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Heinrichs, Harald; Laws, Norman

Article

"Sustainability State" in the Making? Institutionalization of Sustainability in German Federal Policy Making

Harald Heinrichs [†,*] **and Norman Laws** [†]

Institute for Sustainability Governance, Leuphana University Lüneburg, Scharnhorststraße 1, 21335 Lüneburg, Germany; E-Mail: laws@leuphana.de

[†] These authors contributed equally to this work.

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; E-Mail: harald.heinrichs@uni.leuphana.de; Tel: +49-4131-677-2931; Fax: +49-4131-677-2819.

Abstract: More than two decades after the Rio-conference on environment and development in 1992, sustainable development remains a big challenge. Politics and administration, especially in democratic societies, have a specific responsibility in coordinating sustainable development. In order to fulfill this role, the regulative idea of sustainability needs to be integrated into decision-making in politics and administration at all levels, from local to global. Taking this into account, we have analyzed the institutionalization of sustainability as a crosscutting and long-term challenge at the federal level in Germany. Based on a theoretical-conceptual framework deriving from democracy, bureaucracy and political steering/governance theory, we have employed qualitative methods to understand, in depth, how sustainability is integrated into political-administrative practice. In the present paper, we present key results and show that sustainability is not a routine practice at the federal level in Germany. We will conclude by giving an outlook on the structural and procedural options and argue for the need to develop a "sustainability state".

Keywords: sustainability state; democracy; bureaucracy; governance; institution; qualitative research

1. Introduction

The development towards a sustainable (world) society remains an ongoing challenge. Numerous global assessments on ecological, economic and social dynamics published around the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro ("Rio+20") indicate, among other things, that global greenhouse gas emissions are still increasing, biodiversity loss is accelerating, social inequality is growing and economic instability is threatening societal cohesion and political stability (e.g., [1–3]). Putting this stock-taking effort into a long-term perspective on ecological, economic and social developments (by analyzing key indicators, such as population growth, gross domestic product, declining fish stocks, nitrogen input, individual motorized mobility or even the proliferation of McDonald's restaurants as a proxy for mass consumption), one can observe exponential growth rates from the beginning of the industrial revolution in the 18th century till the present [4]. Population growth and increasing material wealth, which is highly unequally distributed between and within countries, puts life-supporting Earth systems at risk [5]. As these and other studies indicate, progress in environmental modernization efforts, specifically through eco-technological innovations over the past few decades, has been far outstripped by economic (material) growth. Thus, after more than 40 years of environmental discourse and the institutionalization of environmental practices in politics, administration, business and civil society around the world, and after 22 years of discourse and practice on sustainable development, it can be stated that the balance sheet is sobering; locally, nationally and internationally. Apparently, the significant developments in environmental (protection) policies, the institutionalization of environmental bureaucracy, the diffusion of environmental management in the private sector, the increased environmental awareness of citizens, an active civil society represented by (environmental) NGOs or the emergence of interdisciplinary environmental sciences and environmental education prove too narrow to stimulate the necessary socio-material transformations [6]. Additionally, the approach of sustainable development and the applied measures, which go beyond the narrow focus on environmental protection and regulation by offering a more encompassing framework to handle complex, interlinked economic, social and environmental developments [7], have been (so far) unable to reverse unsustainable development, as well. Consequentially, in recent years, a broader debate about the need for more fundamental institutional transformations has begun among sustainability experts [8–11]. Next to general theoretical-conceptual approaches focusing on institutional challenges for socio-ecological governance [12] or societal transitions at large, such as transition management [13], the sector-specific institutionalization of sustainability in different spheres of society has been the subject of conceptual and empirical studies, e.g., concerning business and sustainability management, science and education for sustainability or sustainability and civil society. A specific responsibility for sustainable development in democratic societies lies within the political-administrative system [14]. Accordingly, there are a number of conceptual and fewer empirical studies on the institutionalization of sustainability in the multi-level political-administrative system. These studies either discuss fundamental conceptual issues [15,16] or analyze sustainability strategies and their implementation, mostly with desk research methods [17,18]. These analytical perspectives help to get a basic understanding of the general requirements of the institutionalization of sustainability as a regulative idea in policy-making. Moreover, they provide an overview of the status-quo of (national) sustainability strategies and their implementation [19]. However, more differentiated insights are needed concerning the specific

modeling of institutional arrangements, its structural and procedural concretization and its relevance for political administrative practice, which goes the beyond basic theoretical and conceptual approaches of the (neo-) institutionalization or comparative review studies on national sustainability strategies [17].

Against this background, in the present paper, we discuss the results of an empirical study, in which we analyzed the concrete institutionalization of sustainability and its effects for policy-making at the federal level in Germany. The object of this study is to explore the institutionalization of sustainability at the federal level in Germany within three different, but connected and interacting areas. The first question focuses on the institutionalization of sustainability itself: How is sustainability positioned in different institutions, and how exactly do they deal with the issue? The second point is concerned with steering and governing the process of Sustainable Development (SD) by political actors and (public) administration: How and through what measures do political actors try to advance SD in government and legislation? The third focus is directed at the political process: How is sustainability understood (e.g., primarily one-dimensionally or in an integrative way), and is sustainability prioritized? The basic objective of all analyses is to see to what extent the integrative understanding of sustainability, especially the correlation and the interplay of the different dimensions, is applied in policy-making at the federal level in Germany.

