The Concept of Social Sustainability and its Challenges for the Sociology of Social Policy

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Abstract

Max Weber considered social policy to be applied sociology. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda with 17 universal Sustainable Development Goals. The main goals and subgoals essentially deal with social policy issues and are linked to economic and ecological demands. In the 21st century, there are many arguments that speak for a sociology that addresses this transdisciplinary and transformative context. This in turn requires a change of perspective, away from a limited socio-ecological view and towards establishing a discourse on social sustainability. To succeed, the established conception of welfare regimes must be transposed to sustainability research. The article discusses the issue of normativity that social sustainability has as well as measures for a sustainable social policy. The paper argues in favor of a mixed universalism, termed guarantism, that focuses social policy on participation and identifies modern digital and smart pathways to achieve it.

Keywords: social sustainability, environmental regimes, welfare regimes, sustainability goals, Agenda 2030

Preliminary remarks

This paper connects the reflections of two previous presentations: the first, *The concept of social sustainability and challenges for sociology*, was held at the opening of the lecture series *Social Sustainability: Life Opportunities and Inequalities* at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) on March 3, 2021; the second presentation, *Ethical dilemmas of social sustainability. Between personal freedom and the protection of common goods*, was held at the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg in Delmenhorst on May 10, 2021. The first part of the article builds on a previously published article in German: Opielka, Michael (2017a). The article was reviewed and updated for the English translation. The second part of the article was written for the present English version.

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Introduction

The resolution *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations 2015) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on October 21, 2015, shortly before the Paris climate summit, outlined a strategy whereby the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) systematically link climate with welfare and environmental with social policy. The resolution differentiates the SDGs into a complex set of sub-goals and determines relevant indicators for timely compliance. At least 10 of the 17 goals of the *Agenda 2030* are social policy goals such as poverty eradication, equal opportunities, social stability, and inclusion (Opielka 2017, McGuinn et al. 2020). With the SDGs, social sustainability has become the central determinant of global social policy.

The discourses on ecological transformation and sustainability have to date neglected the welfare state as a central form of regulation alongside the capitalist market economy in modern societies (e.g., WBGU 2016). As of yet, far too little attention has been paid to a central common feature of the welfare state and the eco-state: both forms of regulation of modern societies intervene in a central exploitation principle of capitalism, the transformation of labor and nature into the commodity form, the so-called *commodification*. Both counter this with the principle of *decommodification*, a reduction of market imperatives through state and community control. The first authors rightly speak of the "eco-welfare state" (see Zimmermann/Graziano 2020).

For sociology, social policy has been of outstanding importance not only since Max Weber's insights. According to Weber, social policy has its starting point in the critique of processes and results of formal rationalization, prototypically in modern capitalism. This critique leads to ethical demands for corrective interventions and thus becomes the object of an institutionalization where the satisfaction of individual needs is the rationality criterion (Weber 1988). Social policy became the dominant regulative of modern, especially democratically constituted societies (Opielka 2008). With the obvious social relevance of conflicts regarding sustainability and the introduction and establishing of environmental policies, new questions arise from the perspective of sociology of social policy: What is the state of research on the relationship between the welfare regime and the environmental regime? Does their engagement with each other advance knowledge in their respective fields? What normative principles are at play?

The article deals with the question whether the conceptual, epistemological framework of the contemporary sustainability discourse has systematically hindered thinking about social policy. By differentiating social sustainability into four conceptions, it becomes clear why the sustainability discourse and deliberations on a post-growth society have to consider social policy. I assume that the welfare state itself is not only a driver for material economic growth – via the argument of job security – but can at the same time organize or regulate systemic sustainability, if the welfare regime's internal logic is oriented towards social sustainability. The discourses on sustainability and social policy have one central commonality: their focus on the value of equity. Another common feature is their focus on the tension between externalization and internalization of problems, whereby they focus on the latter. Externalization of social or ecological problems means relegating them to others, whereas internalization refers to taking over responsibility for them. Both social policy and sustainability aim at solving conflicts and

problems within the respective systems without externalizing existing conflicts to third parties: externalization should be as weak as possible.

Sociology, social policy, and social reform have been managing ambivalences and externalizations of capitalist development since the late 19th century. Sustainability research with respect to environmental and green policy have been managing the ambivalences and externalizations of industrial development since the late 20th century. These two basic approaches to social sustainability recombine and mobilize different actors' economic, political, cultural, and ethical preferences, and they aim at internalizing the problems and the "internalization society" (Opielka 2017).

