

Institutional Obstacles for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Policy (A Case Study of Lithuania)

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Over recent decades the discourse of sustainable development has loomed large in the agendas of national and international policies alike. This article analyzes the history of the term and its conceptual underpinnings to find that there are fundamental contradictions concerning the present mechanism of implementation of the policy concerned. At present policy is formulated on an international level with the United Nations at the fore. However, the implementation is the responsibility of the nation states. In the process their sovereignty is not challenged and no mechanism of accountability exists. This is worsened by the absence of an institutional framework within nation states to implement such policies. This is demonstrated by the analysis of the Lithuanian Constitution and the Long Term Development Strategy of the State. However, there are good historical reasons for the current international setup. The idea of a single all-integrating global policy is going against the very spirit of the concept of sustainable development, thereby making the policy itself “unsustainable”, if not unfeasible. The author suggests an alternative approach to implementing a policy of sustainable development by changing the principle of how it is formed. Rather than formulating and attempting to implement a policy from “top down”, the policies should be formed in as low level of policy as possible, by deinstitutionalizing and moving the discourse of sustainable development from the realm of politics to the realm scientific debate and by promoting good governance. In the end it is the sum of decisions made on the local and even individual level which makes our lifestyle sustainable or not and these decisions must be informed rather than coerced.

Keywords: *sustainable development, policy, United Nations, Lithuania, good governance.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *darnus vystymasis, politika, Jungtinės Tautos, Lietuva, tinkamas viešasis valdymas.*

Introduction

Over the past two decades the concept of sustainable development has evolved from a simple and commonsensical observation that socio-economic development of human society impacts the surrounding nature into a global mainstream political movement. It is hailed by many as the answer to many of the curses that are plaguing our planet. Throughout history there have always been people prophesying the end of the world, but the scope to which the popularity of modern scares has grown is truly unprecedented. The most prominent

of these is global warming, although it still has some sceptics and grounds for scepticism can indeed be found, as has been masterfully revealed in Martin Durkins' documentary “The global warming swindle” [15]. Sceptics, however, are few and the perceived urgency of the issue makes governments around the world pass legislation to a) appear to be doing something about global warming, b) to implement sustainable development policy as a means to ensure that the humanity never gets into a similar “mess” again.

If the question whether global warming is a fact of nature or a social construct is open for discus-

sion, then so is the concept of sustainable development. Yet global warming aside, this article is concerned with clarifying four things: a) how did the concept of sustainable development come to being and what does it stand for, b) how does this genesis interact with the way the policy is being implemented, c) how does the mechanism of policy implementation in Lithuania affect the prospects of sustainable development and d) what principles should guide the implementation of this policy. These concerns will be addressed in five parts of the article analyzing how sustainable development policy was set, the concept itself, the present management setup of the policy on international level and on national level in Lithuania. The fifth part will explore the principles of good governance, that are considered to be fundamental in public administration and the question how could these principles help implement the concept of sustainable development.

Policy of sustainable development

The term 'sustainable development' entered our everyday vocabulary from political circles, not from the third sector, or the academic field. The term was comprehensively defined in 1980 in a study called "World conservation strategy" in a joint commission by World wildlife fund (WWF) and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). This was the document that claimed it had established that socio-economic development and impacted the environment [32, 1]. In 1983 with recommendation from UNEP the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) passed a resolution 38/161 which created the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). This commission later became known and widely referred to as Brundtland Commission after the name of its chair. The Commission had four tasks: a) to propose long term strategies for sustainable development, b) to recommend ways how this could be achieved by increasing co-operation between various nations of the world, c) to propose ways and means by which environmental concerns could be addressed effectively by the international community and d) define perceptions of long-term environmental issues and what were the appropriate efforts to tackle them [6]. The report that the commission produced in 1987 became the defining document of the doctrine of sustainable development. The document could not have been anything else since it was ordered by a political body. The

main tools to achieving sustainable development can be summed up as follows: (a) strategy for (b) international cooperation which is (c) coordinated and based on (d) a common definition.

