

Challenges of Multi-Level Governance for Sustainability: What can the European experience teach us?

EDITORIAL

Frieder Otto Wolf

As a thematic network we have defined as one of our main tasks to be tackled the understanding of the possibilities and difficulties of multi-governance for sustainability, especially in Europe. We have described our perspective on this problematic as follows:

"instrument of policy co-ordination has become the main characteristic of the post-Maastricht EU, especially since the Treaty of Amsterdam. Likewise, its spirit has impregnated older areas of EU policy making, like the field of structural policy (with the last reform of the structural funds). The post-Gothenburg procedures to be concretised by the Seville summit for further elaborating and implementing the EU sustainability strategy on the level of the EU will not be able to function as yet another separate field of policy co-ordination, as realised by the Gothenburg summit in its call to integrate the Luxembourg, Cardiff and Cologne processes, and the Lisbon agenda. The envisaged yearly "Reports on the economic, ecological and social state of the Union" will highlight the problems of internal cohesion, external compatibility, and implementation encountered by the EU sustainability strategy.

The difficulties stemming from implicit resistances already within established co-ordination procedures against integrating a new dimension of objectives and evaluation criteria will be especially focused in the elaboration of these yearly reports. Sustainability should not be a simple add-on to existing policy mechanisms, nor a mere object of occasional cosmetics and lip-service. 'Ecological mainstreaming' should not lead to neglecting specific measures in each area. A comprehensive critical stock-taking of arrangements on the European level for integrating sustainability into existing mechanisms of policy co-ordination is the first step in developing the network by bringing together experts' knowledge with the experiences of politicians and movement representatives. This communication and articulation process also refers to the effectiveness and efficiency, the transparency and accountability of the process on the European level, in comparison with the national experiences. However, as the policy integration pro-

cess in particular for environmental and less for social and employment policies is further developed in the Union than in most member states, the challenges of integrating sustainability into different dimensions of policy co-ordination in the current EU deserve special attention. In this case, useful lessons for national policy integration might be drawn from the Union's standard setting example.

The EU sustainability strategy, in turn, will depend in its impact on the degree in which it will prove capable of helping to shape the co-ordinated policy objectives and the implementation and evaluation procedures of the existing areas of policy co-ordination. An analysis of the specific conditions of receptivity with regard to the successful operationalisation of the overarching sustainability strategy will be a central condition for further developing this strategy in a realistic way. Such an analysis will have to include relations of interdependency existing e.g. between economic, employment, environmental, and structural policy, as well as possible effects of positive or negative mutual reinforcement between them. The Cardiff process of integrating environmental aspects into transport, energy, agricultural, and other policies will be evaluated for its potential to provide effective models for achieving an operational level of policy integration." (from our 'Technical Annex, 2002)

In our Vienna Workshop we have concretise our debates, in addressing different levels of the multi-level governance of the EU in their contribution to an integrated European strategy for sustainable development avoiding its marginalization by more powerful mechanism of co-ordination - such as the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines (BEPGs) which may claim the urgency of over-riding short-term concerns.

We shall prolong this debate also in the context of the discussion group 'Governance for Sustainable Development' (GOSD) initiated by SERI.

We are especially looking into levels which may be able to activate additional resources and motivate people's activities, and therefore may be decisive for its implementation as a long-term strategy which always will have the difficulty of meeting an attitude among policy-makers that its real hour has 'not yet' come. Such a role may be emerging on the local level with its eventual links to grass roots democracy, or - hopefully - at the level of a changing corporate governance accepting the principle of responsibility. Or it should certainly be sought for in the dimension of gender as a neglected in-depth determinant of all societal processes and political action. Not the least it may gain additional leverage from the changes linked to the kind of innovations made possible by new information and communication technologies, realising the full potential of e-governance by new strategies of institutional innovations.

There are important possibilities to be explored, without any doubt. We should not overlook, however, that this enormous potential for societal change and political initiative is not automatically de-linking from the existing structures of inequality, discrimination and dominance existing in our societies, or from the polarizing tendencies inherent in the dominant tendencies of global and European economic developments since the end crisis of Fordism in the 1970s and 1980s. On the contrary, there are strong reasons for assuming that they will rather serve to reinforce such 'spontaneous' tendencies and their structuralizing, if nothing specific and powerful is not initiated and kept in motion in order to harness these forces of change for a project of radical democratic change. And, although the 'administrative illusion' is still deluding many politicians and experts to believe that a centralisation of power will be the best way of having the benefits of such a potential reaped in a sustainable way, we should elaborate on our critical notion that without a strong support from below, without a politics of broad democratic initiatives and widened democratic accountability from below, there cannot and will not be a realistic perspective of sustainable development on any level.

Maybe it is also helpful for our debates to remind you all, that multi-level governance taken seriously as a strategy of democratic governance will have to redefine the balance between representative democracy, direct democracy, and civil society participation - and not accept to be restricted to the relations between governments and a dependent public.

Finally, I'd like to underline the elementary circumstance (which is in the last instance analytically necessary) that in talking about multi-level governance we have unavoidably ceased to talk about a one-best-way. Instead we are talking about paths of development to be recognized, to be chosen and to be pursued in developing in, eventually, modifying them.

In a situation, where the tendencies that the short term considerations of growth and competitiveness seem to be gaining in urgency, due to the pressures of recession, we shall work on reinforcing the argument the long-term future is not less teal for the mere reason of not yet being with us. In many respects it is even more real than transient moments of the industrial cycle. Making this well understood seems to be the central issue of the politics linked to the Strategy of Sustainable Development the European Council has agreed in Gothenburg in 2001.

AUTHOR:

Frieder Otto Wolf, Koordinator des Thematischen Netzwerkes "Sustainability Strategy"
Freie Universität Berlin, Institut für Philosophie
Habelschwerdter Allee 30, D-14195 Berlin
fow@snafu.de

WEBSITE of the project:

www.sustainability-strategy.net