The Concept of Social Sustainability

Climate change and capitalism are global phenomena. Superficially and from a historical perspective, they differ strikingly in two respects: climate change appeared on the political agenda in the 1970s, capitalism in the 1840s. The species issue has been occupying mankind for almost 50 years, whereas society has been dealing with the social issue as a class issue for some 170 years. If questions persist for a very long time, they indicate stability, importance to social actors, and institutionalization. Many people still perceive the ecological question to be a rhetorical one and climate change merely a construction. Similarly, many considered and still consider the social question to have been solved long ago, and capitalism to be victorious. Most people, however, attribute a high relevance to both questions and suspect a connection. However, the nature of that connection is not clear. This has to do with the second, serious difference between climate change and capitalism: they also differ analytically.

At first glance, the so-called *sustainability triangle* that has been circulating since the 1990s seems convincing. It differentiates between ecological, economic, and social sustainability. Depending on stakeholder interests, the three pillars are conceived as reinforcing or hindering each other. In 1998, for example, the Enquête Commission of the German Bundestag on the *Protection of People and the Environment* described sustainability for the first time as sustainable development of the economic, ecological, and social dimensions of human existence (Deutscher Bundestag 1998). Since then, these three pillars of sustainability have been frequently and controversially (see Grunwald/Kopfmüller 2012) described as interacting with one another and as requiring a balanced coordination in the long term.

The three-pillar or triangular model of sustainability parallels the model of the three processes of efficiency, consistency, sufficiency. This parallel has received little attention so far. These three processes are also present in the sustainability debate and are aimed at corporate sustainability strategies (Schaltegger et al. 2003: 25). However, they can be applied in a useful way to all substance-related sustainability strategies. Already back in the 1990s, Joseph Huber called for "first consistency, then efficiency, and then sufficiency" as well as for an "overall strategy of graded preferences". One must

> first and foremost try to improve the ecological adaptability of material flows by changing material flow qualities (consistency), in order to then, also for economic reasons, optimally increase the resource productivity of these material flows (efficiency), and where both types of changes reach their limits in their interaction, we simply have

> to be satisfied (sufficiency). (Huber 1995: 157; for a critical assessment thereof, Ekardt 2016).

The parallel between the three-pillar and three-process model of sustainability could be the following: ecological sustainability and consistency, economic sustainability and efficiency, social sustainability and sufficiency. But the stumbling block is obvious: An understanding of social sustainability that has so far focused primarily on inequality and justice has little to do with sufficiency. However, as the discussion about a socially just design of the energy transition shows, it is precisely here that the window of opportunity to link the discourses of inequality and justice with post-growth and social sustainability opens.

Since the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, the three dimensions of sustainability figure as a unifying interpretation pattern, even if this conference's final declaration does not contain such a triangle.[2] Patterns of interpretation are usually implicit and preconscious. It is precisely here that the analytical problem mentioned above is built into the triangle: in a capitalist world economy, sustainability refers to the economy and therefore means that the economic system's functional imperatives must not be endangered. The protagonists in the sustainability discourse of the capitalist world are employers, business associations and economic groups. In the figure of the sustainability triangle, social sustainability refers to the other side of the antagonism of classes: here, trade unions and NGOs are positioned worldwide, and they are committed to the capital-less and the excluded. Thus, when invoking a homeostasis of this triangle of sustainability, as in practically all relevant sustainability discourses, the class antagonism is built into the figure of sustainability and at the same time woven into a second antagonism, namely that of the purely ecological issue, i.e., the narrow understanding of the ecological question. Thus, the figure of the sustainability triangle is based on a double contradiction: firstly, between social and economic sustainability (class antagonism) and secondly, between this tension and a narrow understanding of ecological sustainability. Antagonisms or ambivalences tend to paralyze actors. A double ambivalence in the three-pillar concept of sustainability – or the sustainability triangle, for that matter – thus entails an aggravated risk of standstill. In Germany, climate policy provides a good example for this: trade unions and regional politicians fight together with energy companies to proceed with the fossil energy production from lignite and against decarbonization. Stephan Lessenich coined the sustainability-relevant term "externalization society" that summarizes the confusion potential of late modernity. *Externalization society* refers to a society in which people live "according to absolute standards [...] and above standard conditions of others" (Lessenich 2015: 24; in greater detail, Lessenich 2016). Climate change and capitalism merge as society looks away. Are the change from the logic of externalization to a logic of internalization, of honestly acknowledging what is going on, and a path towards an *internalization* society, i.e., of a society taking over its responsibility, even conceivable?