The report of "Brundtland Commission" was called "Our common future" provided the rationalization needed for the onset of the policy of sustainable development. The Commission defined sustainable development as a kind of development "that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" [30]. As with many UN commissioned documents the language is very vague and abstract. This of course happens when one needs to create wording acceptable to a large number of interested sides, let alone the whole world. Different people can put different meanings in nearly each of the words of this definition. One thing however is clear, that the scope of the presumed policy of sustainable development would practically have to influence every other field and level of policy. And that raised more questions than it gave answers [23].

An integral part of the doctrine of sustainable development is the notion of intergovernmental cooperation which was required because the problems outlined in "Our Common future" where of a transnational magnitude. Furthermore to ensure that the common definition is adhered to the policy of sustainable development it is needed to be coordinated. Incidentally, UN would seem the obvious choice for such a function. It simply is the only multifunctional and globally inclusive organization.

In 1992 the representatives of most governments of the world met in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to accept the doctrine outlined by the Brundtland Commission and passed a document legalizing the notion of sustainable development as grounds for political action. This document was called Agenda 21 [7]. Thus sustainable development had taken shape as an international treaty and had to be acted upon.

The global discourse has not relinquished subsequently and ten years later in 2002 in Johannesburg a declaration was passed upholding the stated principles of sustainable development. However, an observation was made, that the pace and degree to which the principles were being implemented was not satisfactory [8]. Therefore a requirement to provide national strategies was included. The political recognition of the concept of sustainable development meant that the pervasion of strategic planning on the subject very quickly reached all

kinds of regional bodies such as EU and nation states themselves.

Concept of sustainable development

The principles of policy of sustainable development that were set by UN should not be confused with the science behind the concept. The conception of sustainable development gives much food for thought whether policies of various kinds have always been well thought through. The dialectic behind sustainable development is really quite appealing.

If we stick to the definition that sustainable development is a kind of development “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs”, then we have to accept that the concept of market economy is directly challenged. Sustainable development goes against the reasoning that human selfishness (or self interest) - which is behind the invisible hand theory. And that presents a problem, because until now liberal market economy has proved its robustness and consequently aided to the creation of stable polities [12]. Market economy has helped create enormous wealth as growth in the West boomed in the 19th century and kept growing ever since [22]. Such a challenge to the fundamentals of the modern West has to be very persuasive.

Arguments in favor of replacing or limiting market economy with sustainable development are as follows. Historically, growth has created great disparities among various social groups and this started to cause tensions in industrial countries. However, most states managed to interfere with the market and appease the brewing social conflict. Yet markets adapted to the creation of the welfare state and added costs. However, this new arrangement kept the old principle of power in policymaking. It only shifted away from the economy and towards the government, which is presumed to be able to seek a balance between the social and economic imperatives and create welfare, while markets cannot [28, 126]. As the dialectic of sustainable development suggests, the reason for that was that the economy grew and welfare in industrial societies increased at the expense of natural environment. That is, nobody represented the self-interest of nature.

Such an “arrangement” is to be blamed on the Newtonian philosophy of “conquering the nature”. Newtonian discoveries and those that followed

created a boom in technological advancement and population growth never seen before [13, 148]. The Newtonian world-view remains a powerful ideology of most societies. But sustainable development suggests that this kind of an approach towards the environment in an industrial age is something that is impossible to maintain. The notion that environment is a limited system is a cause to reconsider the individualist approach of market economy. Sustainable development suggests that one cannot be absolutely individualist, because one is a part of nature and society. Thus the needs of an individual must be balanced against what the nature can supply and what the society will need in the future. Humanity denies an individual’s lifetime, therefore one’s aspirations cannot precede collective interests. The whole idea is summed up by Brundlandt herself in the foreword of “Our Common Future”: The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs and attempts to defend it in isolation from human concerns have given the very word "environment" a connotation of naivety in some political circles [30].

Yet, the definition that “Our Common Future” itself produced has very little to do with the outlined policy principles. There is no hard argument that good scientific understanding and knowledge could not lead to policies that promote sustainable development at any level other than the international. The mechanism that we have for implementing sustainable development is one that is based on political will, not scientific knowledge.

