despite ideological differences: communitarianism (communitarian ethical approach), the need for global justice in the sharing of resources, non-violence with some extreme exceptions, the peace, and the need for sustainable economic development. While classical liberalism focused on the protection of the self-interests and freedom, the liberal state does not dictate moral goals its citizens are to achieve (Dobson, 2007). Hans Jonas pointed out that the problem of harming ‘others’ who live far away in space (e.g. third world populations) and time (future

generations) is becoming increasingly relevant. Such an interpretation, of course, significantly narrows the range of morally acceptable behaviour for members of a given community.

In contrast to liberal values, political movements with the program of the sustainability have appeared in the forms of political parties on both the left and the right wing and have even created international associations. Without wishing to be exhaustive, the political ideas shaped in the programs of the German Greens, the Green Party of Canada, the Finnish Green League, the Austrian Greens, and the Hungarian LMP etc. are increasingly influencing public political discourse. The green political philosophy may contain also an eco-authoritarian conception. Its solution is that authoritarian coercive measures are needed to avoid environmental catastrophe. At higher levels (national, supranational), democracy would be confined within ecological limits, for example, a competent elite would be responsible for the allocation of dwindling resources. At the local level, however, the most direct possible grassroots democracy is advocated, i.e. each small community could decide through direct participatory decision-making (see below).

The eco-radicalism arrived from the Marxism and argued for the decentralization of political centres. By adopting the Marx' social philosophy the human alienation in the exploitation and inequality characters of the capitalist economy, in which the profit-oriented behaviour of the capitalist class leads to the increase of the pauperization of the working class. Wallerstein's theory of the world system (Wallerstein, 2011) which was based on Marxism, projected the phenomena into global capitalism, the centre-states of the Western countries, whose economic development is ensured by exploiting the periphery and semi-periphery states. There are many levels of radical solutions. Starting from the basic premise of deep ecology, some variants organize violent movements, such as ecoterrorism (Eagan, 1995, 2008), to achieve their goals. Its protestations are directed against people and property, and attack the consumerist view of society, the capitalism and the insufficiency of political decision-making. On the other hand, the ecofeminism (Warren, 2015) is also highly critical of the patriarchal society; their ideas are linked to the gender philosophy and LGBTQ movements.

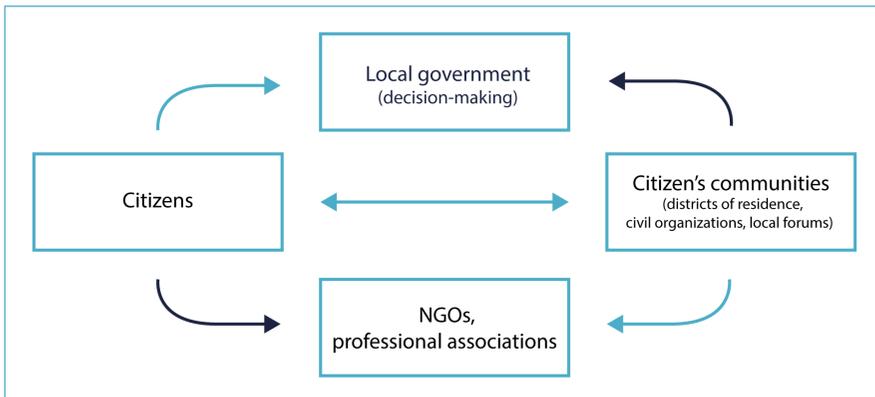
4. Sustainability and the model of the participatory democracy

A change in moral outlook also requires a new style of political leadership, one that does not seek to satisfy short-term interests, but recognizes that timely austerity (e.g. in energy use) will provide greater freedom for all in the long term. According to Caldwell modern man must somehow become better than he is;

this is not utopian idealistic advice, but advice necessary for survival (Caldwell, 1998). In this long-term policy-making process, the participatory democracy model can provide a solution at national level. One of the greatest failures of twentieth century democratic political systems was the growth of voter passivity. Is successful cooperation sustainable in a society whose members are bound together by civic obligations, law and self-interest? – asks Michael Sandel, a prominent figure of communitarian ethics (Sandel, 2002). The problem of sustainability that requires the promotion of activity between electoral cycles, which undoubtedly must be carried out at local level.

At the local level, it is also easier to convince the local population to support a particular issue, and local NGOs, citizens' forums, professional organizations can get involved in local decision-making processes.

Fig. 1: Decision making process in participatory democracy at local level



It is also highlighted that many forms of social activity are possible, and that they can promote each other.