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[2] See the final declaration 1992: http://www.un.org/Depts/german/conf/agenda21/rio.pdf; the declaration of the Stockholm Conference 1972 does not contain it either: http://www.un-documents.net/aconf48-14r1.pdf.

Here, a discussion paper by the Commission for Social Development of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations,[3] entitled *Emerging issues: The social drivers of sustainable development* (UN ECOSOC 2014), helps to both specify the concept of social sustainability and to define the possibilities and limits of political climate protection measures in more detail. The argumentation of the discussion paper initially focuses on the organized class compromise that is oriented towards the dominant valuation of gainful employment. This corresponds to the basic impulse of the ECOSOC that is further sharpened in the tripartite construction – governments, unions, employers – of the United Nations sub-organization International Labor Organization (ILO). Since the 1980s, in the ECOSOC's view, three political discourses have modified the central position of wage labor in the debate:

1. the discourse on women's work since the 1980s: It shows that equal payment for equal performance is as little established as is a visible valuation of family or domestic work;
2. the perception and recognition of the informal economy since the 1990s: This has gained importance through the voices of the Global South, by accounting for the relevance of the subsistence economy, and through the discussion about expanding the GDP to include non-monetary welfare benefits.
3. Due to the observation of *jobless growth* since the 2000s and in the wake of the financial crisis, economic growth per se has become questioned, although its ecological consequences initially played a minor role in the discussion.

I have referred to a specific formulation of the triangle of sustainability, the three pillars of sustainable development, at the beginning of the paper: "sustainable development, enabled by the integration of economic growth, social justice and environmental stewardship" (UN ECOSOC 2014). This formulation suggests that the three dimensions should be treated more equally than before: "Indeed, the interpretation of sustainable development has tended to focus on environmental sustainability while neglecting the social dimension." (UN ECOSOC 2014) But what is this social dimension? Could it be more than or differ from social justice, i.e., the focus on inequality and its redress? The ECOSOC document hints that this is the case. A remarkable number of fields of action are listed and combined as "social drivers for sustainable development": from the promotion of the informal economy to a universalistic social policy including a basic income ("transformative social policy"), a "green economy", participation and empowerment, and a generally social and solidarity-based economy. Such a list of drivers would have been unthinkable within a trade union context just a few years ago. Against the background of the development of this discourse, the next step towards generalizing social sustainability in international politics becomes comprehensible: the successful formulation of the SDGs in 2015. ECOSOC was tasked to monitor and its statistical commission to develop indicators (Opielka 2017: 87-99).

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[3] In the meantime, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations (UN) sees itself as a central platform for sustainability discourses ("the United Nations' central platform for reflection, debate, and innovative thinking on sustainable development"); ECOSOC is responsible for monitoring the SDGs (UN ECOSOC 2016): http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc.

Four Conceptions of Social Sustainability

It makes sense to define the hitherto diffuse term *social sustainability* more clearly. In particular, the term should no longer be reduced to refer to the economic context only.[4] An initially integrative social scientific and subsequently transdisciplinary perspective could link social sustainability to political governance. The link between social sustainability and governance could be provided by the welfare regime concept, applied in comparative welfare state research; it has become known primarily through Gøsta Esping-Andersen's seminal work.[5] Recently, the welfare regime concept has also been examined for its applicability to environmental or sustainability policy.[6] In the following, I will expand the concept of welfare regimes to include dimensions of social sustainability. To this end, I will start with the three types known from Esping-Andersen: liberal, conservative, and social-democratic, to which I have added a fourth type – guarantist – elsewhere, following Talcott Parsons' AGIL theory.[7] In contrast to the multitude of other regime typologies, both Esping-Andersen's and my approach are theory-based rather than phenomenological. For example, in a recent paper, Yörük et al. (2022) distinguish four regime types: institutional, neoliberal, populist, and residual. They justify this on the one hand with a global expansion of the field of investigation and on the other hand with the inclusion of social policy core areas such as social assistance and health services. The fact that they subsume all three welfare regime types in Esping-Andersen under *institutional* suggests that the actual phenomenology of data is sacrificed to a sociological structural analysis. I cannot enlarge upon that critique at this point. In contrast, Zimmermann and Graziano's (2020) attempt to identify types of an "eco-welfare state" on the basis of Esping-Andersen, also via a cluster analysis, by combining social and ecological performance indicators, appears more empirically sophisticated. Their attempt is particularly significant because they place the perspective on decommodification that we share at the center of their analysis.