Management of sustainable development

“Our common future” has defined three imperatives of sustainable development: the economic, the social and the environmental. The twelfth chapter of the report talks at lengths on what should be done for sustainable development to become a reality. However, the report does not touch issues concerning the exact mechanism of how such a global project could be implemented given the wild differences of current situation in various countries. The sustainability of the policy of sustainable development itself can be brought into question [23]. Therefore it is worth exploring deeper into the management of the three constituent policies and establishing whether such policies are possible without addressing the very process of policymaking.

As was previously established most developed countries manage to hold up some sort of balance between the social and economic imperatives. However, trying to integrate the environmental imperative is a whole different challenge. Although nowadays concerns over environment are broadly represented in the policymaking process, “environment” as such cannot represent itself as can businesses or any other social group or institution. Therefore environmental policy is very much dependant on interpretations of participants in the political process. However, the logic of sustainable development needs the environmental protection to be “objectified”. The only way to achieve that is to make decisions based on scientific data. Yet, as we have seen, the current principles of policy of sustainable development have very little to do with the actual logic of the concept. This disparity is obvious in the way the policy is being managed.

In terms of managerial aspects of sustainable development Agenda 21 was an even more reserved document than “Our Common Future”. Its main provisions mostly concerned the UN itself with only chapter 37 providing a few recommendations on what should be done on a national level [7]. At the same time the declaration on environment and sustainable development adopted at the same conference reiterated the sovereign rights of nations [9].

Ten years later the global leaders met again in Johannesburg to discuss the topic of sustainable development. And one of the recognized facts of the conference was that “good governance is essential for sustainable development” (138). And a requirement to prepare national strategies of sustainable development and create the necessary institutional arrangements was set (166) [8].

The acceptance of the fact that a specially designed management system is needed to deal with the issue of sustainable development was a major development. But creating one requires more than just recognizing the fact. Nation states are simply not motivated to act upon these documents unless the domestic political conjuncture is favorable. Signatories to the Johannesburg declaration agree to pass laws, to help achieve sustainable development and increase the participation of their societies in the process. However, the problem with these treaties is the extent to which a nation state can disregard them if the electorate in a given country is opposed to such policies. Thus nation states have practically absolute discretion in implementing policies of sustainable development. In many cases expensive and unpopular initiatives are

hardly possible to implement within a political framework never designed for such issues.

Nation states remain the primary holders of sovereignty and the degree to which principles of sustainable development will be taken to account in implementing any given policy still depends on those states. This translates into a few problems that make principles of sustainable development policy hard to adhere to. First, there are no binding models of what a strategy of sustainable development must look like, what aims should it set for an individual country, etc. They are all recommendations. The accountability for implementation of these strategies is limited to the domestic political process. And the problem is that it is hard to imagine that national sovereignty might be ceded to a body like UN. Another problem is the grandiose disparity between states and individual problems they face. Some developed states for example are facing depopulation, while others are burdened by their uncontrollable population growth. The level on which one would analyze the issue may potentially influence the proposed solution. Let us consider that we strive for a demographic equity on a global scale. That should obviously mean encouraging migration from overpopulated countries to countries with aging populations and low birth rates. Obviously such an approach seems to be impractical and unfeasible. And this makes national peculiarities as well as the purpose of many nations to retain them contradict the principle of coordination, which is the core principle of sustainable development.

Sustainable development as an idea can be ascribed to modernism [26]. The modernist fascination with rationality and control leads to some odd ideas such as an attempt to control natural landscapes, a notion which is essentially utopian [10]. And by being acknowledged as a modernist utopia it can lead to very uneasy neighbors in the history of ideas [24]. Thus it is only obvious why nation states are not interested to compromise their sovereignty.

