Equity and Human Rights in a Post 2015 Transformative Agenda

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The *People's Sustainability Treaty on Rights for Sustainability*[1] endorses the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child and calls for a continuous care for their implementation in all aspects of human life. It further recalls the human rights-related principles of the Rio Declaration and acknowledges the many other rights-related declarations that have emerged since then. We state that sustainable development is impossible without a continuous respect and care for the implementation of human rights as made explicit in the above mentioned texts.

(2)
However, in considering the relation between the challenge of implementing human rights on the one hand and the challenge of implementing sustainable development on the other hand, we also call for an awareness of the insight that a full implementation of human rights – in their meaning of protection of the weak – would not automatically lead to sustainable development.

A human rights based approach to sustainable development governance always works on two parallel tracks:

1. **corrective**: tackling situations and practices perceived as unjust according to 'common sense values' with respect to human dignity: the unacceptability of imposed suffering and deprivation;

2. **supportive**: caring for resilience & contribution;
Basic understanding: self-organisation and the right to education and participation in political decision making
But there is need for a richer concept of resilience and contribution: the need to build capacity to deal with the complexity of sustainable development governance itself.

Sustainable development governance is essentially a complex exercise of coordinating and controlling systems of interlinked socio-economic processes in a dynamic of increasing globalisation.

In this perspective, sustainable development governance actually concerns a 'fair dealing with complexity'.

(3)
Political rhetoric, repeated and supported by an important body of social sciences research, tells us that sustainable development is 'politics' in the sense that it concerns negotiating a consensus that integrates and balances reasonable but often incommensurable and conflicting interests.

But what does that mean? In what way could human interests be *in conflict*? The 'society as organised conflict' paradigm perceives the world as a world of winners and losers. The view is that the very existence of conflicting interests requires strategic positioning, but in fact it is the other way round: strategic positioning of the one leads to conflicting interests with the other, whether that other has an interest in strategic positioning or not; and that applies to economics and politics as well as to their interrelations.

- The idea of politics as civilised and organised conflict concerned with seeking consensus dates from modernity when the right to do politics as such still needed to be acquired;
- The idea of the market economy driven by competition is as such not wrong, but it ignores the fact that, driven by competition, a market economy can never determine its own ethical boundary conditions;
- Member states deliberate sustainable development issues, but do not acknowledge that the criterion of state sovereignty is in itself an obstructing factor in sustainable development governance;

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[1] *http://www.sustainabilitytreaties.org*

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- The working document of the 10th UN Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals[2] makes a distinction between absolute poverty and relative poverty. That distinction is problematic, as poverty is always relative. History has shown us that communities of people in one way or another always manage to organise themselves. If specific communities today are not capable to care for their own basic needs, than this is not a deplorable result of our 'struggle with complexity', but simply a situation of imposed deprivation. A crisis situation where people are dying of hunger is not 'poverty' but brutal imposed deprivation that results from local political, ethnic or religious conflict. Distinguishing absolute from relative poverty gives the impression of an intention to decouple observed humanitarian crises from political, ethnic or religious conflict as their cause.

(4)
So complexity is essentially not the complexity of dealing with conflict, but the complexity of dealing with knowledge-related uncertainty and value pluralism. Transparency is a key criterion, but there is more: the insight that there is no ultimate rationale or truth that tells us what is e.g. an 'acceptable' economic profit, an 'acceptable' environmental burden, an 'acceptable' technological risk, …

In that sense, complexity is also the complexity of interpretation:
- interpretation in the sense of understanding something that is not immediately obvious;
- interpretation of what happens in reality and what can happen in the future, taking into account uncertainty and value pluralism.

(5)
Seeing sustainable development governance as also a fair dealing with 'the complexity of interpretation' enables us to connect it to a specific human rights perspective: if all our individual or group interests are diverse but also conditional (in the sense of being also dependent on interpretation), than our common interest is in *the possibility to deliberate* those individual or group interests. As there are no privileged positions to understand and make sense of complexity, that possibility informs the principle of equality in contributing to making sense of that complexity.

That leads to the human rights principle to sustainable development governance that is proposed in the sustainability treaty on human rights:

→   Added to the 3 fields of human rights that concern a fair organisation of our society, being

1.   the equal right to aid and access to justice of those in need today
2.   the equal right to be a member of society and to participate in the dynamic of that society
3.   the equal right of those of the future to govern their own needs,

…   sustainable development governance implies *the equal right for every human to contribute to making sense of what is at stake*. This right can be fulfilled through the implementation of a 3-fold concept of collective capacity building (which can also be seen as a 3-fold concept of distributive justice):

1.   a sharing of insights and learning possibilities ('nobody can do it alone')
        [> implying pluralist and reflexive basic and advanced education and inclusive and transdisciplinary research]
2.   a sharing of deliberative space ('nobody should do it alone')
        [> implying inclusive, deliberative and transparent multi-level decision making]
3.   a sharing of freedoms of collective choice ('even all together now, our deliberative power is limited, as we cannot include and consult the next generations')
        [> implying global governance as a continuing process of engagement and resignation]

→   Connected to the 3 rights-fields that concern a fair organisation as listed above, this right enables what is essential for human well-being and what makes sustainable development governance possible: **the right to be responsible for every human**.

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[2] http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/owg10.html

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