Esping-Andersen (1990) argues that different patterns of decommodification can be subsumed under three main welfare regimes that differ with regard to their systems of stratification and their arrangements between state, market and family:

1. A *liberal* regime with weak decommodification and low-level statutory services for the working class and the poor, while the middle class is referred to private services on the market;

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[4] This was already discussed in the *Jahrbuch Ökologische Ökonomik 2007* ("Yearbook of Ecological Economics 2007"). The term was sociologically extended already in Littig/Grießler (2005), but a systematic reference to the welfare state has been missing until recently (see Zimmermann/Graziano 2020).

[5] See Esping-Andersen (1990); on the subsequent discussion in welfare research, see Arts/Gelissen (2002), Powell et al. (2020). Esping-Andersen draws on a discussion in political science theory of international relations (without explicitly mentioning it). The regime theory of Robert O. Keohane (1982) and Stephen Krasner (1982) emerged around 1980 as a further development of the interdependence theory; German scholars include Volker Rittberger and Michael Zürn (1991). International regimes are cooperative institutions characterized by informal and formal, legal and non-legal structures that deal with conflicts between nation states. There are four distinguished characteristics of international regimes: principles (shared basic assumptions), norms (general standards of behavior), rules (specific rules of conduct), and procedures (concrete, mutually agreed-upon procedures) (Hasenclever et al. 2000). Esping-Andersen (1990) transferred these considerations to the analysis of the welfare state itself; his regime concept does not apply to supranational but to domestic institutional networks.

[6] See Gough (2016); Koch/Mont 2016, at least with regards to policy comparisons; see also Opielka (2017): 74ff. For a comprehensive discussion of this debate, see Zimmermann/Graziano (2020).

[7] See Opielka (2008).

2. a *conservative* regime with a strong involvement of trade unions, catering to the middle class with statutory status-preserving social insurance schemes for insiders and low-level benefits for outsiders, and a church-related strong role of familialism; and

3. a *social-democratic* regime with high levels of decommodification, where the needs and tastes of the middle class also form the basis of the welfare system but rights and services are universally expanded to all societal groups. I have added

4. a *guarantist* regime with high levels of decommodification through an expansion of universal basic income entitlements but with medium employment guarantees. The focus here is on guaranteeing social, civil or human rights.

Following this, four types of social sustainability can be distinguished:

1. A *narrow understanding* of social sustainability as *social redistribution*: In this understanding, the social is conceived of as one of the three pillars of sustainability, namely as redistribution and conflict reduction and, at the same time, as antagonistical to a economically liberal interpretation of economic sustainability.[8] This perspective is prone to social-democratic/socialist politics. It interprets the genesis of the third, namely the social, pillar as a trade-unionist and left political program against the dominance of the economic, capital-oriented pillar. The discursive understanding of *social* thus corresponds to today's use in the sense of vertical distributive justice.[9]

2. An *internal understanding* of social sustainability as the *sustainability of the social*: This conception initially has little to do with ecology and the concept of sustainability commonly used today. It refers primarily to the social itself, to the preservation and reproduction of the social core systems of a society. This understanding comes close to a conservative political or regime principle, such as that advocated by the ordoliberal Freiburg School of Economics. It refers to a sustainable culture of wealth, for example by promoting family businesses or increasingly creating foundations, or to *good governance*, the long-term stability of institutions. The commons play a crucial role by linking both responsibility towards nature and towards the environment. Egoisms and short-term thinking threaten air, biodiversity, water, and natural beauty. Accounting for the social within a concrete smaller society as well as scaled up to world society means including the ecology of the social, encompassing nature as well as spiritual world heritage. In these rather conservative discourses, the concept of social sustainability applied attempts to avoid transforming institutions or redistribution processes. This perspective attempts to protect nature internally, i.e., within existing institutions, without changing society.

3. A *skeptical understanding* of social sustainability as the *sustainability of economic functionalities*: Like the internal understanding, this understanding of social sustain-

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[8] A telling example hereof is Senghaas-Knobloch (2009), also Jahrbuch (2007); somewhat attenuated, see Littig/Grießler (2005).