To sum-up the whole idea seems a little out of place. From the perspective of core principles of sustainable development policy sovereign nations appear to be part of the problems, not of the solution. Political will and means for action are concentrated within nation states and the possibilities of UN to implement policies on its own are rather limited. This contradiction can be illustrated in the manifestation of the problems concerned with the progress of achieving the UN millennium goals. Richer nations are needed to be involved finan-

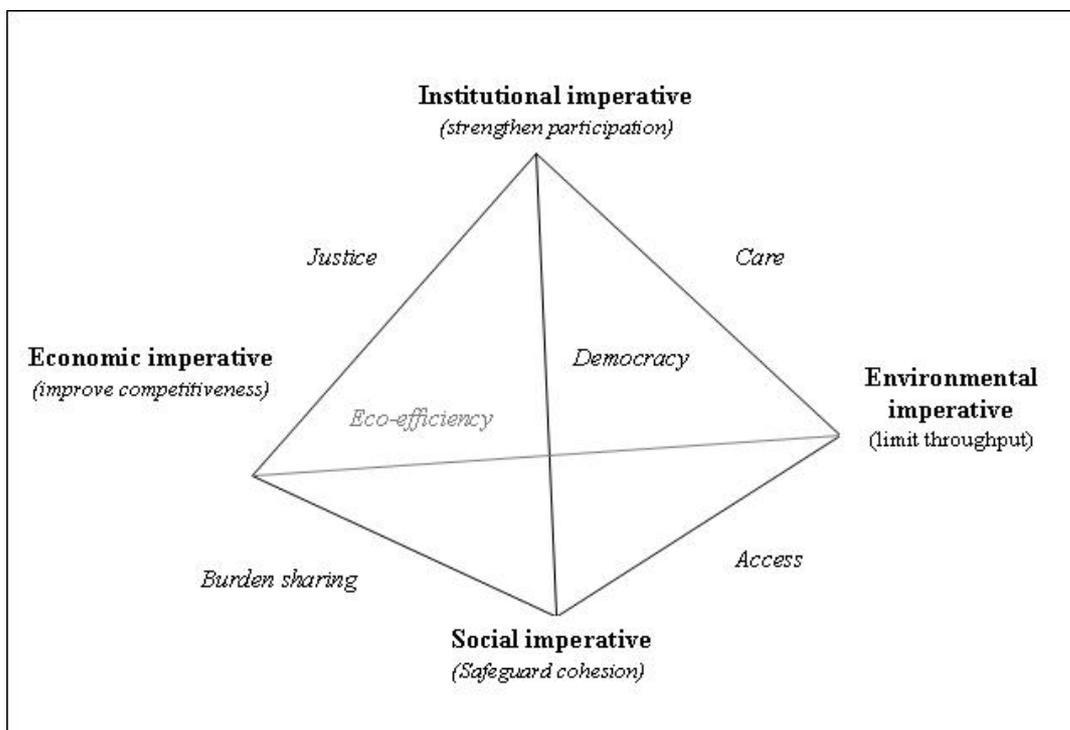
cially and the public sector management needs to improve [31]. While less developed countries must make major changes in their public management systems [17]. However, the UN has a very limited control over these processes.

On the other hand, the European Union (EU) is the leading region in terms of achievements in the field of sustainable development. EU as a supranational international body can develop integrated programs that achieve real progress [27].

This leads to a conclusion that management of sustainable development can be held as a separate imperative, the fourth one. Sustainable development can only become such if it is managed properly, or one could say “sustainably” (see Figure 1).

What needs to be done in order to achieve sustainable development must be addressed by the relevant sciences. However, the establishment of a given fact of what must be done does not automatically lead to a simple solution in a political process. The concept of sustainable development demands that environmental issues are taken into account while trying to please the electorate by guaranteeing the quality of life and prosperity to the citizens. The nation state is a system that has most powers in policy implementation and for that reason it should take be tasked with main responsibilities in matters of sustainable development.

Figure 1: The Prism of Sustainability



Source: [20, 23]

Institutional limitations of sustainable development policy in Lithuania

Lithuania is a member of EU. And as such it adheres to the environmental protection requirements implemented in the entire community, but any greater progress than the required minimum is hard to envision in the current institutional setup.

There are many reasons why sustainable development does not just happen. And technological issues are not necessarily at the root of the problem.

