

# Institutions for a sustainable development—experiences from EU-countries

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**Abstract** This article is based on an international comparative study analysing innovations in national administrative institutions. Results of that research are presented and discussed here. Against the background of the institutionalising process of political institutions the study focused on innovations initiated or introduced by governments or parliaments by example of policies and politics supporting sustainable development. The countries involved in the original study were Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. **Three general lessons can be drawn: (1) Countries with a long tradition of integrated environmental policy-making are more open to the concept of sustainability. (2) A (institutional) “cure-all” solution does not seem to exist. It seems necessary to diffuse the concept of sustainability into all spheres of politics and society. Reaching this strategic goal requires a specific policy and polity mix. (3) Strong and well-equipped institutions result from specific policies and politics: they play a central role in promoting and intensifying sustainable development. Successful innovations integrating SD into everyday politics and policies are only a very first step though.** Further improvements with regard to effective participation and public debate, global orientation of policies and the measurability of achieved progress are necessary.

**Keywords** Sustainable development · Institutions · Institutionalising procedures · Experiences in EU-countries · Tradition · Shared values · National frameworks

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## Introduction: the historical challenge

Since the UN Earth Summit of 1992 in Rio many proclamations have been made by political actors, but with their conventional mode of policy-making supported by traditional institutions and policy tools, they have neither been able to adjust the traditional and current non-sustainable modes of production nor changed the lifestyles of their populations in a direction and to a degree that is more compliant with sustainable development.

Nevertheless, a growing number of governments, local authorities and parliaments have become aware that their traditional working procedures and structures are not functioning optimally to cope with the challenges that the realisation of Sustainable Development (SD) poses. As a reaction several countries have adjusted the relevant institutions to the changed circumstances, whereas in other countries innovative institutions have been created to push and to accompany processes that lead to SD.

As institutionalisation is considered by many as the fourth pillar of SD—next to ecological, economic and social dimensions—the question rises what role institutions and institutionalisation have played so far in introducing and consolidating SD in society. This article analyses whether, and if so, how institutions and the institutionalising process have successfully contributed to enhance SD in some EU countries. The analysis is based on an international comparative study prepared for the Office of Technology Assessment of the German Parliament and on subsequent research in several EU-countries.<sup>1</sup> Within the framework of sociological neo-institutionalism theory institutions and the institutionalising process are analysed to better understand the role of institutions in promoting SD.

## Institutions and institutionalisation for SD

### Institutions and institutionalisation

In the course of human history institutions have been developed to structure behaviour for social purposes. Institutions can be described as organisations, or mechanisms of social structure that enforce rules to govern the behaviour of individuals. Usually they are characterized by permanence. This may contribute to the impression that institutions are mostly seen as existing organisations and are thus regarded as given “facts”. But of course they pass through several developmental stages: they arise and develop until a formal or an informal pattern of self-organisation emerges, comprising rules and regulations, shared expectations, as well as commonly held norms and habits. At this point human acting and social relations have become indisputable, as a matter of course and as such a “reality” has grown.

New institutionalism theory offers interesting elements to a better understanding of the functioning and the role of institutions. The works of Meyer and Rowan (1977/1991), DiMaggio and Powel (1983, 1991) and Zucker (1987) made significant contributions to explain macroinstitutional and microinstitutional cohesions within organisations; moreover neo-institutionalism theory also dealt with the symbolic significance of organisations, thus referring to its characteristic feature of their permanence. Related to sustainable development these elements could explicate the role of institutions in moving society into

<sup>1</sup> The article is mainly based on a study commissioned by the German Parliament, the Bundestag. The study, entitled “Long-term and cross-section issues in European governments and parliaments—an analysis of institutions and procedures in selected countries” was conducted from July 2001 until July 2002. Parts of it are published in Göll and Thio (2004).

the direction of SD. Sociological concepts like “structuration theory” (Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1984) and “social field and habitus” (Bourdieu, 1992, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996) understand institutions as emergent configurations which structure the context of action for all actors, reduce insecurities and transaction costs, clarify expectations of other actors and support or sanction specific activities, make some of them more probable than others. Institutions are a result of social action and effect/influence social action.

Besides analysing the effects of existing institutions neo-institutionalism theory pays attention to the process of institutionalisation as well. Here we particularly refer to the theoretical contributions of Tolbert and Zucker (1996) and Beschorner et al. (2005), who analysed the institutionalisation process in depth: as a result several grades in this process can be distinguished. Based on their insight we shall attempt to describe the state of SD in the several EU member states.

Theoretical concepts like neo-institutionalism enable us to assess how far the institutionalising process of SD has progressed in the analysed member states of the EU. By allocating indicators to each phase in this development it will be possible to assess the progress made during the institutionalising process of SD.

### Phases and degrees of institutionalisation

It is Tolbert’s and Zucker’s merit to have deepened the understanding of institutionalisation by regarding it explicitly as a process. In this way a better understanding of how institutionalisation works can be reached. Starting from the definition that an institution is “a reciprocal typification of habitualized action by types of actors” (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996: 180) generated by an institutionalising process, they point out that institutions create meaning of action (M. Weber: “Handlungssinn”); in this way institutions acquire an objectivated state that is called “social reality”.