Due to the fact that administrative staff of higher ranks can be described as at least partly superior to political leaders, due to their vast experience, continuous daily practice, routine and training [20], the main focus of this analysis shall lie with the executive branch.

Using the triad of institutionalization, political process and governance, it is possible to examine how deeply integrated the guiding principle and role model of sustainability is in politics and public administration. The condition of SD and its actual implementation level can then be convincingly assessed. After a brief elucidation of our understanding of "sustainability" as we have applied it in the study, we introduce our theoretical-conceptual framework, describe the empirical approach and present and discuss empirical results. At the end of this article, we conclude what our results mean for further research and make suggestions for political-administrative practice.

With this research perspective and study design, we aim at opening scientific discourse about the need, the possibilities and the observable progress towards a "sustainability state". With regard to other state conceptions, which came into debate and (partly) into practice at earlier points in time, such as social or welfare states, constitutional states and, lately, environmental states [21], we believe that the time has come for debating the potential for a "sustainability state".

2. Theoretical-Conceptual Framework

2.1. Understandings of Sustainability

"Sustainability" can be seen as a black box or an umbrella term, not entirely or comprehensively defined, covering different meanings and understandings. What it subsumes is subject to different points of view. For instance, in an additive model of sustainability, each actor prioritizes one sustainability dimension [7]—either the social, economic or ecological realm—that may be associated with their field of activity; e.g., each government department focuses almost only on its own domain without paying much attention to other spheres. Regarding the complex interrelations between economic, social and

ecological developments, however, a more integrative understanding of SD seems to be more adequate for sustainability challenges [22]. In this model, often seen as a role model for societies, administrations, companies and other societal stakeholders, the interplay and interdependency between the three sustainability dimensions (some add even a fourth, cultural dimension) is always recognized. Here, a specific government department, for instance, not only takes responsibility for the SD dimension associated with its predominant activity, but also considers the other dimensions and strives for a closer cooperation with parallel units in other departments.

The integrative understanding of SD seems to better respond to the claim that social and economic development can only take place within planetary boundaries [5]. These boundaries define the potential and, simultaneously, the limit for every kind of human activity; they confine the frameworks of everything that constitutes modern life, even if the planet's capacity could seem unrestrained to actors pursuing technological development, prosperity and wealth. Inevitably, transformations and changes within one of the sustainability dimensions always have effects on the other dimensions. Only the effort of recognizing, anticipating and integrating the complexities, interdependencies and possible interactions into a course of action creates the chance for a true SD. Ignoring one or two of the three dimensions cannot be successful in the long run. Next to this cross-cutting, dimensional element, the temporal component is of key relevance to SD. Already in 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development concluded: it is only possible to speak about sustainability if the needs of today are satisfied in a way not limiting the survival possibilities of future generations [23]. To reach this goal, it is necessary to handle economical, ecological and social challenges in an integrative way. This integrative understanding of sustainability forms the basis of the present study.

2.2. Democracy, Bureaucracy, Governance

Sustainability is an utterly political phenomenon. It is a "*res publica*", a public matter in the classical, Ciceronian sense [24]. It has implications for the sphere of the social organization of societies, links to the effort of creating a sustainable societal order, which is connected to maintaining the ecological basis of life, as well as to economic activity as a process of trade between different members of the society. With all this, sustainable development can be described as a collective task.

Collective tasks, like sustainable development, require legitimation [8]. Decisions have to be legitimated not only through output, but also through input [25]. If it is about specific measures or collective tasks in a society, also questions of participation come into play. The reality in pluralistic societies, however, is that individual interests and preferences will not necessarily cumulate into a positive collective will (for sustainable development). Thus, the possibility that the interests of very diverse actors will merge into a common rationale (with the same understanding of the phrase sustainable development) seems to be very limited.

According to pluralism theory, democracy is especially safeguarded when, after a thorough debate, compromises between different societal fractions are achieved [26]. Nevertheless, it must be taken into account that the possibility to influence the outcome is (at least) unevenly distributed [27,28]. Specific fractions can disturb the democratic balance when their power of influence and implementation is significantly higher than those of other groups of the society. This is especially true with regard to the observation that societal interest and powers are mirrored in institutional power within government and

its ministries [29]. Such a democratic imbalance may become especially problematic in cases where these more powerful interests are not consistent with the factual interests of large majorities of the population [30]. Already in the Federalist Papers, James Madison [31] highlighted governmental responsibility in this respect. Furthermore, today, different studies in different contexts (in sustainability matters illustrated for example with the report "*World in Transition*" of the German Advisory Council on Global Change [8]) point to the necessity of the state's ability to act. Particularly important here is the balance between goal-oriented expansion of democratic participation possibilities in the sense of the participatory-democratic theory and the effectiveness in mastering the existing challenges, together with the representative-democratic legitimacy of such problem-solving efforts [32]. In this regard, the effective institutionalization of sustainability in legislative and executive branches of the state is essential for fostering sustainable development in complex democracies. Of specific relevance for a state's ability to act on sustainability issues are therefore the capabilities of horizontal and vertical coordination, cooperation with governmental and non-governmental actors, including citizen participation, in order to make better decisions because of the inclusion of more and wider knowledge resources and smart regulation and governance approaches [33], which takes seriously that societal actors are subjects and not mere passive objects of political steering [34].