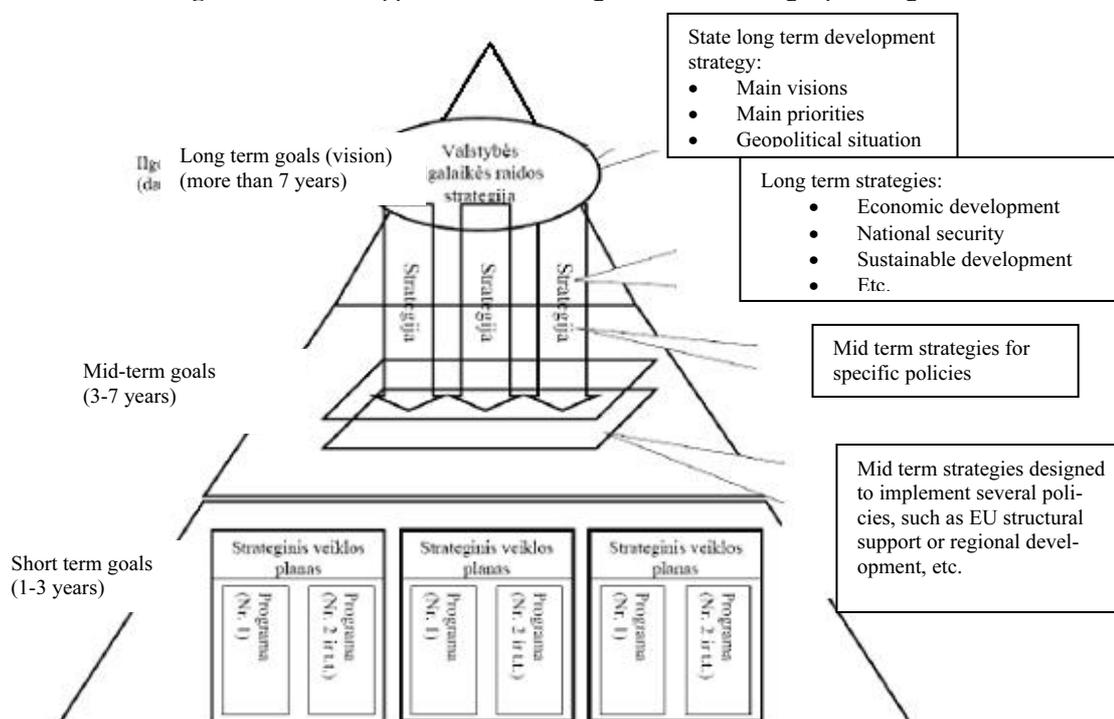
Crucially, the way we organize our institutions is a problem that is often overlooked.

One of the very important reasons for “unsustainable” development in modern society lies within the economic imperative. Sustainability by definition requires implementing policies that ensure that economic behavior is oriented towards the long and very long term. But the free market gives a very small value to resources that cannot be directly consumed [11, 7]. This is what market economy is in its nature. It is only possible to alter

this attitude towards recourses by using means of institutions that are not part of the market, but rather part of the government. Yet, governments have shortcomings of their own, they are dependant on the large number of variables which may change very quickly, such as elections, lobbyism, economic crises, etc. It is important to note that in most cases pressure groups which represent business institutions impact government policies much more significantly than any other group in society [21, 15]. Furthermore, the bureaucracies themselves are agencies that defend their narrow interests. Thus one could assume that the key to sustainable development lies in creating the capability of the government to implement long term programs relatively free of the variables mentioned. But how does one do it in a democratic system?

Another issue in terms of management of sustainable development is the scope of the idea. The principles set by the UN require for it to be approached holistically. This means that any given policy would need to be coordinated with virtually every other and that is a very complicated task, indeed. In Lithuania six ministries are charged with the implementation of the National Strategy of Sustainable Development. All these institutions are not subordinate to each other and the only legally prescribed mechanism of coordinating the actions of different ministries is the governmental committee on sustainable development, which meets once in two years [4]. Surely that cannot be sufficient to coordinate a policy that concerns pretty much every aspect of everyday life in the whole world.

Figure 2: Cabinet approved scheme of government strategic planning.