According to Tolbert and Zucker the process of institutionalisation passes through three phases:

- *Habitualisation*: Based on trial-and-error and on individual and collective experiences made in the past, man has developed a pool of routines he uses in every day situations (*habitualisation*). Confronted with unknown problems solutions or new options (imitations, mostly ad hoc) are looked for in a non-systematically way. Organisations seem to behave in a similar way. The problems they are confronted with are caused by new regulations, technological change or requirements of the market and occur during the so called “innovation phase” (Tolber & Zucker, 1996).
- *Objectivation*: During this phase a consensus on the significance of new structures to alter or to replace routines to cope with the new reality is arrived at. Imitating other organisations on an ad hoc basis is left now and is normatively determined. This part of the institutionalisation process is characterized by a swift diffusion of structural elements and by observing other organisations precisely and systematically. Objectivation may also take place by trying new or other options for action; in such cases institutionally structured routines are broken.

A successful distribution is strongly influenced by the *legitimisation* of the structural change and can be assessed to the extent by which these changes are taken over by heterogeneous actors. Because coordinative action is determined normatively, the fundamentals of objectivation are more stable compared to the habitualisation process; thus from this perspective objectivation is a step forward in the institutionalisation

process. However, a sound judgement of this stability will only be possible after standing the test of time.

**Sedimentation:** The end of the institutionalising process shows the sedimentation of this development in institutional settings: a new “reality” has emerged reflected in a generally accepted institution. From this moment the new institution is likely to be a constant element in society exerting its influence on social behaviour and relations.

Based on the three stages of the institutionalising process Beschorner et al. (2005) distinguish a triple-phased institutionalising process for SD including the following indicators:

- The first is called “pre-institutionalisation” and is characterized by problem oriented articulation and communication, innovation and habitualisation. The distinctive characterizations are indicated as follows: During this stage expert discourses illustrate the increasing significance of SD; later SD will be part of public discourse. SD-related problems are studied, whereas a monitoring process is started to grasp and to record the problems. In the course of this phase knowledge increases, ideas and concepts are (further) developed; at the same time first problem-solving approaches are tested, in the case of SD mostly by NGOs.
- During the second stage, “semi-institutionalisation”, normative action starts to dominate SD engagement and is characterised by increasing implementation based on “good practices” and systematic monitoring. Another indicator is the commitment of heterogeneous organisations to adopt and implement the principles of SD. (Legislative) Regulations, although not an indicator for the extent of social and economic integration may strengthen and deepen the institutionalisation of SD.
- The last phase “completed institutionalisation” (full institutionalisation) shows a fully normative diffusion of institutionalised SD, that means that a (relatively) full social acceptance of the significance of SD has been arrived at. As a consequence SD can stand up to opposing traditional norms and interests.

## Methodological aspects and considerations

Political institutions are subject to constant debate: they have to perform well if they are to maintain general well-being and legitimation. That implies that they have to be adjusted to new societal and political conditions on a regular basis. Examples of such policy and polity revisions in recent decades are the realisation of environmental policies, women’s emancipation and gender politics and technology assessment. To meet those challenges new political-administrative bodies were established through political struggle in these political arenas. Yet, sustainable politics is even more complex and challenging, and extremely ambitious. There are at least five specific problems that have to be mastered by new or adjusted institutions for SD:

1. As Sustainable Development is crosscutting in *character* traditional and functional divisions (of labour) have to be complemented or replaced by a crosscutting or interdepartmental approach.
2. Since crises and problems of present non-sustainable systems originate mostly from the short-term perspective of institutions<sup>2</sup> the introduction of a long-term orientation is of great importance.

<sup>2</sup> See Luhmann (2001).

3. A democratic and liberal transformation towards sustainability will only be possible if there is a higher level of participation and mobilisation of organisations, associations and citizens based on increasingly shared values and norms regarding SD.
4. History shows that major transformations need to affect as many people as possible; because of its holistic quality SD needs to be explained by concrete and self-explaining activities. SD-institutions have to be based on a “trans-disciplinary” approach.
5. Due to the global effects of many activities the globalisation of institutions’ perspectives has to be improved and built into the architecture of SD-bodies.

In order to understand the set up of institutionalisation and its importance for establishing SD the focus here is on political institutions and the institutionalising process. Therefore emphasis is given to indicators that represent that institutionalising process. Hence, the first step was to identify relevant institutions, programmes, strategies and procedures by means of a literature and document study as well as internet research. The findings gave us reason to assume that almost all observed countries had gone through the “pre-institutionalisation” phase already. For each country structuring elements in the development of its sustainability policy were identified: they include institutions in the narrow sense (e.g. a ministerial department of SD, a SD-commission or Council). Also other types/degrees of institutionalisation, e.g. legislation, programmes or strategies as well as monitoring were observed and included in the analyses. Each of these indicators could at least be related to the second stage of the institutionalising process, “semi-institutionalisation”. However, the sheer existence of such indicators is no explanation in itself. Qualitative attributes had to be analysed also, especially the content, the terms of the programmes or strategies, the beginning of legislation, the competences and resources of institutions and monitoring authorities as well as the support of the regional and local level.

The formal indicators had to be complemented with information accounting for these aspects. This was done by way of interviews (October 2001 until January 2002). By conducting structured interviews with experts (scientists, high officials, members of parliament, and representatives of NGOs) from the eight countries their assessments as to the role and the importance of institutions, procedures and programmes promoting SD were grasped. Also the importance of long term and crosscutting aspects were integrated into the topics discussed during the interviews.

One outcome of the interviews was the expert’s assessment of the new or innovative character of the institutions, programmes, procedures and observed arrangements in the analysed countries. Criteria that could describe the degree of innovation were discussed and ranked, among them interdisciplinary approach, the distinctiveness of the long term orientation, participation of external experts in procedures, the societal reception of these institutions, programmes and procedures, resources, capacities, progress, evaluation, monitoring and success of implementation.

Existing studies<sup>3</sup> were complemented by assessing information and insights regarding the specific national and institutional contexts as well as their influence on long-term and crosscutting issues. In this way institutional and procedural barriers and factors favouring sustainability were identified and compared.