[9] In a classic study, Eckart Pankoke (1970) depicted the history of the German usage of the term and thus also the way the meaning of *social* changed over time.

ability is conceptualized as a matter of intergenerational justice, for example, by distributing the financial burdens of pension insurance between young and old, by limiting government debt (to achieve a fiscal "black zero") in fiscal policy terms or by preventing a growing demand for public investment in promoting sustainability through new (government) debt. This liberal type of politics or regime is skeptical towards social sustainability and often reacts with aversion and in a negative way; it is seldomly considered a positive concept in these discourses.

4. A *broad understanding* of social sustainability, in which the *social is understood as societal*, following the English usage: Social sustainability in this understanding is conceived of as a social, a transformational project. Discussions revolve around postgrowth society, around green growth and degrowth. In this *guarantist* policy or regime type, social sustainability is developed as an umbrella concept for the sustainability discussion. The term *guarantism* requires explanation: classical liberal/socialist/conservative – i.e., center/left/right – policy legitimations have been challenged by a global agenda of basic social rights that go beyond the triad of economical, ecological and social sustainability. Strong arguments suggest that democracies with appropriate policy structures develop an evolutionary dynamic toward basic social rights (especially direct democracy).[10] The guarantism regime type takes this dynamic into account. It is essentially based on human rights (Opielka 2008) and marks a strong understanding of social sustainability. It represents the antithesis to the skeptical, liberal understanding. Moreover, the Tableau of the Sustainable Development Goals and the UN's vote for a "holistic" policy change stand for a broad understanding of social sustainability (see also McGuinn et al. 2020).

Figure 1 presents the systematic representation of welfare regimes, to which the four conceptions of social sustainability are added. All four social sustainability conceptions contain substantial and future-oriented aspects. Although they are constructed politically and normatively, they are also analytical conceptions that allow for investigating how well social systems perform when governing society. The *narrow understanding* focuses on socio-economic conflicts that Thomas Piketty (2014) interprets as a process of global domination of capital returns over workers' incomes. In Germany, for example, in discussions about energy prices or (brown) coal mining, climate protection measures are discussed as having socially unequal effects and as threatening to exacerbate existing disadvantages. The *internal understanding*, in turn, counts heavily on community design options, mental changes (behavior, consumption) and technical innovations (Zimmer 2015); this politically rather conservative faction considers institutional changes as superfluous.[11] Likewise, the *skeptical (liberal) understanding* wants to avoid institutional changes and essentially relies on technological solutions for the sustainability problem. Finally, the *broad (guarantist) understanding* of social sustainability could become a guiding principle

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[10] Switzerland's increasingly civic foundation has led social policy researchers to classify its social policy as "soft guarantism" (Carigiet/Opielka 2006).

[11] In its communitaristic, socially empathic dimension, the conservative, internal understanding in terms of regime theory also has a left-wing or left-liberal expression and history (Opielka 2006).

for the encompassing sustainability discourse. Going beyond the social, societal, and institutional aspects of a transformation towards a more sustainable society, it highlights that a primarily technological or economic strategy misses the systemic character of the socio-ecological problem.

Table 1: Types of Welfare Regimes and Conceptions of Social Sustainability

	liberal	social-democratic	conservative	guarantist
Control / Governance:				
Market	central	marginal	marginal	marginal
State	marginal	central	subsidiary	subsidiary
Family/Community	marginal	marginal	central	medium
Human/Basic rights	medium–high	medium	marginal	central
Dominant form of the solidarity of the welfare state	individualistic	wage labor-centric	communitarian-etatist	Citizen status, universalistic
Full employment guarantee	weak	strong	medium	medium
Dominant form of Welfare state control	market/ economy	state	morality	ethics
Conceptions of social sustainability	skeptical	narrow	internal	broad
Empirical examples in social policy	USA	Sweden	Germany, Italy	Switzerland (*soft* guarantism)

Source: Opielka 2008:35, abridged and expanded to include the concepts of social sustainability.

A broad understanding of social sustainability aims at comprehensively reorganizing politics, as was done when the idea of the welfare state and the establishment of various forms of a welfare regime worldwide was successfully implemented in the 20th century. There is hope that the sustainability movement succeeds if it manages to demand and promote new institutions that systematically develop welfare state endeavors that reduce social inequalities and develop the present welfare state into a kind of eco-welfare regime, similar to the process that happened a century earlier as a result of the labor movement.