However, not only are the implications of democratic theories connected with sustainable development. Insights provided by bureaucracy theories play a role, as well. The foundational theoretical approaches of Max Weber [35] and the theoretical-conceptual developments of the last few decades regarding cooperative public administration, ranging from new public management [36] to new public governance [37], with transparency towards citizens and expanded interaction and participation possibilities as the central elements, are of significant importance for comprehending the institutionalization of sustainability as the guiding principle in public administration.

Long-term and the cross-section orientation of sustainable development constitutes a particular integration and coordination challenge, which is partly contrary to the central features of a bureaucratic organization, like specialization and a hierarchy orientation, as well as the departmental principle ("*Ressortprinzip*") [38]. As a matter of fact, the effort to implement sustainability requires public administrations to put into operation a rather systematic integration of actors from inside and outside bureaucracy, of plural knowledge sources, moral values and interests, time horizons and spatial scales [12]. Additionally, different problem areas and problem-solving approaches have to be incorporated. In addition to "normal" coordination mechanisms in public administrations, the effort to balance ecological, economic and social developments in an anticipatory way makes adjustments in existing bureaucratic structures and procedures, as well as in governance and steering mechanisms necessary. Thus, when it comes to bureaucracy, the following aspects seem of specific relevance regarding the institutionalization of sustainability in administrative practice: organizational localization, strategic and integrative planning, interactive administration (regarding non-state actors), coordination within administration, as well as individual competence of staff.

These reflections on democratic and bureaucracy theories regarding the institutionalization of sustainability in policy-making and public administration lead to the idea of the integration of state, civil society and economy-related actors into the efforts of the (self-) governance of societal matters; the very essence of the governance debate [39]. According to this theoretical perspective, new processes of interaction between state and non-state actors, for example through and within networks, are required [40].

However, this does not imply that traditional and hierarchical steering mechanisms would vanish. They are rather supplemented in a way that the different elements of the market, hierarchy, networks and communities constitute governance structures [34].

The state is not losing its right to maneuver in this process, even if the configuration may change and differ from what it used to be. Many governance processes take place in the "shadow of hierarchy", which enables the state to drive societal self-steering and make use of cooperative approaches without giving up its role of "primus enter pares". In particular, the approach of the responsibility of the last resort ("*Letztverantwortung*") [41] points to the fact that the state is still able to maintain crucial responsibilities to deliver public goods; or at least, to re-appropriate them (or win back). Another perspective of responsibility of the last resort approach is that citizens may continue to hold the state liable in case of public goods not being delivered or not delivered effectively or if the results of ecological, economic and/or social policies are perceived as insufficient [41]. Furthermore, the ultimate physical enforcement capacity of decisions still lies with the state. This way, what Max Weber wrote as early as 1921/1922 is still valid, namely that a state can be defined as such if its administrative staff can still claim the monopoly of legitimate physical force [35].

Against the will of the state (at least in theory), nothing is possible. As long as the state prevails as the source of legitimate force, the last competence of implementing decisions, collectively binding and democratically taken, will still belong to its defining role.

From this perspective, the legitimacy of the steering/governing of the state, but also the ability to do so, may be described as "concealed" or "encapsulated" by other actors and levels, but it has not vanished. Obviously, the state still has the possibility to create, or take part in creating, the central societal and political framework of a society; as long as the political will still exists. In Germany, this fact is illustrated by the rapid and decisive response after the nuclear catastrophe in the Japanese nuclear power plant of Fukushima, when the German government decided to renounce nuclear power as part of the future sourcing of energy. On the international level, this condition can be illustrated with the decision to curb financial markets in response to the crisis in the banking sector in 2008 (even if it has to be acknowledged that the political will rapidly waned).

Looking from this perspective of political steering and governance to the institutionalization of sustainability in policy-making, it can be said that the state is challenged to develop approaches of smart regulation and the collaborative definition of problems and to search for solutions without giving up its responsibility and ability to formulate and enforce collective binding decisions. In this sense, the key aspects regarding the institutionalization of sustainability in political and administrative governance are smart approaches to political steering and governance, the monitoring of the progress of governance results through evaluation and the ability to cooperate without giving up legitimate power.

With the applied perspectives of democratic theory, bureaucracy theory and governance theory, it can be justified that state-related actors, like the executive and legislative branch, still hold a special societal organizational and leadership responsibility. At the same time, the shortcomings of democratic and administrative decision-making and organizational processes in the promotion of sustainability are clearly visible.

The identified challenges deriving from the respective theoretical-conceptual perspectives provide the key dimensions for the empirical analysis of the institutionalization of sustainability.

3. Methodology

To achieve the goal of this analysis, interviews with actors in politics and administration were carried out. Expert interviews [42] were conducted in every federal ministry (except the Ministry of Justice), the chancellery and in all five political parties in the Parliament. Because the focus of this study was especially on the everyday practice and experience of implementing the guiding principle "sustainability", oral statements of practitioners (ministry officials, politicians and their personal assistants) were given special weight. Additionally, a quantitative analysis of documents (documents of the ministries and parties identified as key texts with regard to sustainability) and a cursory qualitative study of documents (drafts, bills of the Parliament with specific sustainability-related catchwords) were included in a supporting role. It shall be mentioned that in general, the qualitative (not the quantitative) analysis of documents showed a more positive portrayal of the respective actors when it comes to their engagement in sustainability than the findings derived from interviews. At least partly, this can be attributed to the fact that in official documents, actors and institutions try to use rhetoric that shows them in a rather positive way. Taking this into account, conducting interviews seems even more important, because an interview situation can bring quite unfiltered statements that are closer to the real processes.