The institutionalisation of environmental policy bears some similarities with the institutionalisation of SD. Both, environmental issues and SD have in common that they are

<sup>3</sup> Among them have been Jänicke and Jörgens (2000), Lafferty (1999), Lafferty and Meadowcroft (2000), Niestroy (2005), Scruggs (2003), Weale, Pridham, Cini and Konstadakopoulos (2003), Weidner and Jänicke (2002), De Jongh (2001).

highly complicated and extensively interconnected with many other policy areas. **Initially it was assumed that problems and negative effects could be solved or eliminated in the short run, so the problem-solving approaches concentrated directly on the problem(s) without taking into consideration the non-technical or intertwining aspects of possible causes<sup>4</sup>.** One of the essential features of environmental policy that has developed since aims at preventing ecological damage, for instance by shifting production processes toward less polluting and more resource efficient alternatives, and altering patterns of consumption. Such an approach acknowledges that societal, economic and developmental aspects are interwoven in environmental problems in manifold ways. This also leads to the integration of interests in establishing procedures to cope with environmental problems and threats and is resulting in the sharing of responsibilities of environmental management, both at public policy level (e.g. developing cross-sector cooperation between ministerial departments) and in the private sector and civil society. As a consequence interest in market-based tools and control measures (such as environmental taxation and emission trade) as well as negotiated agreements and voluntary initiatives has grown steadily and in several countries they are, at least partially, established practice. These aspects illustrate not only the shift in emphasis in environmental policy and its closeness to SD, but that they are also elements of an institutionalisation process. **Environmental policy has emerged in modern societies much earlier than SD and it may be viewed as a major root of SD.<sup>5</sup>**

### Overview of institutional innovations on SD

During our research we found **many types of institutionalisation in sustainable politics in the eight EU-countries, some of them were innovations.** For all countries the major elements structuring SD-policies including their indicators were collected (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup>

With the exception of the Netherlands and Denmark specific SD commissions were installed at government or ministerial level. Sweden established a SD ministry, whereas Belgium appointed a Minister of Sustainable Development, although for a short period of time (it has a state secretary now). As to the legislative remit of national governments the German Bundestag created a Parliamentary Council on Sustainable Development, the Belgian and Finnish parliaments passed major laws explicitly concerning SD, whereas others have decided only on some formal or minor SD policies.<sup>7</sup> In all countries SD-strategies and -programmes were set up, policy goals and ways for implementation of SD defined, in many cases even evaluation schemes were designed to report on progress made.

### Comparisons of national SD-institutions

Based on the spectrum of elements and indicators of Sustainable Policies outlined above we positioned the eight countries in two cross-tables to establish a relation between the

<sup>4</sup> See Diamond (2004) and Radkau (2000).

<sup>5</sup> This connection is for instance, articulated within the very name of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro 1992: “U.N. Conference on Environment and Development”.

<sup>6</sup> For the full overview see Göll and Thio (2004), pp. 188ff.

<sup>7</sup> See Göll (2004).

**Table 1** Overview Structuring Elements in Sustainability Policy in selected EU-member states (based on Göll/Thio 2004)

Overview Structuring Elements in Sustainability policy:			
Institutions	Legislation	Strategies/Programmes	Evaluation
<p>Belgium</p> <p>CFDD: Integration civil society, advisory function;</p> <p>CJDD cooperated in developing the Belgian SD strategy with FB/BFP; monitors implementation;</p> <p>Federal Planbureau/ Bureau Fédéral du Plan, supported by a Task Force, is involved in developing the Belgian SD strategy, responsible for the report, coordinates/supervises SD process;</p> <p>State Secretary of Sustainable Development.</p>	<p>Coordination of the federal SD policy (May 1997) based on corresponding laws in Flanders (1995), Wallonia (1994).</p>	<p>Federal Plan for 2000–2004 based on the Federal Report, intensive engagement of the public and experts (2000); PADD (Stimulation of research in SD).</p>	<p>Federal Report (every two years, since 1999) – identifies deficits of existing measures;</p> <p>Ministerial obligation to report every two years;</p> <p>At this moment indicators are developed and elaborated on.</p>
<p>Denmark</p> <p>Ministry of Environment, in particular EPA, coordinates Danish SD policy;</p> <p>Apart from that, intensive communication and coordination with societal actors.</p>	<p>“Environmental Protection Act” (1973).</p>	<p>Design National Strategy June 2001.</p>	<p>Institutionalized oversight by the Ministry of Environment with respect to other ministries’ policies as to ecology and SD;</p> <p>Since 1997 annual report of the Ministry of Finance about the ecological effects of budgets;</p> <p>Danish SD-indicators (December 2003).</p>
			<p>In 2000 70% of the Danish municipalities were realizing LA21 (partly under a different title);</p> <p>In 2000: parliament’s decision to have the LA 21 report to be submitted every four years.</p>