Graphics based on [5]

Still another concern acute for Lithuania is the weakness of the system of strategic planning (see Figure 2). The scheme of strategic planning puts the National Strategy of Sustainable Development with an array of other strategic documents. Seldom are these coordinated. The National Strategy of Sustainable Development is itself subordinate to the Long Term Strategy of the State [3]. In this document the term concerned is not used system-

atically. The term is mentioned twelve times. However, the document does not include a definition of sustainability. In at least six of the instances the term could be interpreted as appellative. Still more, the two strategies translate the term “sustainable development” differently. To add to that even strategies that are at the top of the pyramid are passed by decree of the Parliament or the Government and do not hold the power of a law. This

means that everyday political concerns can easily overpower any long term policy of sustainable development.

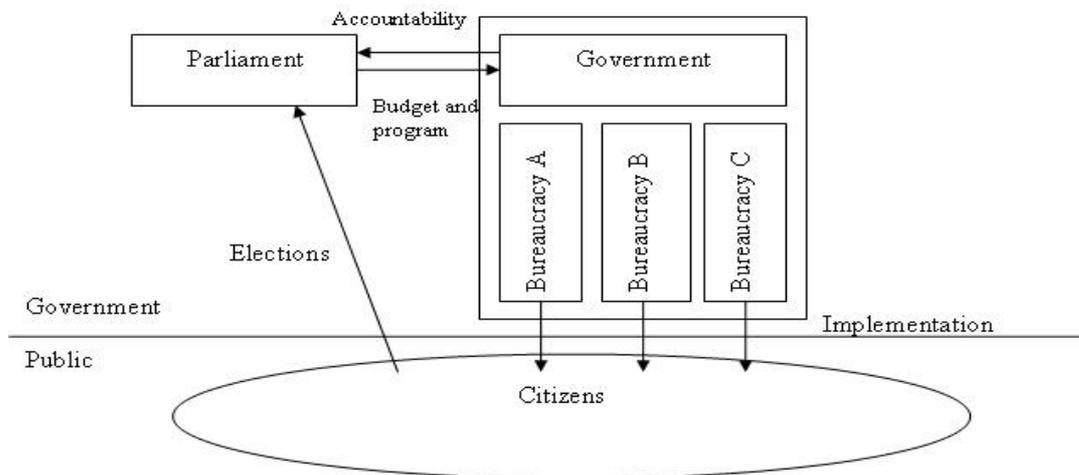
The setup of the political process in Lithuania also does not help follow the principles of sustainable development policy. The analysis of provisions of the Lithuanian Constitution concerning government organization speaks in support of such an argument [1]. According to the 2nd article “all powers belong to the Nation”. And this power is realized through the electoral process of the Parliament and President (articles 55 and 81). The Parliament, President and the Government are the institutions responsible for policy creation and implementation (article 5). For the sake of simplifying the analysis the Presidential post will not be analyzed. The Lithuanian Constitutional Court has ruled that Lithuania is primarily a Parliamentary Republic [19, 76]. The courts will not be considered either because they are apolitical (article 109).

It is the Parliament’s job to approve the government program and the annual budget (Article 67). The Government holds direct responsibility both for formulation and implementation of public policy, since it has a right to propose laws and other regulations as well as pass its own (article

94). This makes the Government a major if not the only actor in any policy including that of sustainable development (see Figure 3).

The Lithuanian constitutional model of policymaking is characterized by the fact that the Government is not obliged to directly interact with the civil society in the process of policymaking. The main feedback process is based on elections which occur only every four years. Thus it is hard to evaluate the reaction of the citizens to one or the other policy. The model also does not provide for cooperation between institutions of the bureaucracy. As Guy Peters rightly observes: “public bureaucracies are rarely mentioned in constitutions” [25, 5]. Lithuania is no exception. The Law on the Government treats ministries as subordinates accountable to the Government. Bureaucracies are not directly accountable to the Parliament or for that matter to the public [2]. Still more problematic is the issue of accountability of the Government to the Parliament, since it is not transparent [33]. This situation allows public policy to be formed not necessarily based on public interest nor does it provide for such a policy of sustainable development that is worth more than its name.

Figure 3: System of policymaking as provided by the Lithuanian Constitution



Graphics by author

Possible impact of practice of good governance on policy of sustainable development

If we accept that national sovereignty is a constant that cannot change and that a need for sus-

tainable development is well-founded, then one must agree that the present constitution of sustainable development management is problematic.