Because many of the indicators used were tailored for the practice and daily routines of the actors, a supporting analysis of documents was not carried out for every indicator. Here, only the interviews will be analyzed. Thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted in ministries. The positions of the interviewees ranked from heads of a department and heads of a division to (in one case, an advisor (clerk)). In some cases, the interviewee brought in advisors and assistants. As interlocutors in the ministries, the officially named sustainability contact persons of each ministry were contacted. Either the interviews were conducted with them or they referred us to other responsible office-holders. In a similar approach, the people mainly dealing with sustainability were contacted in the parties. Almost all interviews were recorded with digital recording devices and transcribed for better evaluation. Only in one case did the interviewee prefer not to be recorded; notes were taken by hand instead. These notes were integrated more carefully into the evaluation. The dialogue with the chancellery was partly off-the-record; thus, all information gathered from this source was double-checked with other sources: public, written or acquired through interviews with other actors in public administration.

The interview lengths were very diverse, ranging from 33 to 96 min, excluding the off-the-record parts.

The political parties of the parliament were represented in five interviews obtained from members of the *Parlamentarischer Beirat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung* (PBNE) (Parliamentary Advisory Committee for Sustainable Development) or from the assistants of Parliament groups. These interviews lasted between 40 and 84 minutes.

Indicators

All interviews relied on a system of up to 27 indicators (see Table 1 below) that were derived from the theoretical considerations. Features from different theoretical schools and backgrounds played a role when composing the key and sub-indicators. The integration of key indicators, like cooperation (civil society; other government actors) and policy-steering, resulted from a good part of the governance considerations, while mostly bureaucracy theoretical reflections led to the indicator inclusion of

coordination, strategic planning or target conflicts. The latter was, of course, as well, influenced by the reflections of critical or even liberal-constitutionalist theories of democracy. Aspects from different theories of democracy, like the critical or pluralistic theory, also played a role in the inclusion of the key indicator asking in what places and institutions (with what kind of importance in the political game) sustainability is located and if sustainability is (to what degree and why or why not) prioritized. Biodiversity as an indicator was included as an example for the specific integration of one of the planetary boundaries into daily work routines. The indicators used were slightly different for ministries and for parties.

As time was often limited, addressing every indicator was not always possible; thus, not every indicator includes responses from every interviewee. Some indicators could not be classified or weighted as positive or negative. These indicators were mainly included for informational purposes.

The evaluation relied on codes, created using the computer program, MaxQda. For the interviews in ministries, 1706 codings were generated; 726 codings were generated for the interviews in party groups/factions. The codings were assigned to categories and under categories. For the purpose of analyzing the material, the answers were mostly classified into three categories (significant, partly significant, not significant, respectively, rather yes, partly, rather no). Some indicators did not justify a positive or negative interpretation. They were rather for informational purposes.

Table 1. Overview of key indicators and sub-indicators.

Key indicators	Sub-indicators		
Strategic planning	Long term perspective	SD as power factors	SD at places of strategic planning
The individual factor	SD and human resource development	Promotion of SD by leadership personalities	
Policy-steering/governance	SD-reference at projects	SD as rationale and justification	Choice/option of Policy-Instruments
SD goals and their evaluation	SD goals	Project-evaluation (*ex post* and *ex ante*)	Expenditure-evaluation using SD criteria
Target conflicts	Target conflicts	Target conflicts within one's own department	
Institutionalization	Planning and establishing specific institutions to promote SD	Share and investment management + procurement	
Cooperation (civil society)	Cooperation with non-state actors to promote SD	Combined assessment and consulting bodies	Influence of third parties on SD politics
Cooperation (other government actors)	Cooperation with other government actors	Commitment of ministries	

Table 1. *Cont.*

Key indicators		Sub-indicators
Coordination	Coordination of government programs	Integration in processes of planning
Vertical policy integration	Influence of EU and UN	Consideration of sub-national levels (Länder, municipalities)
Where is SD located? (Environment or cross sectional)		
Prioritizations of sustainability		
Biodiversity		

SD: Sustainable Development.

4. Study Results

4.1. Significance of Sustainability

Substantial progress was noted in organizational, institutional and instrumental attempts to address the long-term and cross-cutting character of SD; e.g., the establishment of the following bodies and structures:

- National sustainability strategy;
- Undersecretary committee for sustainable development (UCSD);
- The PBNE (Parliamentary Advisory Committee for Sustainable Development);
- A scientific advisory council appointed by the German Chancellor (*Rat für Nachhaltige Enwticklung* (Council for Sustainable Development)).

Still, sustainability as a political-strategic topic is only of limited significance to legislative and executive bodies. This is seen in the limited importance ascribed by practitioners to newly established institutions, like the PBNE or UCSD, or by the way the topic is positioned in the daily routines of politics and administration. Furthermore, the programmatic statements in different party programs are either rather rhetorical and general or sparse. This applies especially for the Liberal Party.

The point of view that sustainability is primarily an environmental topic prevails in most ministries. However, some ministries, like the Ministry for Environment, emphasize its cross-cutting character, manifested in institutional arrangement: sustainability is not the responsibility of administrative units dealing with environmental questions, but of executive departments or special units devoted only to SD. Its cross-sectional and cross-dimensional aspects can thus be addressed in a more dedicated way.