Table 1 continued

Institutions	Legislation	Strategies/Programmes	Evaluation	Support of LA 21
<p>Finland</p> <p>FNCSD (Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development) (1993–2002) – Office of the network, presided by the Prime Minister. Promoter: Plena and workgroups (exchange of experiences and practical orientation).</p>	<p>SD integration in sectoral legislation, e.g. housing (1990) and with respect to Local government (1994);</p> <p>“Environmental Impact Assessment” (1994);</p> <p>Environmental Protection Act (1996).</p>	<p>Governmental reports: Sustainable Development (1990); National Report to UNCED 1992;</p> <p>Charting Finland’s Future Options (1993) with goals of implementation;</p> <p>State Council (1998); The Finnish Government’s Programme for Sustainable Development.</p>	<p>Evaluation by FNCSD 2001</p> <p>NGO-Reports with respect to the activities of the civil society as to Rio+5 and Rio+10 (financed by the Ministry of the Environment);</p> <p>FNCSD suggestion to have their members issue reports and plans in preparing WSSD “Signs of Sustainability 2000” – 83 internationally comparable indicators for 20 sectors;</p> <p>Evaluation of SD Programmes of 2003.</p>	<p>have been supported since 1998, although with limited financial means;</p> <p>66% of the municipalities is involved (86% of the Population);</p> <p>Dec. 2001 LA21 was evaluated by AFLRA.</p>
<p>France</p> <p>Commissariat General du Plan; CFDD: Since 1992 the Rio-advisory council has been headed by the prime minister;</p> <p>CNE (2000) – advisory council of ministerial officials – close to the industry (evaluating body);</p> <p>CES: represents organised interest groups since 1946;</p> <p>DAN (1995) – coordinates spatial and SD issues between the regions and parliaments;</p> <p>4D (1993) – established by ministerial officials.</p>		<p>Strategy papers 95/96 and 2001/02;</p> <p>Publication national SD strategy (2003); drawn up by the Comité Interministériel au développement Durable (CIDD).</p>	<p>IFEN developed indicators for target groups.</p>	

**Table 1** continued

Overview Structuring Elements in Sustainability policy:

Institutions	Legislation	Strategies/Programmes	Evaluation	Support of LA 21
Germany “Green Cabinet” (2000); German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) (2001); Parliamentary Advisory Board for Sustainable Development (2004); Offices/teams at regional state level.	Several laws in specific policy areas after 1992; Report of Inquiry commission (1998).	National sustainability strategy “Perspectives for Germany” (2002); Individual projects of the RNE (youth, film etc.); Specific programs of ministries and government agencies.	21 broad indicators are part of the national SD-strategy; Progress reports every two years, dialogue with stakeholders.	Transfer Office for Local Agenda 21 (2002); Service-Bureau for One-World-Initiatives.
Great Britain British Panel on SD (1994) – advises the prime minister; UK Round Table on SD (1995) – Forum for “stakeholder”; SD Commission – monitors progress SD (2000) Environmental Agency (1996), since Labour – SD Unit (1997) – Center of SD activities; Parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee – observes and analyses policy with respect to SD (incl. budget); Green Ministers (cabinet committee).	Climate Change Levy (1999); negotiable energy taxes (firms become max. allowances of 80% if increases in energy efficiency are planned.	Sustainable Development Strategy – 1994 Emphasis on environment; 1999 – Goal: Improvement of quality of life; SD-strategy “Securing the future” and Strategic Framework (2005).	150 National SD indicators and 15 exemplary “headline indicators” (developed by SDU); The Government Annual Report 2002 – <i>Achieving a better quality of life</i> , published in 2003; report about progress made in SD-process on the basis of “headline indicators” (yearly report).	In 1997 the prime minister encouraged municipalities to develop LA21 (90% re-acted positively); 79% have a Strategy (3/2002); Local Government Bill (2000) requires a LA21-Strategy of all municipalities.

Table 1 continued

Institutions	Legislation	Strategies/Programmes	Evaluation	Support of LA 21
<p>The Netherlands</p> <p>R/ROM (Raad voor VROM): Advisory council of the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Development and the Environment;</p> <p>RMNO (Raad voor Milieu- en Natuuronderzoek) – advises the government about future research (spatial planning, environment)</p> <p>Time horizon 3 – 15 years.</p>	<p>1993: Environment management Act.</p>	<p>NMP (NEP) 1 to 4: integrated environmental policy planning (since 1989) with concrete goals (NMP4: energy, biodiversity, natural resources, agriculture, mobility etc., until 2030);</p> <p>Report about government's policy (2002), review of societal activities was published in 2002.</p>	<p>Progress NMP: annually: environmental balance (written by RIVM); 'Environmental Outlook' published every four years (by RIVM); Ministerial obligation to report (twice a year in Parliament); 2002: 35 internationally comparable indicators.</p>	<p>1996 Support programme for LA21 (Supporting environmental policy at local level, VROM) was stopped because of diminished interest in LA21.</p>
<p>Sweden</p> <p>Ministry of the Environment (1986); Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SwEPA) developed national communication strategy for SD (1999);</p> <p>National committee on Agenda 21 and Habitat (1995/2000): coordinating task with office, 11 members (presided by the minister of environment);</p> <p>Ministry for SD (2004).</p>	<p>Environmental Code (1999).</p>	<p>National SD strategy (2002)</p> <p>15 national goals with regard to environmental quality (1999);</p> <p>LIP (0,8 Mrd € 1998–2003) supports more than 125 municipalities thereby creating ca. 15000 jobs.</p>	<p>Since 1996 during budget planning sessions in parliament annual report on SD activities;</p> <p>Habitat-Report 2001; Report to WSSD (2002);</p> <p>Final Report to the Government on Rio- and Habitat-activities (SwEPA) (2003);</p> <p>Evaluation of LIP by Swedish National Audit Office (2002).</p>	<p>Swedish Institute for Environmental Sustainability: advises municipalities on LA21. (in 2001 ca. 70% had an own plan/ programme for SD);</p> <p>moderately financed by LIP/CLIP.</p>

## Glossary

Councils – Special councils and institutions coordinating and promoting sustainable development

Legislation – Essential decisions by parliament and laws concerning SD

Strategies / Programmes – Existence of national Sustainability programmes and strategies

Evaluation – Projects and measures to evaluate Sustainable Development activities (incl. indicators)

Support of LA21 by government / parliament – decisions / measures at the national level to encourage LA21-processes

**Table 2** “Start and diffusion of sustainability policies” (Source: Göll & Thio, 2004, p. 161)

Start of sustainability policies	Diffusion of sustainability policies		
	Low	Medium	High
Early			Finland Sweden Netherlands
Medium		Belgium Germany Great Britain	Denmark
Late	France		

major variables. The positioning of each country in Table 2 is based on the information presented in Table 1, case studies and the interviews.