Coincidentally, the UN activities are very pronounced in the field of Public administration [14]. UNPAN (United Nations Public Administration Network) is a UN body primarily concerned with

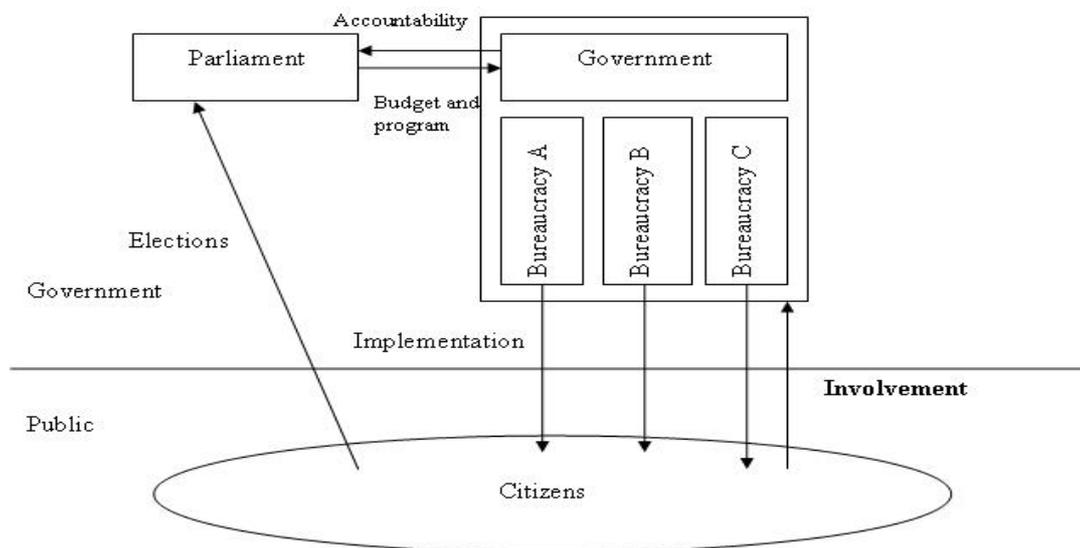
disseminating good practice knowledge to less development nations about public administration in an aim to help “achieve their development goals” [29]. The recognition that governance is important to achieving sustainable development is important in many ways. Yet the principles of good governance are at odds with the present international makeup of sustainable development policy mechanism.

Good governance includes the principles of citizens participation, pluralism, subsidiarity, transparency, accountability, equity, access, partnership, and efficiency [15]. The implementation of these principles in any state can lead to great advances in every field of policy. As demonstrated in Figure 3 feedback in the present structure of Lithuanian government between and institutions of the state and the public is directed only one way and its cycle is based on election terms. This situation allows specific interest groups to advance their own agenda virtually unchallenged. One can hardly expect that this agenda would be one of sustainable development. Therefore pluralism is essential in any credible policy initiative and is demanded by the principle of subsidiarity to be organized in as low level as possible where citizen

participation is easiest. There is very little to suggest that the “global” problems outlined by “Our common future” cannot be tackled locally. Principles of transparency, accountability, equity, access and partnership are the essential tools that government has to get the society onboard in a quest for an environmentally friendly policy.

The utilization of these principles in policymaking can allow the management system of sustainable development itself adhere to the whole philosophical underpinning of the concept of sustainable development. The only reasonable possibility to “sustain” a given policy is to get citizens onboard. The main aim that the implementation of good governance should achieve is creating a new feedback loop in the political system going in the opposite direction than the present (see Figure 4). The essential feature of good governance is that it promotes policymaking from “the bottom up”. As the Lithuanian example illustrates the current management mechanism of sustainable development policy does not encourage initiative and barely allows for a minimum standard which suggests that on a global scale it cannot be very high. This discredits the idea which by itself is not a bad one.

Figure 4: The feedback process that can be potentially provided by utilizing principles of good governance.



