Conclusion

Global sustainability governance – really?

Doris Fuchs, Anders Hayden, and Agni Kalfagianni

Four fundamental questions exist, when it comes to global sustainability governance. The first one relates to the politics of global sustainability governance: why are we not seeing real action in the face of the sustainability challenges humankind faces? To a bystander, it must seem like we are driving full speed into the wall, all the time having our gazes strictly fixed on entertaining stuff happening on the sidewalk. Do not look ahead! appears to be the motto of our time. Against the background of this question, the second one develops: where can we identify potential sources of hope for change, if any exist at all? Underlying these questions are two additional ones that students (in the broadest sense) of global sustainability governance need to ask of any representations of sustainability challenges and solutions: what analytical lens does the argument take, i.e. what does it focus on, but just as importantly, what does it ignore? The answer to this question provides a first basis for evaluating the plausibility of the representation of the problem and solution. The final question concerns the normative frame explicitly or implicitly applied in the respective representation of sustainability challenges and solutions. Taking this frame into account allows us to evaluate the suggested solution in terms of its fit with broader norms and values, so as to avoid potential trade-offs between sustainability and other societal goals. This Handbook and its contributions speak to these four questions. In fact, while the chapters are placed in four sections corresponding to the earlier questions, all chapters speak to more than one of them.

Various chapters in the Handbook highlight structural barriers to transformative change, pinpointing both opposing material interests as well as underlying ideational paradigms that promote unsustainability. The role of the latter is noteworthy in terms of the hegemony of ideas of growth (Higgs), mining (Princen), and consumption (Krogman), for instance. But ideational paradigms also include the definitions we use and stories we tell about decarbonisation (Lane), technological innovation (Alexander and Rutherford), local participation (Litfin), governance (Blühdorn and Deflorian), and democracy (Mert), or more broadly our "magical thinking" (Maniates) as well as the meaning we attach to everyday practices (Meyer). Material structures create barriers to transformation in terms of asymmetries in influence on public opinion and policy debates (Brulle and Aronczyk), by expanding and simultaneously disguising the reach and impact of financial logics (Clapp and Stephens), and by advantaging the interests of present generations over future ones (Lawrence) and

humankind over nature (Gumbert). Meaning and material structures also come together in shaping our everyday practices (Meyer).

A number of chapters specifically try to look for promising strategies and approaches to sustainability governance, in the midst of the existing material and ideational barriers. They suggest there is a need and opportunities to reorganise patterns of work time (Larsson et al.), consumption (Fuchs), participatory focus and space (Litfin), as well as the economy (Lange, Princen), governing institutions (Mert), and their goals and steering measures (Higgs, Philipsen). They propose that moving forward may become possible by stepping away from our dualistic and anthropocentric worldviews (Inoue et al., Gumbert), as well as by developing a new consensus on a vision of the future to strive for (Di Giulio and Defila, Vanhulst and Beling) and the normative foundations of such a future (Hayden, Kalfagianni et al.). In this vein, we may also want to provide more room for spiritual foundations (Glaab), and need to provide more voice to underrepresented groups (Inoue et al., Lawrence, Okereke).

Other chapters present a range of analytical lenses against which to evaluate the stories told about global sustainability challenges and potential solutions in research and practice. With their help, the importance of paying attention to the role of structural forces as constraints and potential enablers of sustainability transformations becomes clear. Thus, authors highlight the important role of both agent-centred and structural power (Bexell), of critical inquiries into the underlying and potentially counter-intuitive intent and character of sustainability governance (Blühdorn and Deflorian), or of evaluations of the transformative potential of governance solutions related to everyday practices and their foundations in terms of meaning and material resources (Meyer). Other chapters ask us to critically reflect on whom and what we actually consider when we talk about the goal of sustainability and associated norms and strategies (Inoue et al., Gumbert, Lawrence, Okereke). In a similar vein, we can approach narratives about sustainability problems and solutions by inquiring into their underlying assumptions about the potential and need for continued economic growth, the limits to growth, and the governability of such limits (Higgs, Lange) or optimism regarding technological innovation and decoupling (Alexander and Rutherford, Lane).

Finally, a number of chapters concentrate on normative lenses and ethical questions one can apply to sustainability challenges and especially to suggested solutions. They ask us to reflect on the fundamental goals of sustainability and sustainability governance (Di Giulio and Defila, Vanhulst and Beling), and suggest normative yardsticks against which we can evaluate developments in sustainability (governance) (Kalfagianni et al., Pellizzoni, Lawrence). They also develop normative requirements for a sustainability transformation (Hayden) and discuss the potential to draw on specific normative resources in its pursuit (Glaab). Finally, the identified norms allow us in research and practice to evaluate sustainability-related developments, from financialisation processes (Clapp and Stephens) and indicators of well-being (Philipsen) to questions of consumer rights and responsibilities (Fuchs), economic organisation (Lange, Larsson et al.), or even population growth (Coole) in terms of their potential to provide (or endanger) the foundations of a world we want to live in.