Regarding the genesis of the SD institutionalisation in the observed countries, the date of origin of their SD policies was related to the degree of diffusion of SD-policies. Although this kind of qualitative estimation can give only an approximation of a very complex and dynamic reality, the results are hinting at interesting correlations.

Table 2 indicates that countries that started early with SD-activities show a high diffusion of SD-policies. Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden started their Sustainability Policies in the early 1990s. In Finland SD was integrated in sectoral legislation as early as 1990 (Finnish Ministry of the Environment 2003). The Environment Management Act, that introduced an integrated approach to environmental issues, was passed in Dutch parliament in 1993, whereas the first of the four so called National Environmental Plans (which introduced an integrated ecological approach) was introduced in 1989. Sweden has further developed the integrated approach of their environmental policy since 1972. In the other countries integrated environmental policy did not start before the second half of the 1990s. Since SD-policy should be based on a cross-sectoral approach integrating diverse policy levels, stakeholders and representatives of the civil society, it might be more than chance that these cases seem to indicate that an integrated environmental policy may be a precondition to work out a SD-policy. It is a hypothesis that has to be analysed in more detail, of course. The case of France supports that interpretation, because it started very late and diffusion of SD is low.

Diffusion is mostly associated with the spatial spread of innovation over time (Hägerstrand, 1968), but this concept can be applied to society as well. Howard and Moore (1988) thus described diffusion as the spread of an innovation throughout a social system over time. We use this definition for the diffusion of sustainability policies: the extent of the societal reception and adoption of SD-concepts and practices over time. It refers to both an increasing ecological sensibility, a sensibility to improve the quality of life and the urge to enhance social capital as well as to generate economic benefits and savings, also for future generations.

Establishing political institutions and spreading these to other administrative levels is one aspect of diffusion, the other is the implementation of SD in the economy and in society. Based on their knowledge and experience political parties, industrial federations, scientists and environmental organisations have undertaken efforts to realise SD. On the other hand, to strengthen these efforts and the participation of the mentioned stakeholders and representatives of the civil society, a strong reciprocal relation between the government and their economic and societal partners is of great importance and may thus contribute to an effective diffusion and institutionalisation.

**Table 3** “Diffusion and institutionalisation of sustainability policies” (Source: Göll & Thio, 2004, p. 162)

Diffusion of sustainability policies	Degree of institutionalisation of sustainability policies		
	Low	Medium	High
High		Netherlands	Finland Sweden
Medium		Great Britain Germany Belgium	Denmark
Low	France		

To assess the diffusion of sustainability policies within the designated (short) research-period was not unproblematic. Nevertheless, the information regarding Local Agenda activities (see Table 1) and the assessment of interviewed experts from various societal arenas<sup>8</sup> enabled us to position the observed countries in Table 2.

Especially in Sweden local authorities traditionally have a strong position. Their less dense population and an urbanisation process that started late, contributed to relatively strong links to the regional and local level. This is expressed in the strong advancement and financial support for Local Agenda activities by the Swedish government.<sup>9</sup> A similar support on the part of the government occurred in Finland, although the financial resources made available in that country were not as high as that of Sweden. Furthermore, Scandinavian countries have a long tradition of social welfare policies, which also seems to accelerate SD-policies.<sup>10</sup>

The case of France as a so called “late comer” illustrates that it is obvious that countries need time to work on SD and to disseminate that concept in their societies. Its relatively late start resulted in a correspondingly lesser diffused SD policy. **It is a remarkable reminder that Sustainable Policies is a complicated, hard and ongoing process. It makes clear that SD-policies need permanent engagement and it demonstrates that SD can only be a continuous process of learning and improvement.**

Earlier it was mentioned that almost all countries studied reached the second stage of the institutionalisation process. Table 1 lists the characteristics that describe “semi-institutionalisation”: institutions (commissions, councils, in the Swedish case a ministry for Sustainable Development), legislation, strategies and programmes, respectively, types of evaluation and support for local agenda activities (LA21). Table 3 shows that the degree of institutionalisation of Sustainable Policies seems to be positively correlated to the degree of diffusion of Sustainable Policies. The higher the diffusion of SD is, the broader the degree of institutionalisation in a society will exist. The SD-institutions in France are small and are situated in the periphery of the political power structure, their resources and activities are low compared to other policy areas.

In two countries, Finland and Sweden, a explicit institutionalisation of SD was found. As far as Sweden is concerned a strong and successful bottom-up approach could be observed: in 2001 70% of the municipalities had LA21 processes, whereas 60% of the local authorities continued to spend financial resources for these activities at the same

<sup>8</sup> See Göll and Thio (2004) for the complete list of interviewees. In addition ICLEI (2000 and 2004).

<sup>9</sup> See Niestroy (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Similar views with regard to corporatism are reported in Weale et al. (2003) and Scruggs (2003). See also Göll and Thio (2004).

level as in the past years.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, many societal groups participate in these LA21 processes.