The view that every department/unit should just deal with its own field for the overall goal of sustainability to be achieved is partly identifiable in ministries, less so in parliamentary groups. One of the best examples representing this departmental thinking, or "*Ressortprinzip*", was found in the Treasury: "*Well, it is very good that every department is on its own and that we don't have to think at the*

same time about what is best for the environment. This is what is very good about this departmental responsbility and departmental pooling."/*Das ist ja ganz gut, dass jeder für einen Bereich steht und dass wir nicht gleichzeitig darüber nachdenken müssen, was jetzt für die Umwelt das Beste ist (...). Das ist ja sehr gut an dieser Ressortzuständigkeit und der Ressortbündelung/*Here, the idea of acting parallel to each other instead of taking into account all SD dimensions and the spheres other ministries are dealing with found its expression. This is insufficient: it does not address the impacts one's actions have on other units and their respective spheres.

4.2. Institutionalization and Coordination of Tasks

Within the government and in the Parliament, institutions responsible for dealing specifically with sustainability have been created. However, an institutionalized and systematic interlocking of different policy fields and policy levels is still missing. For example, no intensive coordination practice between the federal ministries concerning SD was discovered. Furthermore, the UCSD has only a limited potential to affect the implementation of sustainability within the government.

The interviewees assessed the importance, political weight and public knowledge about PBNE as rather remote and expandable, possibly because PBNE is not a full-fledged committee of the German Bundestag, which limits its potential. Furthermore, the cooperation between federal ministries and PBNE is rather limited. This was shown with the fact that only within the Ministry of Environment was a close working relationship with the PBNE stated. Even if only in the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Women, Youth and Elderly people no cooperation was stated and the other ministries had a partial liaison with the PBNE, the results reflect that the PBNE is not yet seen as a player of foremost importance. One problem connected to the PBNE is its limited possibility of sustainability assessment: it can just review if the three sustainability dimensions are named and integrated in bills, but not whether or not they are correctly applied, or as the interlocutor from the party, Die Linke (The Left) said: "*The next step has to be the assessment of the content*"/"*Der nächste Schritt, das muss dann schon die inhaltliche Bewertung sein.*"

Cooperation between parliamentary groups and ministries on sustainability-related topics is hardly ever described as close and reliable. Furthermore, from the perspective of their colleagues representing other political subjects, who fear their excessive interference, practitioners of sustainability politics are not always perceived positively.

Cooperation between the federal level and the German Länder (German states) in relation to sustainability is perceived by ministries as very important. Unfortunately, real-life practice does not seem to coincide with this declaration. The actual collaboration is much less intensive. While it was possible to deduce from the statements in all ministries the perceived importance of federal level-Länder cooperation when it comes to sustainability (e.g., "*The Länder are responsible for the implementation of a lot of things. Therefore, you have to take them into account when you make proposals*"/"*Bei vielen Dingen, (...) sind die Länder für die Umsetzung zuständig. So müssen bei ihren Vorschlägen, die sie machen, schon mitdenken, dass die Länder es letztendlich umsetzen möchten und müssten*", Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection), the answers about the *de facto* cooperation were somewhat disillusioning. All statements made showed that the cooperation was perceived as limited in its intensity, problematic or improvable.

A similar tendency was detected in the cooperation between parliamentary members with actors at the same function level in the Länder or municipalities: the Länder are seen as important in establishing SD, but the factual cooperation is limited. This can be illustrated by an excerpt from the interview in the fraction of the Christian Democrats: "*Q: Do you have contact with Länder colleagues of your party (when it comes to the topic of sustainability)? A: No. Not much. I always had the idea to offer to do something together with the district associations about sustainability, that I go there. But so far, it did not work out; also because it did not work out time-wise with me. But this is a project that we can do some time"./"F: Haben Sie konkret Kontakt mit Kollegen aus Ihrer Partei in den Ländern? A: Nein. Wenig. Ich hatte immer mal die Idee gehabt, dass wir den Kreisverbänden mal anbieten, wenn sie was zum Thema Nachhaltige Entwicklung machen wollen, dass ich dann rumkomme. Das ist aber bis jetzt auch in der Idee erstmal stecken geblieben, weil es sich jetzt bei mir zeitlich auch nicht so ergeben hat. Das ist aber ein Projekt, das kann man irgendwann mal angehen, dass man das mal anbietet.*"

4.3. Setting Priorities and Goals

Prioritization of sustainability, e.g., in the case of conflicting goals, is often not implemented in practice, despite the fact that the German government publicly declares it. Due to different factors, for example the politics of the day, other strategic goals and different requirements of daily routines, prioritization of sustainability remains underdeveloped: the role model of sustainability remains too often behind the possibilities, but also behind the necessities.

While sustainability goals are becoming more prominent for parts of the public, it is not always possible to observe a significant use of sustainability goals in the daily routines of German ministries. Even if they are becoming more known, because of the sustainability strategy of the government and its Progress Reports, a high significance in the daily practice of the ministries was only to be observed in a few cases (Agriculture; the Treasury; Education; Health; Women, Youth, Seniors and Families). In five more ministries (Environment, Defense, Development Assistance, Labor and Social Affairs, Transport, Building and Urban Development), it had to be concluded that the sustainability goals only partly played a role (only taken into account when evaluating the goal attainment of one's own ministry or in the course of preparing the progress reports; sustainability goals were subordinated to other deliberations in case of doubt). Additionally, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the Ministry of Economy, the goals were even of lesser importance. Problems for applying an integrated understanding of sustainability are believed to occur because, often, only the goals of one's own ministry are taken into account.