As pointed out earlier, barriers to and hopes for global sustainability governance, the analytical lenses applied, and ethical questions asked are interlinked. They come together, for instance, in our understanding of consumption, the way we have set up our economic and political systems as well as societies in terms of fostering overconsumption by the global consumer class, the questions we fail to ask about the meaning of and drivers behind this overconsumption, alternative visions to strive for, and potential strategies for reorganisation. Their interaction is also reflected in the questions we, as researchers or practitioners, ask or fail to ask, the normative characteristics of the transformation we aspire to, and the transformative

potential we see or fail to see in governance and, more specifically, our participatory practices and democratic institutions. Altogether, then, the contributions to this Handbook tell the story of barriers to and hopes for global sustainability governance, and provide tools to analyse and evaluate it. They share scepticism regarding easy fixes and point to the complex and fundamental political, economic, and societal structures that have brought us to this point and continue to hinder a turn towards transformation. They also show a way forward, however, drawing our attention to the question of what really matters both in terms of a vision to strive for and structural barriers that we need to actively deconstruct and remove.

The future of global sustainability research

In consequence, this Handbook is as much a summary of the state of the art of research on sustainability governance as it is a springboard for further research. Sustainability challenges are constantly evolving and answers to these challenges are continuously changing – even if woefully inadequate overall to date. Research into and knowledge of the various requirements, potentials, foundations, conditions, and implications of global sustainability governance are simultaneously constantly developing as well. The individual chapters therefore highlight specific necessities and promising targets for future research. As editors, we would therefore like to raise a couple of overarching priorities for research on global sustainability governance that go beyond the foci of the individual chapters: the sustainability of sustainability research and communication, and the role of money in (sustainability) governance.

When studying developments in sustainability research (and its uptake in the political realm) over time, we cannot avoid asking ourselves: why do we see the same suggestions for solutions being repeated in fashion cycles, even though they have been debunked on theoretical and empirical grounds? Or framed differently, what are the challenges for learning at least on the part of researchers? Examples of such reoccurring fashionable stories are the all too optimistic hopes placed in grassroots initiatives, public participation, or changes in consumer values. While the idea that we can change the system from the bottom-up, that we can individually learn and thereby collectively exercise control and transform our world in the direction of sustainability is certainly extremely attractive (which is already one part of the answer to why these perspectives keep reappearing), the empirical reality simply does not provide sufficient evidence of such successes. Grassroots initiatives tend to face serious challenges in terms of the scale and reach of their impact; participatory governance often is not inclusive, transparent, and a secure basis for a transformation of interests from individual to collective objectives; and consumers may purchase greener products but only under certain conditions, and they, most importantly, are almost always invited to shop more rather than less (e.g. chapters by Fuchs, Krogman, Litfin, and Maniates). This is not to deny meaning and (some) impact to such efforts, but to caution strongly against being too naïve in attributing transformative potential. The same applies to placing hopes in the "green state" or top-down approaches. Given what we know about opposing interests, both in their concentrated and individually powerful form (e.g. corporations in general and institutional investors in particular) as well as in their decentralised and collectively powerful form (e.g. consumers and employees embedded in incentive structures that prioritise if not consider exclusively economic factors), and given the failure of national governments and (often toothless) international organisations and agreements to achieve the necessary decoupling of human well-being and resource consumption (e.g. chapters by Bexell, Blühdorn and Deflorian, Brulle and Aronczyk, Mert), why should one expect transformative change from this source? And yet, we find well-meaning research all too easily touting both stories again and again, without critically reflecting on their limits.

To be clear, we are not arguing that we should toss the hopes of bottom-up or top-down change out of the window entirely. If change is not coming from the top and not from the bottom, where would it come from? What we want to strongly caution against is continuously reinventing these stories, as if they had not been told (and – in their most simplistic forms – debunked) before. We will need both bottom-up *and* top-down impulses for change; however, to identify realistic conditions for success on both accounts, we have to learn from what research on global environmental and sustainability governance has already found over the course of the last four to five decades. And this leads us to the sustainability challenges that sustainability research faces today.

The unsustainability of sustainability research?