What is thematically at stake when talking about a broad understanding of social sustainability? Does the perception of problems change, and can analytical considerations for research be developed through this perspective? In a position paper, the German Science Council acknowledges the need to address "major societal challenges". Science policy actors understand this to refer mainly to climate change, global warming, and clean energy (WBGU 2015:15). The focus on the broad understanding of social sustainability allows for an additional parallel: the

transformative sustainability sciences at the beginning of the 21st century presumably fulfill a similar function as the social sciences did at the beginning of the 20th century. Sociology was the discipline to conceive of itself as a means for social reform and to handle the social issue as a class issue (Kaufmann 2014). The solution to the social question was the welfare state. More than a century later, the eco-social question will be answered, if things go well, with a global eco-welfare regime.

Strong vs. weak sustainability

To conclude these considerations: I argue that a sociologically based conceptualization culminates in the thesis that only a broad understanding of social sustainability adequately meets the present-day societal challenges. However, before elaborating on that, alternative conceptualizations will be considered. Armin Grunwald's (2016) *Understanding Sustainability* that has documented and discussed work on the concept and meaning of sustainable development, facilitates and underscores my argument. Two differentiations appear helpful here: one is the distinction between *strong* and *weak* sustainability, and the other between *integrative* and *strong* sustainability.

Strong sustainability refers to an approach that does not assume the mutual substitutability of resources and capital.[12] In contrast, the approaches of weak sustainability refer precisely to this substitutability – technology can replace nature, for example (Grunwald 2016:121). Such weak sustainability approaches are mainly represented in neoclassical economics. Philosophers, on the other hand, argue mainly based on principles and engage in justifying discourses. Down-to-earth issues do not affect their strong sustainability assumptions. The above-presented typology explains the conflict between weak and strong approaches in the sustainability discourse: weak approaches correspond to the more skeptical understanding of social sustainability. Those who focus on the market and the economy are convinced, if only for epistemological reasons, that basically all social phenomena can be reduced to market relations and thus to relations of exchange. The strong approaches are subsumed in the other three concepts of social sustainability presented above, depending on which additional political assumption prevails (whether it is rather socialist, conservative or guarantist). The *integrative* concept of sustainable development that Grunwald himself favors is more remarkable and theoretically sophisticated. It consists of three substantive elements: intra- and intergenerational justice, global orientation, and an anthropocentric approach (Grunwald 2016:94).

All three elements are relevant to conceptualize social sustainability in this article, even if – with the regime theory – a different, namely historical-systematic approach is chosen: the welfare regime theory approach advocated here encompasses both regulation and equity theory.

The three traditional regime concepts – liberal, social-democratic/socialist, conservative – all share the same problem: they present only very particularistic answers to intergenerational equity problems. Liberals think in terms of benefit calculations, socialists in terms of class utopias, and conservatives in terms of community particularisms. Therefore, the regime approach

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[12] See Opielka 2008, which follows the work of Esping-Andersen; for an early positioning of social policy in the ecological discourse, see Opielka 1985.

provides limited information for intergenerational justice thinking. Only the guarantistic approach – that implicitly underlies the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – seems to be substantively universalist in nature. As regards global orientation, the same holds true: sustainability must be thought of and pursued globally.

How normative is social sustainability?

In a report on current attempts to establish a "sociology of sustainability," Anna Henkel observes "the sociological skepticism towards sustainability from the point of view of normativity" (Henkel 2017: 308). It may be helpful for non-sociologists to know that this sociological skepticism has always applied to social policy: social policy was considered social reform, as (lecture) socialist, or – when considered as a science – it was not only applied and therefore inferior, but also sociology's normative and thus dirty little sibling, like social work. Here, too, Max Weber said what needed to be said almost a century ago in his essay on "the 'objectivity' of social-scientific and socio-political knowledge" (Weber 1988a). Norms and values can and must, of course, themselves be subject of sociological research, and not only as residues in people's subjective consciousness, as is the case in attitude research, but as a central element of institutional order. The sociological movement of *neo-institutionalism* rightly points this out (Opielka 2007).

Sociological skepticism regarding social sustainability or sustainability in general is therefore just as inappropriate as it is regarding the economy, politics, Europe, or the family. These are all social phenomena, some more structural-institutional, others more action-related. They can, of course, have normative significance; one can, for example, hate or love Europe, but that does not change the fact that it exists, and be it as an idea only. A holistic view always means an – at the same time – action- and system-theoretical, empirical, and theoretical view on social sustainability. Moreover, without this encompassing sociological focus, without the expertise of a discipline that wants to think and understand the whole of society, the discussion about sustainability withers.