In Finland the bottom-up approach is traditionally widespread as well. Already in 1997, before the national strategy was set up, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities introduced a SD-strategy. Self-organisation of society and stakeholder groups have a long tradition in Finland. This explains why non-governmental organisations have been included in Finnish politics for a long time. SD has strengthened this custom and has brought about the extension of the intensive participation of interest groups, incl. business companies, into other policy fields.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand research indicates that there is no direct, automatic and simple causality at work. **Experts pointed out that another factor was important too: highly motivated, qualified and recognized personalities, active at influential positions in relevant sustainability areas and offices, played a clearly positive and discernible role. This opinion was most frequently heard during the expert interviews, especially from actors representing civil society<sup>13</sup>. These key persons have been a decisive factor in advancing environmental and sustainability policies. This insight is valuable information with regard to implementing policy integration and underlines the importance of ‘‘political leadership’’.**<sup>14</sup>

In order to have a closer look at the institutions, their context and their SD activities two country studies will be demonstrated in the next part. The German case is of interest since explicit SD activities were introduced after the early starters. Yet, with smart and systematic new forms of institutionalisation, based on long experiences with environmental policies, SD in Germany seems to have been able to gain some momentum and spread into several arenas of society. A different strategy of institutionalisation was followed in The Netherlands. Within the context of a long history of environmental policy some of the old and proven institutions integrated SD into their portfolio of goals and activities. The institutional differences show differences in the outcomes of SD policies.

## The experience of Germany

Germany has started later than some other countries with regard to Sustainable Politics. At the national level after the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro 1992 and during the Kohl administration (1982–1998) little concern was shown for that issue on the national level. The federal government produced an expert paper, authored by the environmental ministry, but it did not seek and arouse public interest. During the 1990s German parliament, the ‘‘Bundestag’’, set up so called Parliamentary Inquiry Commissions on issues of SD. Their reports and proposals did have a considerable impact on the scientific and public debates in Germany. The second commission recommended the establishment of a federal *Office of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE)*.

After the Social Democrats and the Green Party were elected in 1998 and built a ‘‘red-green’’ government, it still took further lobbying before such a council was

<sup>11</sup> Although with reservation, this might be interpreted as an integration of Agenda 21 activities into the regular work. Niestroy (2005), p. 261.

<sup>12</sup> Göll and Thio (2004), p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> See Göll and Thio (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Hertin and Berkhout (2001: 18ff). This assessment is shared by Weidner and Jänicke (2002): ‘‘Finally, all country studies revealed the outstanding importance of a high degree of ‘will and skill’ on the part of environmental proponents as a precondition not only for effective policy making but also in overcoming structural restrictions. This refers especially to the capability of strategically exploiting situational changes and sudden erratic events’’. See also Her Majesty’s Government (2005).

established in 2001. Its 18 members, appointed by former Chancellor Schröder, represent major groups of German society, including business, environmental organisations, labour unions, churches, one world groups, media, etc.<sup>15</sup> The council is supported by a small staff and has the following tasks:

- to accompany and comment on the government's national sustainability process.
- to advise the government and the Green Cabinet.
- to motivate and mobilise societal actors and organisations for sustainability.

The council's direct partners within the government are the Chancellor's Office and the "Green Cabinet". The latter was founded in the fall of 2000 and coordinates the activities of most of the federal ministries with regard to sustainability. Within relatively short time and despite the crisis situation in Germany these two bodies have brought some achievements.

After directly consulting the RNE and societal organisations the federal government published its first national sustainability strategy "Perspectives for Germany" in June 2002. The RNE actively promotes sustainability within the government and in the German society. One example is the dialogue process "Sustainability and Society", which organised conferences and workshops with target groups. These sessions resulted in proposals, ideas and commitments to improve the work of the government and the council itself to build a sustainable Germany. Model projects like a short movie, young people writing books about their future, sustainable consumption ("sustainable shopping basket"), the opening of parts of the RNE-meetings for the public, input for TV-movies etc. are examples for an increasingly pro-active approach. In its annual conferences and its comments on the government's policies RNE expresses criticism and is supported by several major civil associations in this respect. The RNE's current term of office will end in 2007, the new conservative—social-democratic government proclaimed to continue that strategy with RNE.

Since February 2004 the two executive institutions have been accompanied by a "Parliamentary Advisory Board for Sustainable Development" in order to strengthen the legislative branch vis-à-vis the government and to advance the cause by additional means (see Göll, 2004).

At the level of the 16 states similar councils, institutions or at least offices within the governments have also been established. Initiated by the Bundestag, the Local Agenda 21 activities have been supported by the Transfer Office for Local Agenda 21 (<http://www.agenda-transfer.de>) since August 2002, and an older Service-Bureau for One-World-Initiatives. RNE supports LA21 financially with the program "Citizens initiate Sustainability".

## The experience of the Netherlands

Dutch environmental policy is reputed for its encompassing approach, as expressed in the National Environmental Plans (NEPs) that have been developed since 1984. These so called NEPs passed through initial stages of repairing damages done to the environment and other remedial actions. **With NEP 4 in 2002 environmental policy in the Netherlands entered a new phase in which principles of prevention, precaution and responsibility built the core elements. The important process of policy integration, that was introduced in former NEPs and manifested itself in cross-departmental imple-**

<sup>15</sup> For further information: <http://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de>.

mentation of environmental policy has been continued and improved in NEP 4. Nine ministries have been involved in developing and realising NEP 4. This led to a high degree of cooperation and communication between the ministerial departments.

Another characteristic of Dutch environmental policy plans is their time horizon of 20–30 years. NEP 4, being broader in scope and more future-oriented than previous NEPs, has an extended time horizon of 30 years. For this period of time commitments for the medium- and longer-term have been laid down, whereas clear responsibilities of societal and political actors as well as “covenants” are defined. NEP 4 provides the policy framework and instruments to implement Sustainable Development by way of a so called “transition policy”. This policy formulates targets that should lead to the introduction of SD in the Netherlands.