Research currently is characterised by numerous unsustainable practices on different levels. Similar to other societal realms, governance by numbers has become a dominating steering strategy by university administrations and governments. Relevant "numbers" include grant acquisitions by researchers, impact scores achieved with publications, and international "visibility" demonstrated with publications, conference participation, and media presence. The increasing dependence of universities and scholarly careers on grant acquisitions promotes a short-term focus on research topics for which funding happens to be available and on research questions and hypotheses attractive to funders. To acquire governmental funding, for instance, research emphasising win-win solutions, participation as a basis for sustainability transformations, or technological transformation potentials (bioengineering, digitalisation, etc.) tends to be more helpful than focusing on overconsumption or power asymmetries in politics. Increasingly co-funding with "societal actors," largely translated as "big corporations," is a requirement for governmental research funding. This has serious implications for the type of research pursued, which typically involves problem-solving in a way demonstrably benefiting businesses (in the hope that this will also benefit society) as opposed to critical, reflective, and normative research. For corporate funding, research analysing the potential contribution of corporate responsibility programs to sustainability governance, for instance, is much more likely to receive funding than research critically inquiring into the intent and impact of such programs.

In terms of publications, similar problems with respect to the fashionability and mainstream character of research topics exist when it comes to the need to get into journals with high impact factors. This dynamic is aided by a demand for quantity in publications, which exists for both junior and senior researchers in many academic systems today, creating a constant quest for new output. Obviously, a high frequency of publications has to reduce the amount of research going into each individual publication and therefore its innovative potential, as researchers are only human, too.[1] The original motivation behind the publication of research, i.e. the communication of new and relevant research findings to peers, has lost weight relative to the need to simply publish. This need to publish and publish felt by researchers is accompanied by a need to be present at international conferences. Here, too, the initial motivation of being able to engage in direct exchange on topics of joint interest with other researchers appears to have been pushed back relative to the need to increase one's visibility and therefore invitations to joint grant applications and publications. Given the number of paper proposals submitted to many international conferences and the recognition of the importance of "active participation" by researchers, many associations have started to organise so many panels parallel to each other that the audience for the individual panel sometimes barely matches the size of the panel. The resulting quantity of publications and presentations,

in turn, means that every researcher wanting to be heard amidst the noise needs to be even more omnipresent. The result of these trends then is that we publish more than we read, we speak more than we listen, and we have too little time to really take into account what decades of research on a given topic may already be able to tell us, while simultaneously using up energy for computer time and storage, paper (though perhaps increasingly less so), and creating large ecological footprints via air travel.

These trends apply to most fields of research, including sustainability research. And perhaps it is because of the perversity of the effects described earlier for researchers trying to foster a sustainability transformation that they become most noticeable here. Accordingly, relevant scientific associations or subgroups within these associations have debated questions of moving to paperless publications or virtual conferences for some time. Many sustainability scholars are struggling with related questions and issues of personal responsibility versus systemic constraints, and the associated costs of individual counter-agency. Slow science movements are emerging. Among the contributors to this volume, one can identify a range of personal choices regarding the situation ranging from attempts to avoid air travel to the refusal to participate in the grant application game. Senior (tenured) researchers can make those decisions more easily than junior scholars and untenured faculty, of course.

Still, sustainability research needs to pay particular attention to the question of what sustainable research is. We certainly should not waste resources of reinventing (all too imperfect) wheels again and again. We need to take sufficient time to make sure that we listen to and learn from each other. We need to focus on questions and try to develop answers that really matter, rather than those for which funding can be obtained. And we need to call out systemic constraints destroying the foundations for sound and therefore societally valuable research.

Communicating sustainability issues

Another issue to which we need to pay more attention as sustainability scholars is what happens with sustainability-relevant knowledge in public discourse and politics. An underlying problem here may be that many of us too easily assume that everybody knows the seriousness of the sustainability challenges humankind faces (and therefore wonders why nobody takes action – see above). Surely, a considerable share of the population in high income countries is somewhat aware of these challenges and chooses to use humanity's incredible ability to close our eyes to unattractive news and to turn our thoughts away from the consequences. Another group, however, simply is not convinced that the challenges are all that real or that easy fixes are not around the corner. And why should they be? Wouldn't they hear a lot more about these challenges – relative to other news – if they were so serious? Indeed, in the overall noise, sustainability-related messages are simply drowned out. Media logics and power relations behind the distribution of media time, as well as the human inclination to focus on easier or more entertaining information (especially when faced with challenges that seem to be beyond one's control) mean that we receive hundreds if not thousands of messages about other "stuff" for every sustainability-related message that we receive. Politicians also send contradictory messages to citizens, given how rarely they talk about sustainability problems – even if they point out their seriousness when they do – compared to other issues, and how frequently they promote opposing interests. Angela Merkel may enjoy appearing as the "Klimakanzlerin" (climate chancellor) in preparation for the Climate Summit in Paris, but German governments under Merkel also have opposed stricter EU emission standards for cars, rolled back support for renewable energy sources, been complicit

in the car industry's efforts to cheat on emissions controls, and delayed exiting coal, to name just a few countervailing efforts.[2] The resulting message to the public, then, is that climate governance is nice to have, but not as important as "…." And then, there are highly visible individuals who explicitly oppose any ideas of a seriousness of sustainability challenges and call climate change a hoax, of course (Brulle and Aronczyk). Efforts to discredit science are all too evident today. A recent manifestation comes from the Dutch Senatorial elections of 20 March 2019, when Thierry Baudet, leader of the populist Forum for Democracy (FvD), attacked universities in his victory speech[3] and later provided an online mechanism inviting students to report "political indoctrination" by lecturers and professors.[4] In sum, questions of how to deal with information overflow in general and fake news in particular cannot be ignored by sustainability scholars.