A sociology of sustainability can easily establish that such an opposition of normativity and factuality has never been relevant; rather, their interpenetration has been and is typical. The SDGs demonstrate this in an excellent way: they are supposed to have an incentive effect as goals, as normatives (Kani/Biermann 2017), which is extremely challenging given the complexity of the socio-ecological objectives and their interactions (ICSU 2017). Whether the SDGs have governance potential and what intentions guide political and other actors who take up the banner of sustainability or social sustainability is not evident without research. Sociology has identified sustainability as a research topic, and climate change is recognized as a social and no longer primarily a scientific problem (Dunlap/Brulle 2017). It is time to familiarize sociology, especially social policy, with this issue.

Some concrete elements of a sustainable social policy

This article has so far focused on considerations regarding fundamental questions of a social policy oriented towards social sustainability. Sustainability's main focus on climate protection

and climate policy should not neglect issues such as biodiversity or resource sustainability. In the following, some elements of sustainable social policy will be presented.

The introduction and expansion of CO2 pricing has become established as a central regulatory instrument for reducing the use of fossil energy. The socio-political relevance of this consumption tax is evident. It increases the costs of mobility and housing as well as of numerous other material consumer goods, and a strong upward trend is foreseeable. The distributional conflicts associated with this trend have mobilized protest movements (e.g., the French Yellow Vests), as well as right-wing and left-wing populist actors. Some welfare states have therefore developed regulatory models to refund CO2 taxes to citizens in full or in relevant amounts on a flat-rate basis to maintain the incentive effect of the taxes and at the same time avoid socio-economic upheavals. While in Germany, for example, the so-called *energy money* (*Energiegeld*) has become a debated issue in party-political competition, some countries such as Switzerland have already developed suitable instruments (Deutscher Bundestag 2018). In Switzerland, the federal government has levied a CO2 tax on fossil fuels such as heating oil or natural gas in 2008. The Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) ensures that the environmental levy is distributed to all insured persons via health insurers. In 2021, 87 Swiss Francs (~€83) were repaid per person from the returns of the environmental levies (CO2 levy and volatile organic compounds levy), totaling CHF753 million (~€721MM). The public justification for this instrument is interesting from a socio-political perspective: "Distribution via the health insurers is the simplest way for redistribution. They have the most up-to-date register of residents in Switzerland since basic insurance is compulsory for everyone."[13] The sociopolitical system of a (guarantist) citizens' insurance thus proves to be both technically and legitimately suitable to socially cushion the costs of environmental levies, especially for poorer people. Germany lacks a comparable structure, since social insurance in the conservatively corporatized welfare state does not cover all citizens, while at the same time there is no obligation for relevant population groups (especially pensioners) to file income tax returns.

Against this background, it is surprising that leading social policy researchers, such as Frank Nullmeier, deputy director of the German Institute for Social Policy Research (DIFIS) founded in 2021, suggests the "creation of an eco-social insurance as a sixth pillar of the German social insurance system" (Nullmeier 2021:122) to bring together the social policy and climate policy fields. The details of this proposal are quite complicated; Nullmeier discusses the variants of a "climate protection impact insurance" and an "ecological damage insurance". The fundamental question is, of course, whether the system of employment-oriented social insurance remains suitable for solving universal problems affecting all citizens. Not only in Germany, but especially because of its Bismarckian tradition (see Nullmeier & Rüb 1993), employment-based social insurance is defended as a class compromise. The idea of learning from the Swiss system of a particular kind of citizens' insurance for sickness and pensions continues to meet with reformist skepticism. Nullmeier does hint that the German social insurance system could also be developed towards a citizens' insurance, but it remains merely a hint. A first attempt to reflect and micro-economically simulate a fundamental reform of the German welfare state architecture, including the idea of a basic income, was the Future Laboratory Schleswig-Holstein of the so-

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[13]   See   https://www.bafu.admin.ch/bafu/de/home/themen/klima/fachinformationen/verminderungsmassnahmen/co2-abgabe/rueckverteilung/umweltabgabe-rueckverteilung-2021.html (Retrieved 2022/04/19).

called political Jamaica coalition[14] of the federate state of Schleswig-Holstein (Opielka 2019, Opielka/Peter 2020).