Graphics by author

It is known that good governance facilitates development [18]. Governments that are successful in implementing policies in general will probably manage to implement sustainable development also. And the key to that is not a fear of the end of

the world or a responsible attitude to the statements made in international forums, but presence of good governance. An allegory of “carrot and stick” is suitable here. The production of globally unifying documents can only set the minimum standard. Not

achieving which a “stick” can be used to punish the offender. But this mechanism does not give the “carrot” to those who are able to achieve more.

The problem with the concept of sustainable development is not its scientific basis, but the fact that it has become and stayed for too long in realm of politics rather than science where it intermingled with political agenda. If the principles of good governance will not become common practice the policy of sustainable development will be hard to achieve. Deinstitutionalizing the policy of sustainable development and allowing nations to create their own policies of sustainable development based on local possibilities seems to be a much more feasible way forward. And international institutions should move back to doing what they do best: provide a forum to share knowledge and help when it is needed. Ultimately it is up to individual decisions that will determine the sustainability or otherwise of our lifestyles. Nation states have the best shot at coercing some and encouraging most to change their lifestyles.

Conclusions:

1. A clear distinction has to be made between the concept of sustainable development and the policy led by the UN which is based on the principles of (a) strategy for (b) international cooperation which is (c) coordinated and based on (d) a common definition.

2. Conceptually there are few grounds for suggesting that these principles are predicative for achieving sustainable development. The concept itself substantiates the need for limiting market economy for the benefit of environmental protection.

3. This disparity between the scientific argument for sustainable development and the present political process at achieving sustainable development creates a situation when the concept becomes indiscernibly intermingled with political agenda.

4. The present system installed to implement the policy of sustainable development is organized around a hierarchical principle. This setup is problematic because within the international system UN is not a sovereign. Thus all its initiatives are not mandatory for national governments.

5. This, as demonstrated by the case of Lithuania, creates a situation where national sustainable development policy is completely at the mercy of day-by-day political concerns. And this contradicts the very paradigmatic nature of the concept of sustainable development.

6. The proposed solution to remedy the situation is to promote good governance within nation states. This would allow creation of the kind of policymaking process which would be based on a “bottom-up” principle. This kind of policy-making process is advocated by a body of UN itself, the UN Public Administration Network. At present the institutional setup does not appear to be “sustainable” itself. On the international level this would mean that sustainable development should be deinstitutionalized and should only act as a forum for ideas and means of support.

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Institucinės kliūtys įgyvendinant darnaus vystymosi politiką (Lietuvos atvejo analizė)

Santrauka

Pastaraisiais dešimtmečiais darnaus vystymosi problematika užėmė svarbią vietą valstybių ir tarptautinės politikos darbotvarkėje. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojama, kaip darnaus vystymosi terminas įgijo dabartinę reikšmę ir kaip jis darnaus vystymosi politiką sieja su darnaus vystymosi conceptualiaisiais teiginiais. Pabrėžiama, kad tarp šių dviejų darnaus vystymosi aspektų esama tam tikrų prieštaravimų. Šiuo metu Jungtinių Tautų Organizacija vaidina pagrindinį vaidmenį apibrėžiant ir formuojant darnaus vystymosi politiką, tačiau konkrečių jos priemonių įgyvendinimas išlieka suverenių valstybių valioje. Ši institucinių trūkumą padidina valstybių valdžios vidaus institucinė sąranga. Šis teiginys grindžiamas Lietuvos atvejo analize. Nacionalinės darnaus vystymosi strategijos ir valstybės ilgalaikės raidos strategijų sąsąjū analizė parodė, kad valstybės mastu vienos darnaus vystymosi politikos nėra. O remiantis Konstitucija sukurta institucinė sąranga nesudaro prielaidų tinkamai ją formuoti. Sprendžiant šią problemą svarbu suprasti, kad šalių suverenitetas negali tapti kliūtimi įgyvendinant darnaus vystymosi politiką. Autoriaus siūloma darnaus vystymosi politikos įgyvendinimo alternatyva galėtų išspręsti esamus prieštaravimus. Siūloma deinstitutionalizuoti darnaus vystymosi politiką tarptautiniu lygmeniu ir taikant deramo viešojo administravimo principus šalyje formuoti darnaus vystymosi politiką „iš apačios į viršų“.

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