When it comes to setting priorities, a statement from the Ministry of Economy illustrates the problematic: "*It is like this, that if you have the intention to create a bill…things are developed because of a specific need to regulate something. But overriding principles, like sustainability…they don't play a primary role there"./Es ist so, dass bei Gesetzesvorhaben, Verordnungsvorhaben…die Dinge aus der Notwendigkeit entwickelt werden, einen Sachverhalt zu regeln. Aber übergeordnete Gesichtspunkte, wie zum Beispiel Nachhaltigkeit, spielen da keine primäre Rolle.*"

Furthermore, in different ministries, it was stated that the topic is not important enough to get high priority on the agenda; particularly the statements of the Ministry of Health led to the conclusion that its leading personnel was not championing for SD (e.g., "Q: *Are there specific people of the political leadership for whom sustainability would be an important matter of concern? A1: No. No. A2: For this,*

the topic is not prominent enough"/"F: Gibt es auch einzelne Persönlichkeiten sozusagen jetzt mal aus der politischen Führungsebene, die sagen also Nachhaltigkeit ist uns besonderes Anliegen, besonders wichtig...? A1: Nee. Nee. A2: Dafür ist das Thema nicht prominent genug." On the other hand, only three ministries (Agriculture; Development Assistance; Education) and the Chancellery fall into the category of the significant commitment of leading figures. The results were reinforced by the answers to the question as to which ministries the interviewed people perceive as promoting sustainability especially, and which not. The result was that in six cases the Ministry of the Environment was mentioned, as well as the Ministries for Development Aid (mentioned twice), Agriculture (twice) and Health (once). As less engaged in promoting sustainability, the Ministry of Economy (twice), Internal Affairs (twice), Foreign Affairs (once), the Treasury (once), Transport, Building and Urban Development (once) and the Justice Department (once) were named.

Even if sustainability plays an ever growing role for the communication process of the parties in the Parliament and political plans or bills are more often justified with sustainability requirements, an actual strategic prioritization integrating all three dimensions of sustainability cannot be observed often enough. However, also, the long-term perspective of sustainability is only partly integrated. Important sustainability-related decisions are only moderately monitored by taking into account the long-term effects. Still, often, the sitting term of the Parliament constitutes the framework for decisions. This was to be concluded from statements of all parties in the German Bundestag. This problem was summarized best by a statement of the interlocutor of Die Linke (The Left): "*The foremost goal of a politician is to make his own ideas come true. This can only happen if he is re-elected. Thus, he will make decisions in a way that assures he will be re-elected. This is a problem because this requires decisions with a short-term and not with a long-term horizon"./"Das erste Ziel eines Politikers ist es, seine Ideen umzusetzen. Die kann er nur umsetzen, wenn er wiedergewählt wird. Also wird er auch Entscheidungen auch so treffen, dass er wiedergewählt wird. Das ist ein Problem, weil das kurzfristige Entscheidungen sind und nicht die langfristigen.*" This way and because of the politics of the day and other "requirements", the use of a long-term perspective as a guiding principle when introducing policy recommendations and bills in the Bundestag is not always implemented or considered only partly.

4.4. Cooperation with Civil Society

Actors within the legislative body have close ties to actors of civil society with regard to SD. Furthermore, within the ministries, cooperation with civil society is seen as an important factor. This finding applies to a lesser extent to the design of common strategies for tackling SD. Common assessment and strategy-development bodies comprising civil society actors and political actors hardly exist.

4.5. Policy-Instruments

To deal with the challenges of sustainability, all parties favor a mixture of instruments. Furthermore, within the ministries, a basic orientation towards the application of all possible instruments was found. Only within the Ministry of Economy did the answers indicate a political predisposition for market instruments. Two other ministries (Foreign Affairs and Family and Youth) have an inclination towards informative instruments. The Ministry of Economy was, in general, leaning towards voluntary actions and rejecting compulsory measures when it came to sustainability issues. One statement was, for

instance, "*I want to give you an example: It would be possible to make preparing sustainability reports compulsory. But we don't want this. We rather say: Companies can do it on a voluntary basis when they think it will bring them an advantage. Then, they should do it*"./"*Ich will Ihnen ein Beispiel nennen: man könnte das Erstellen von Nachhaltigkeitsberichten verpflichtend machen. Wollen wir nicht. Wir sagen: die Firmen können das freiwillig machen, wenn sie sich davon Vorteile versprechen. Dann sollen sie das machen.*" In another illustrative example, in which also sustainability goals play a role, it was stated: "*The Ministry of the Economy appeals to the voluntariness and insight of companies to implement sustainability goals. It is a declaration of the federal government: this goal we find correct, achievable and we want to take the economy along this way. But it is not like this, that we want to force the economy to achieve this goal*"./ "*Das BMWi appelliert an die Freiwilligkeit und Einsicht der Firmen Nachhaltigkeitsziele umzusetzen. Es ist ja eine Aussage der Bundesregierung: dieses Ziel finden wir richtig, erreichbar und möchten gerne die Wirtschaft auf diesem Weg mitnehmen. Allerdings ist es nicht so, dass wir die Wirtschaft zwingen wollen dieses Ziel zu erreichen.*"

4.6. Sustainability-Evaluation of Measures

As a rationale for measures and as a part of the communication strategy, the steering effects of sustainability are incorporated and used by the ministries and by parties in the parliament. Despite the existing regulations regarding sustainability in the Joint Rules of Procedure of the Federal Ministries (*Gemeinsame Geschäftsordnung der Bundesregierung* (GGO)), a real and fully-fledged evaluation of measures using all three sustainability dimensions and an *ex ante* and *ex post* reflection on the bills, measures and expenditures of the federal level is not developed in any ministry.