- 1) Improving own life (quality of life), either individually or in a small community (e.g. a residential or workplace community at the level of daily routines) / micro-level
- 2) Promoting changes in a particular area, e.g. animal welfare or the preference for renewable green energy sources. This requires a greater degree of social cohesion. Involving NGOs and professional organizations can improve water quality or animal welfare at local and regional level /micro-level
- 3) It is possible to raise awareness and sensitize society and policymakers in a particular area /micro and macro-level
- 4) 2-3 influences the state legislative process / macro-level

Citizen's choices can play an important role in improving the environment and quality of life, but the complexity of environmental problems, the distance of goals and the different perceptions of the good life mean that the willingness to participate in decision-making is lower at national (state) level. The idea of participatory democracy builds on local practices and initiatives. It is no coincidence that British politician and the International Coordinator for the Green Party of England and Wales, Derek Wall ([Wall, 2010](#)) has identified the four pillars of green politics as follows: (1) ecological wisdom, (2) social justice, (3) grassroots democracy and (4) nonviolence. It was expanded by the Green Committees of Correspondence in the United States into Ten Key Values that further included (5) decentralization, (6) community-based economics, (7) post-patriarchal values, and (8) respect for diversity, (9) global responsibility, (10) future focus. These pillars are also found in the Global Green Charter, which brings together the green parties. Different federations complement the work of the global organization. The Federation of Green Parties of Africa, the Asia Green Network, the Federation of Green Parties of Americas, and European Green Party aim to coordinate solutions to continent-specific problems, through participation in legislation and policy-making processes.

At the same time, sustainability is a global issue, closely linked to the problem of equitable distribution of goods and burdens. It is difficult for people to give up their freedom to consume according to their desires, and it is hard for them to change, because it is against their short-term self-interest. According to David Korten, this phenomenon is rooted in the American cultural experience of the abundance of free land, which led to the so-called frontier or cowboy mentality or ethic ([Korten, 1996](#)). In contrast, the citizen ([Rousseau, 2001](#)) must be able to weigh the perceived long-term good of the community alongside his short-term self-interest. To do so, however, he must have sufficient information and, if necessary, expertise in the matter to be decided. Awareness of environmental risks is more than a difficult task when it comes to the trade-off between convenience, job preservation and the present versus the unforeseen future. Environmental justice is still a rather weightless value in the world of politics, so the principle that "doing good pays" is politically false. It is important to regulate fairly the use of scarce natural resources and natural capital, and to protect endangered species and areas more effectively. In addition, it is essential to establish strict rules that are commensurate with the environmental pressures on production/service provision and that are binding on all competing economic operators. Such regulation would certainly appear to be a restriction on the market, but on closer examination, it is merely a means of ensuring a more environmentally fair playing field.

Another point of debate relates to the undemocratic political systems in underdeveloped and poor countries. They are vulnerable to the global economy

and suffer from global crises. For a clearer picture, two competing ethical visions that present moral dilemmas should be focused on. The so-called lifeboat ethic (Hardin, 2021) assumes that resources are finite, and therefore that each geographical area, like a lifeboat, has a proposed maximum number of passengers. However, there are few lifeboats, not enough room for everyone, and the distribution of resources becomes unequal on a force-by-force basis. The so-called “spaceship ethic” (Shrader-Frechette, 2021) requires a shift in consciousness from individual ethics to community ethics, and from a society of rights to a society of duties. The Earth itself is a spaceship, of which every single geographical area and state is a part. The community is not only the human world but also, the entire ecosystem. On this spaceship, participants who have little or no share in the resources – think water shortages, droughts and other natural disasters – do not want to travel, while others on the spaceship enjoy and use many services and goods. A more equitable distribution between the unequal/disadvantaged regions requires a more solidarity-based and consumption-reducing approach in developed regions. The solution must therefore come from the developed countries, and the group of these countries should be the driving force behind the solution. From the state and political actors, we are back to the starting point for a change of perception for a paradigm shift, which is essential for understanding and managing sustainability.

5. Conclusion

The global problem of sustainability has challenged both the social mentality and the political decision-making process. Western individual values, coupled with a consumerism have become the norm in liberal Western democracies. The capitalist economy, also globalizing behind the political system, has reached the limits of its expansion. The solution is an environmentally friendly policy based on the protection of nature and ecosystems, which puts the economy at the service of sustainable development. Its success is highly doubtful. What is needed is a holistic approach to the nature-society relation, an increase in (civil) social activism and a reduction in inequalities in the global world. Sustainability calls attention to the need for a complex policy-making process that involves both sub-state and supranational levels. Effective state legislation will not be possible if society does not wake up to the challenge of sustainability. Effective state legislation is not possible without consciously coordinated legislation on a global scale and across states. There are many arguments in favour of participatory democracy. Unlike traditional liberal democracy, it can mobilize citizens at the local level and involve them in decision-making. This is particularly important because sustainability seems a distant and abstract goal, in contrast to the interests of the individual in the present and the consumer

desires for immediate satisfaction. For the moment, the global mindset is not working. Being in solidarity and active for humanity is a much bigger challenge than being active for our local environment. Increasing the willingness to participate in local decision-making can have a positive impact on the macro-level of state legislation. This of course requires a community-cantered, solidarity-based approach. Community spirit and social/political participation are mutually reinforcing.

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