The rising relevance of social media and the decreasing relevance of facts for political and media communication are relatively new phenomena, relevant not just for sustainability research. Again, however, they are particularly relevant for sustainability research given the need for real and fast action. What does this mean for sustainability researchers? Many of us are already trying to insert our voices into the debate via various means. The sustainability scholar in the ivory tower is probably a rare phenomenon. Moreover, critical sustainability scholars do not shy away from communicating tough messages. Beyond such individual efforts, however, the situation described earlier shows that sustainability scholars cannot leave questions of the role of communication and information in politics to others. We need a better understanding of how to enable sustainability messages to survive in the media jungle, to be heard and to be trusted.

Money and governance

This brings us to a related problem: the role of money in (democratic) governance. The potential for serious sustainability governance cannot be thought of independently from the distribution of power in the political system. We need to open creative spaces for the development and adoption of policy options by vastly reducing the influence of powerful market actors on politics. Addressing power imbalances in democracies implies reducing the role of external money in politics in as many forms as possible, which is much easier said than done, unfortunately. Lobbying could be strongly curtailed and the remaining parts balanced among different types of interests as well as made as transparent as possible. Private sponsoring and campaign finance could be abolished. But money also exercises influence on politics via the media and the shaping of public discourse. In consequence, the dependence of media on advertising and the political connotations if not explicit content of advertising and other communications in the media also need to be considered. A possible strategy in this respect would be a massive reduction in advertising via the creation of advertising-free spaces (important in schools as well), as well as the taxation of advertising (rather than its subsidisation via tax reductions). Given the contribution of advertising to (over)consumption, its reduction would even garner a double-dividend.

None of these ideas is new and not just sustainability scholars have proposed them. There is a considerable amount of research about the increasing dysfunction of our democracies. Currently, such research tends to focus more on the rise of populism and polarisation, while questions regarding the influence of corporate power and money in general are pushed to the background. Clearly, populism is a serious phenomenon deserving attention, for reasons including its implications for sustainability governance. But as sustainability researchers we should also not lose sight of the influence of imbalances in material power (and the discursive

power it can buy) on politics. Admittedly, this is a field of research where laurels are not easy to gain. "Proving" the influence of a particular actor or group of actors on specific policies is difficult, to say the least, given problems of data accessibility and methodological standards regarding the demonstration of causality that have taken hold in much of the social sciences. Still, it is a crucial field for sustainability researchers if the ground for a transformative potential in democracies is to be laid. Demonstrating undue influence and revealing cases in which the interests of a rich or powerful few trumped the interests of many can serve as a basis for contestation by the public of political misrule and a reconsideration of policies and regulations. Such research would promote the (re)politicisation of sustainability governance.

Concluding thoughts

The good news is that many open questions remain for global sustainability governance in research and practice. Well, actually, that may be indicative of rather bad news. Certainly, the sustainability challenges we face are not small. As scholars, we struggle with their size, reach, and complexity as well as with the multifaceted forces hindering their effective targeting. The research and teaching by the contributors to this Handbook, however, show that we have not given up on hope and that we continue to invest in the future of humankind. In these efforts, we are convinced that critical perspectives on global sustainability governance provide a particularly powerful vantage point, allowing us to question the material and discursive status quo, reflect on the potential for alternative realities, and develop promising ideas for transformative strategies. We hope that you will join us on this journey!

Notes

1 In fact, one may be critical of handbooks like this one, for which contributors tend to be asked to contribute chapters on a core aspect of their research, on which they will naturally already have published before. As editors, we carefully weighed the idea of publishing this Handbook, therefore. However, we felt that a book combining drawing together the included critical perspectives on sustainability governance, showing their breadth and interaction, and thereby underlining the relevance and combined value of these perspectives was direly missing.
2 www.greenpeace.de/sites/www.greenpeace.de/files/publications/20171026-greenpeace-bilanz-klima-merkel.pdf.
3 www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/03/21/de-uil-van-minerva-spreidt-zijn-vleugels-bij-t-vallen-van-de-avond-a3954103 (in Dutch).
4 www.renaissanceinstituut.nl/actueel/de-nieuwe-schoolstrijd-meldpunt-indoctrinatie-op-scholen-en-universiteiten (in Dutch).