Nullmeier's contribution has been published in a valuable volume devoted to a sustainable orientation of social policy (see Rodenhäuser et al. 2021).[15] In her contribution, Katharina Bohnenberger (2021) develops six criteria of a sustainable social policy while avoiding this guarantist problem: meeting needs, participation and distribution, compliance with ecological limits, free choice of lifestyle, economic feasibility and independence of growth, and incentives for transformation.[16] Philippe Van Parijs, perhaps the most prominent contemporary proponent of the idea of a basic income, critically examines whether the serious consequential costs of the COVID-19 pandemic reduce the chances of basic income reform to be implemented worldwide. He opposes a socio-political attitude of wishful thinking and finds strong arguments why a universal and reliable guarantee of the subsistence minimum increases the chances for ecological governance (Parijs 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic also plays a role in Nullmeier's contribution: he problematizes the "police constitution of infection protection" (Nullmeier 2021:115) that is not only characteristic for Germany, and strongly pleas for transferring infection protection to social insurance law and thus to social policy. He rightly sees a connection between infection control and climate protection "as policies to protect against 'socio-natural' risks, i.e., risks based precisely on the close link between society and nature" (Nullmeier 2021:110). However, whether the (German) system of work-related social insurance is suitable for this risk management rather reinforces our doubts for the field of health policy as long as it lacks universalism. The Austrian discussion of a so-called "climate social policy" seems on the whole more critical of the Bismarckian social policy tradition cultivated in Germany, which relies on conservative status protection and wage-labor centricity (Die Armutskonferenz et al. 2021).

Conclusion

Social policy research seems well advised to strengthen comparative and evaluative projects that examine the performance of universalistic and rather particularistic social systems in a policy-relevant and indicator-based way. The popularity and relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals and their implementation could strengthen the community of social policy research and fulfill Hans Achinger's demand to understand "social policy as social policy" (Achinger 1979) on a more complex level. From the perspective of both research and policy traditions, the connection between environmental, – currently especially – climate policy, and social policy

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[14] The Jamaica coalition consists of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Green Party.

[15] See also the International Research & Policy Network on Sustainable Welfare: https://www.researchgate.net/project/International-Research-Policy-Network-on-Sustainable-Welfare (Retrieved 2022/04719). For further references, see Zimmermann/Graziano (2020).

[16] In a former text, she was still very much in favor of a gain-centered social policy and against the idea of a basic income, see Bohnenberger/Fritz 2020.

that we have addressed with the conceptual umbrella of *social sustainability* in this article, has surprisingly been little worked on. We therefore venture an outlook with some questions:[17]

– How can the present public and scientific debate productively discuss the opposing contrasts between green growth and post-growth?
– Are there other essential instruments for linking climate and environmental policy and social policy, beyond the per capita reimbursement of revenues from CO2 pricing or their use to reduce the Renewable Energy Act (*Erneuerbare-Energien-Gesetz (EEG)*) levy?
– Which individuals and institutions need to be brought together to develop a sufficiently specified discussion agenda?
– Which thematic priorities should be prioritized to explore the link between climate and environmental and social policy in all their major sub-fields?
– Which executive and administrative contexts of federal policy and – if applicable – of lower-level policies in Germany, and which policies from comparable contexts such as Switzerland and Austria and generally from the EU, offer successful and critical experiences regarding the interface between climate and environmental policy and social policy?
– Do such experiences also exist in the cooperation of subordinate authorities and research institutions?
– To what extent can (accelerated) digitalization optimize such interfaces at the level of empirically-based research, decision-making, and evaluation?

The conclusion of the article is thus a call for further research. This is quite usual. For such a serious *topic of the century*, however, it is also unpleasant. Especially in the foreseeable post-pandemic phase, the enormous burdens of the COVID-related deficits on public budgets are likely to massively restrict the scope of an inclusive social policy. This will largely eliminate the scope of a social policy oriented toward redistributing growth gains. At the same time, the globalized and finance-focused economy maximizes income and above all wealth of the very wealthy. Having everyone tighten their belt will therefore only be possible through massive populist mobilization alongside probable collateral effects on precarious groups. Social sustainability is likely to prove being a complicated problem that requires new arenas of problem setting and problem solving. In this paper, I have argued in favor of a solution of mixed universalism, termed *guarantism*, that focuses social policy on participation and identifies modern digital and smart pathways to achieve it.

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