What makes the Dutch case remarkable is its systematic use of existing institutional structures (e.g. planning offices, think tanks, advisory boards) that support government in preparing and developing both its long-term policy and cross-sector approach on the one hand, and using available concepts to prepare and further a SD policy on the other. Examples are the establishment of new councils, inter-ministerial coordinating groups, long term oriented and cross-sector programmes, e.g. the *ministerial steering group* (reflecting the interdepartmental approach), presided by the prime minister and the project group *National Strategy for SD (NSDO)*. The main task of the project group NSDO in which six ministerial departments were represented, was to develop a national strategy to realise SD within a time horizon of one to two generations (20–50 years). The strategy, based on earlier formulated path breaking policy guidelines (e.g. “transition policy”), also includes international and EU policies. The latter is expressed in the Dutch foreign ministry’s participation in NSDO.

Apart from these governmental activities several ministerial departments took the initiative to anchor SD more firmly in the economy and society by supporting concrete projects. To that end the *Dutch National Initiative for SD (NIDO)* was created. On the basis of, and in cooperation with, existing sustainable development programmes NIDO aimed at achieving “leaps forward” in Sustainable Development by combining experience, knowledge and insights of business, government, social institutions and science. This integral and innovative approach, in cooperation with the stakeholders involved, is meant to give further impulses to the process of SD in the Netherlands.

The Dutch case is an example of a political institutionalisation process of SD policy that did not result in the creation of new central political institutions. Rather, existing institutions were focused on new and relevant political themes; although new advisory bodies were set up, they had and still have a limited task. As soon as the task has been accomplished the commission or workgroup will be dissolved. The way the Dutch institutionalised SD policy runs the risk of becoming (too) dependent of strongly engaged and motivated individuals and officials on the one hand and of a changing public opinion on the other. Sustainable Development policy risks the chance of coming to a stand-still, when political or public interest diminishes and support from society and the economy dwindles.

For this reason the WRR suggested to institutionalise the existing cooperation with non-governmental organisations by example of the *Social and Economic Council (SER)*, which had integrated environmental organisations in some of its committees.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See WRR (2003a): *Naar nieuwe wegen in het milieubeleid. Rapporten aan de Regering. Nr. 67. Den Haag: Sdu [Towards new directions in environmental policy].*

## Key findings

The analysis shows, that on the national level and in the complex field of SD “institutions do matter”. The institutionalisation seems to be part of capacity building for SD and for mobilising societal resources. In an innovative and a challenging policy area they are decisive for formulating, implementing and evaluating SD. The institutional dimension therefore seems to have become implicitly a broadly accepted part of thorough sustainability strategies. In a recent study it is argued, that “the governance dimension of SD policies is of utmost importance” (Niestroy, 2005: 69). Another study from 2002 compared environmental policies in 30 countries and found: “There is no country in our example where effective environmental measures were achieved in relevant areas without a certain degree of environmental policy institutionalisation.”<sup>17</sup>

As our analysis shows innovative institutions have increasingly been established in order to improve SD. We now try to explain the genesis of the SD-institutions, the different functions/roles these institutions play within their respective political/societal context, and we will discuss the transformations of these institutions over time, as we interpret it on basis of our broader assessment.

The answer to the question, what caused the variety of such SD institutional settings and organisations in these different societies can be focussed on three patterns of influence.<sup>18</sup> The countries discussed are very different in terms of structures and basic features of their political system. The spectrum varies from centralised France to an outspoken decentralised, civil society-oriented society like Denmark. In the field of sustainable policy a certain kind of “path dependency” (Porter, 1998) seems to exist: the political actors and institutions in countries like Sweden and Finland are characterized by an openness and sensitivity towards ecological issues and a high concern for social welfare—even abroad. Although there is no clear causality between political structure and sustainable politics, a system like that of Scandinavian countries supplies a larger opportunity structure for sustainability activities, not the least because state and societal actors are used to intensive communication and cooperation. Political culture and situative factors seem to influence the intensity and quality of sustainable politics directly. This can be exemplified by the high regard for gender equality in Scandinavian countries that parallels their experience with sector-crossing issues, which is so important for SD-policies. Additionally, well-positioned sustainability actors/institutions are able to use certain political problems (like the political crisis in Finland 1990) or major events (like Rio 1992 or Johannesburg 2002) to gain momentum for their activities. The openness and willingness of (at least part of) the political leadership—and their voters—is necessary for the success of such tactics.

Tradition of ecological sensibility: another finding of our study is that in societies with a long and strong tradition in environmental policy many actors from politics, the economy and in society are sensitive and open to the concept of sustainable developments. They are familiar with ecological concepts which are basic for SD, and there exist institutional settings and procedures to support such intersectoral performance. This explains, at least in part, why many actors in these countries are prepared and even willing to consider to integrate SD in their daily work; they also mobilise all available knowledge and experience

<sup>17</sup> Weidner and Jänicke (2002: 417f.). See also Jänicke and Jörgens (2000), Niestroy (2005), OECD (2001), OECD (2002), Scruggs (2003), Weale et al. (2003), Dalal-Clayton and Bass (2002), IISD (2004), Maurer (1999).

<sup>18</sup> For a more details see Göll and Thio (2004), pp. 162ff.

to use them as an input to their efforts to implement SD. Basic ecologic features are incorporated in SD and are therefore familiar to them, and institutional settings exist to support such intersectoral performance. Many actors are willing and prepared to consider and integrate SD in their daily activities. In these countries seems to exist a widespread understanding to mobilise all available knowledge and experiences, and to use it as an input to their efforts to implement SD. This is expressed in the intelligent and goal-oriented combination/constellation of institutions, instruments and projects found in the countries that are more advanced in developing a sustainability policy.