4.7. Training and Human Resource Development

In the sector of human-resource development, the topic of sustainable development plays hardly any role. The complex connections and ramifications of sustainability are barely mediated by staff members of fractions or ministries in workshops or training events. For this reason, the necessary and much overdue systemic knowledge concerning the interdependencies of different policy areas and levels remains underdeveloped.

4.8. Procurement and Investments of the Federal Level

On a positive note, sustainability criteria have found their way into the acquisition decisions of some ministries, but the effect on the potential buyer power of the federal level often remains low and limited. The problem is illustrated by a statement made in the Ministry of Economy that the "*principle is not sustainable, but affordable procurement and to buy as inexpensively as possible*"/"*Oberste Linie ist eben nicht die nachhaltige Beschaffung, sondern die kostengünstige Beschaffung*".

The measure program of the federal government, adopted by the UCSD in 2010, needs to be implemented, consequently. This applies especially to the goal of strengthening sustainable public procurement. Furthermore, through the interest of the federal government in various enterprises (e.g., German railways), a positive step towards SD can be made. So far, this potential is used ineffectively or only partially.

4.9. Fear of Interference

In the German Parliament, it was observable that the fact that sustainability means dealing with aspects of the social, ecological and economic dimensions at the same time and the effort to address them together creates fears that sustainability politicians could interfere in/with other fields, departments or tasks of other committees. Even colleagues of the same party raise concerns that the cross-cutting nature of sustainability would lead the politicians of sustainability to intervene in different policy areas and the work of other members of Parliament. There is concern that "*we suddenly become responsible for everything. This was really said to us: No, how do you imagine it? You will become a super-committee and suddenly you are responsible for everything, be it labor, pension or health*"/"*dass wir plötzlich für alles zuständig sind, das wurde uns tatsächlich gesagt. Nein, wie stellt ihr euch das vor, da werdet ihr zum Überausschuss und seid plötzlich für alles zuständig, sei es Energiefragen oder Arbeit oder Rente oder Gesundheit*" (Christian Democratic Union—CDU/Christian Social Union—CSU).

5. Discussion of Empirical Results with Regard to Democracy, Bureaucracy and Governance Theories

The empirical results show that 22 years after Agenda 21 was adopted by the German government, there is still no (sufficient) systematic and institutionalized interlocking of policy fields fostered by structures and processes aiming at promoting sustainable development. The declarative national sustainability strategy of Germany, which has been in place since 2002, has not been adequately mirrored by institutional transformations. Sustainability continues to have only limited impact on political and administrative practices. Regarding the demanding role state institutions have for sustainable development in complex democracies, it can be stated that especially its capabilities of horizontal and vertical coordination are apparently not appropriate for the cross-cutting and long-term challenge of sustainable development. Moreover, it has become obvious that the materialization of competing interests within the political and administrative institutions prevents the institutionalization of sustainability as a guiding principle in every resort at an equal level. On a positive note, it can be stated that the state has adapted a more cooperative style of policy-making and approaches of smart regulation as conceptualized in the discourse on governance *vs.* government [43]. However, the fact that certain ministries (especially the Ministry of Economy) still have preferences for specific policy instruments and for cooperation with particular resorts points to the need for reflection on the thin line between the positive notion of governance as interactive policy-making of an interactive state *vs.* the post-democratic influence of (powerful) interest groups.

Next to the identified difficulties regarding the democratic role of federal political-administrative institutions for sustainable development in Germany, the bureaucratic arrangement is of key importance for implementing sustainability policy. The empirical data shows that adjustments in existing bureaucratic structures and procedures, such as the state secretary council or new requirements in the Joint Rules of Procedure of the Federal Ministries (GGO), aiming at more integrative, long-term oriented cross-sectoral coordination, are very limited in their influence of administrative practice; despite their formal existence. The data reveals that within a hierarchical and sectoral bureaucratic organization, coordination mechanisms are still insufficient, and most often lack political backing by the

top of the hierarchy. There is hardly any strategic and integrative planning for sustainability; the individual competence of staff and leadership regarding sustainability is described as weak.

The identified challenges for the political-administrative institutionalization of sustainability in the democratic and bureaucratic perspective are reflected in respective governance approaches. Even though the basic ideas of governance—such as smart regulation approaches and collaboration with non-state actors—were observed, other measures relevant to successfully realize cooperative policy-making between different sectors and state and non-state actors are hardly found in administrative reality. Specifically of concern in this regard is a lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (*ex ante*/*ex post*). The sustainability assessment of the PBNE and the sustainability assessment required by the GGO are lacking consistent execution and substantial impact. The idea of "governance in the shadow of hierarchy" only works if the state is capable of professionally employing its legitimized power for the political steering of societal self-steering. Looking at key aspects of political-administrative action at the federal level in Germany regarding sustainability through the lens of democratic, bureaucratic and governance theories, it can be concluded that despite some institutional and instrumental developments, the German sustainability policy is still lacking a firm, comprehensive and effective institutional basis. Compared to the institutional settings of the social or welfare state and the environmental state, it can be stated that a sustainability state has not been realized yet.

6. Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, we posed three research questions:

(1) How is sustainability positioned in different institutions, and how exactly do they deal with the issue?
(2) How and through what measures do political and administrative actors in government and legislation try to advance SD?
(3) How is sustainability understood (e.g., primarily one-dimensionally or in an integrative way) and is sustainability prioritized?

With regard to the third question, the empirical results and their theory-based interpretation reveal that sustainability is still viewed in large parts of the political-administrative system as environmental sustainability and not in the sense of integrative sustainability; and in day-to-day politics, sustainability is most often crowded out by other, more immediate, issues. In relation to the second question, it can be said that progress has been made in organizational, institutional and instrumental terms; however, the implemented measures and organizational adaptations seem to be insufficient to adequately address the cross-cutting and long-term challenge of sustainability. Concerning the first question, the analysis shows that the relevance and related activities vary significantly within the political-administrative system. Overall, the topic is still hardly incorporated in the everyday practice of political and administrative actors. Departmental thinking, representing materialized societal interests, still prevails and prevents more integrative sustainability policy. In sum: while Germany portrays itself as a sustainability leader, its transition into a sustainable society falls short of the statements with which this portrait is drawn, because the basic requirement for a sustainable society, a sustainability state, has not been realized yet.

For a further mainstreaming of sustainability and to move closer to a sustainability state, first steps may be taken and initial recommendations for the political-administrative practice can be formulated:

- *Leadership* is required: The guiding principle of sustainability needs to be fostered by additional efforts at the leadership level in the political and administrative sphere.
- The importance of sustainability-related competencies, knowledge and skills should be addressed: additional training measures for low-, middle- and high-level political and administrative personnel must be introduced.
- Because the goal of a sustainable society can only be realized as a common effort, political and administrative bodies must develop systematic structures of cooperation and participation with actors form civil society, other state actors and the economy that aim at action-oriented sustainability facilitation.
- *Ex ante* and *ex post* evaluation of all kinds of federal-level measures, bills and expenditures, including the review of all three sustainability dimensions, should be introduced.
- To realize its potential, the PBNE shall be upgraded to a standing committee with all its rights and duties, granted fully-fledged rights of examination of bills (with regard to impact on SD) and made responsible for the development of a sustainability strategy. Only then may the PBNE gain the political weight necessary to foster sustainability on the level of the Parliament.
- Even if at both the federal level and the level of Länder, the need for better coordination is recognized and wished for, it remains underdeveloped. There is a pressing need for a closer interconnectedness of the different policy and administrative stages from the global to the local level. The competencies at different levels of the administration should be more synchronized.
- Monitoring and reporting capacities have to be provided for; strategic planning approaches have to be developed and action guidelines and checklists can be introduced and used.
- Sustainability as a topic should be pooled. Possibilities for a new institutionalization may be reviewed. The competencies of different resorts have to be bundled. The departmental principle seems not to be aim-oriented enough and, for such a complex topic as sustainability, outdated. The principle of ministerial independence and the classical model of departmental autonomy appear increasingly unproductive considering the interdependence of the dimensions of sustainability.
- Contradictory policies, e.g., subsidies whose negative results are repaired with money from the state, are to be stopped. A smart mix of regulative, incentive- and market-based and informative instruments seems needed.
- Sustainability criteria should be mandatory for public procurement. The federal state should use its power as a consumer. Enterprises for which the federal government holds shares (e.g., Deutsche Bahn) have to become role models of sustainability.

Even if not comprehensive or sufficient, these recommendations may be the first step in further integrating the needs of sustainability into the practice of administrations. However, in most cases, they do not reach their target audience if they remain within the realm of (social) science. Therefore, we firmly believe that there is enormous need for transformative and transdisciplinary sustainability science [44] focusing on institutional development to improve the integration of sustainability into the political-administrative system. Any transformative and trans-disciplinary sustainability science focusing on political and administrative institutions must be aware that this is a very tricky and

challenging task. It is not about given scientific, technocratic advice; moreover, it is about challenging and questioning the values, interests, preferences and power relations of political and administrative institutions, which prevent sustainability from becoming a routinized practice in policy-making. Therefore, it is necessary for science to become engaged in praxis-relevant discourses. Due to the inherently political nature of the topic, new transdisciplinary coalitions between sustainability science and civil society are necessary, beyond "normal" applied research for political and administrative actors. Within this, certainly ambitious, social process, where science and praxis interact with each other, new scientific questions and insights can be gained, while supporting (and perhaps pushing) political and administrative practice to develop effective institutions for sustainability. It seems to be high time to press for institution building in order to create a real "sustainability state". Hereby, an engaged social science as a part of sustainability science has its role to play.

Author Contributions

Both authors jointly conceptualized and structured the paper. The whole paper was jointly drafted and developed by two authors to bring to the current state. The second author was solely responsible for data collection (interviews) and analysis, using the mentioned software.

Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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