SD-institutions are “Power Centres”: the experiences of the institutions we analysed proof that they play a pivotal role in their countries with regard to SD-policies. Within their respective national contexts they have the function of primary promoters and “power centres” to give orientation, resources and political support for a sustainable development.

Especially the most innovative institutions fulfil important functions and could be regarded as being particularly “future oriented”. These functions and roles are directed at integrating SD in society and thus emphasize the societal aspects of institutionalising SD (moderation, facilitating, enabling, catalysing, watchdogging).

Using resources from other administrative levels: another impulse comes from the international arena. In all countries it became clear that the national SD-institutions use sustainability strategies, requirements of the UN and increasingly those of the EU as impulses to become more influential in the national arena (multilevel tactics). In some cases even local projects and local authorities and their associations put their weight into supporting a SD-course on the national level.<sup>19</sup>

But this stage can be analysed even more closely because the assessment will show the way for improvements.<sup>20</sup>

It seems, SD-institutions are transformed over time in particular ways/stages:

- in a first phase SD-institutions have been meant to fulfil formal requirements of the “Agenda 21” and to produce primarily “symbolic politics” (Edelman, 1985) or selected singular goals.
- a next step for SD-institutions was/is to define general goals, lists of indicators and visions; they propose projects or even programs and SD-plans—often without sufficient means to realise them.
- by learning lessons from that stage SD-institutions gain more respect and influence over the participating organisations and groups, even inside the political and state apparatus. Because of their intensive contact with many respected societal national and international organisations SD-institutions become a kind of “hub” of future oriented policies, they suggest programs and strong monitoring instruments.

A future possibility of SD-institutions—or their basic principles—is that of becoming a hegemonic centre in their national societies, not at least because traditional policies and

<sup>19</sup> Although it has to be admitted, that to a certain extent some of the political and administrative “activities” have a rather symbolic character, it nevertheless proves that supra- and international sustainability politics and concepts have reached the status of a policy frame of reference.

<sup>20</sup> All of the SD-institutions analysed here have more or less reached the second stage. The dynamic of that transformation comes from different sources/factors which over time change in their meaning for the SD-institutions. Factors are: international obligations, image and political reasons, self-interest of SD-members/staff, legitimation and success of specific policies (like eco-tax), insufficient results of traditional policies, good-practice examples of other/similar countries, international competition and prestige on grounds of SD, etc.

strategies are unsuccessful and many problems reach critical phases. **Instead of technocratic or even authoritarian solutions people in the end seem to prefer a transparent, reflexive political strategy.**

Although the creation of a council, the appointment of a minister or passing laws and programmes with respect to SD are important steps that indicate that the SD-process is continuing, it is too early to assess their actual and real impact on SD.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, one of the conclusions of the Pilot 2006 Environmental Performance Index is: **“At every level of development, some countries achieve environmental results that far exceed their peers. In this regard, good governance appears highly correlated with environmental success.”** (Esty et al., 2006: 2)

## Perspectives

In assessing the world wide sustainability efforts at the WSSD in Johannesburg 2002 UN Secretary General Annan said: **“With some honourable exceptions, our efforts to change course are too few and too little. The question now is whether they are also too late.”** Similar scepticism and critical assessments are articulated by many other experts. **That means that sustainability activities have to be improved, and our findings suggest very strongly that institutions and their specific position and roles will be important for that tremendous task.**

This seems to be all too logical because, as Albert Einstein once said: **“You cannot solve the problems with the very thinking, that caused them.”** **The foundations of the political structure of our polities were laid down more than 150 years ago.** Therefore it is high time to renew the traditional structures and bring them in accordance with the new challenges and historical requirements of Sustainability. **One step would be to establish new political institutions and participatory bodies.** Looked at from an optimistic angle it might be, that the innovative SD-institutions could incorporate features far beyond that of the traditional governing bodies and political apparatuses of the 19th century and that they could become prototypes of a new “sustainable governance structure” or even cornerstones of new political systems which support SD much more adequately. At least they will improve the dominating traditional type of representative or “spectator democracy”.

Therefore, present national SD-institutions can to be considered as helpful and have to be improved and strengthened.<sup>22</sup> They should network with each other (executive, legislative branches of governments, and civil society organisations should be supported in order to follow that horizontal networking, that is horizontal integration). Furthermore, national institutions have to be closer connected and linked with the activities and

<sup>21</sup> **Nevertheless, correlations between these different kinds of ‘institutions’ and their effects might, for instance, be analysed by comparing the institutional settings with well-grounded assessments of national SD-performance, like the Environmental Sustainability Index (Esty et al., 2005), the Pilot 2006 Environmental Performance Index (Esty et al., 2006), or the Global Footprint correlated to the Human Development Index (see GFN, 2005). A very first and simple comparison shows, that there seems to be some kind of correlation. Of course, this output-oriented assessment has to be analysed much more systematically, because the indices are different (some measure the amount of biomass, which can only be influenced indirectly by “new” institutions and policies, showing results only in the long run), and the number and correlations between the variables have to be considered in a sensitive way.**

<sup>22</sup> See *German Council for Sustainable Development* (2006).

working structures at EU-level (vertical integration).<sup>23</sup> There still is a long and winding road to go for SD-institutions, but first important steps have already been taken, as the examples from the analysed countries may have shown.

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<sup>23</sup> A similar recommendation was made by EEAC (2003).

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