The individual, the community, society, civil society – who is the subject of sustainable development?

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Thesis 1: In the discourse on sustainable development in general and on ecosystem services in particular society is conceived as subject.

Evidence from the literature

WCED, Our Common Future, 1987, Ch. 2, I, 6: „(…) Sustainable development requires that societies meet human needs both by increasing productive potential and by ensuring equitable opportunities for all.“

G.C. Daily, Introduction to „Nature‘s Services“, 1997, p. 1: „In the space of a single human lifetime, society finds itself suddenly confronted with a daunting complex of trade-offs between some of its most important activities and ideals. Recent trends raise disturbing questions about the extent to which today‘s people may be living at the expense of their descendents, casting doubt upon the cherished goal that each successive generation will have greater prosperity.“
Thesis 2: Although society is acknowledged as the subject of sustainable development, sociological knowledge on society, social change and societal development is widely ignored in the discourse.

Why is sociological knowledge widely ignored?

- In general, sociologists keep in distance to natural scientists, because they assume that their research object is completely different than nature.
- The problems of sociology to define their own research object conveys a premature picture of this science.

Why is sociological knowledge important?

- It helps to understand success and failure in exploring trends towards a sustainable development of society.
Outline

1. Concepts of Society and Societal Development

2. Knowledge on the Evolution of Societies for Sustainable Land Management

3. Avoiding Failures by Understanding Societal Development
1.

Concepts of Society and Societal Development
The Two Sociological Perspectives on Social Relations – The Individualistic Tradition

- This perspective is focussing individual persons as (more or less) rational and/or emotional decision makers who are acting upon the world.

- Actors build up relations with each other; positive social relations and/or a shared goal can stimulate collective action.

- Collective action may result in agreements on rules that limit the possibilities for future decision-making and bind the individuals together.
The Two Sociological Perspectives on Social Relations – The Relationistic Tradition

- In this perspective individuals are conceptualised as socialised actors, since men always evolve in social relations.

- Social relations are structured by rules and routines which are defining the situation for actors and shaping their interests and strategic options.

- During a socialisation process an actor learns rules and routines in a specific situation by imitating already socialised actors. However, the creativity of men can lead to transform these rules and routines.
The Concept of Society in the Relationistic Tradition

- The sum of the normative patterns of interaction of a population are considered as a society.

- Societies structure the life of its members from birth until death and provide the chances they have during their span of life.

- Societies convey normative patterns from one generation to the next. Each generation as well as each individual member has to conduct to the (explicit or implicit) requirements of these patterns to express how things should or ought to be.

- Although a society has an eminent impact on the actions of their members, it is only one influence among others.
Society and other influences on acting (and decision-making)

Acting

Telic system

Society/ social norms

Physico-chemical system

Biological system
Social Change and Societal Development

- All these different systems interact while we act. The outcome of this process can conform with the actual existing rules and routines or it can be deviant.

- If somebody acts deviant, he/she can be corrected by other actors, like a child that learns how to dress its clothes properly.

- However, he/she can also institutionalise a new rule or routine, whenever the deviant pattern advances a specific societal aspect.

- Societies can learn (J. Habermas, K. Eder). The conceptual framework of the relationistic tradition helps to reconstruct historical processes of societal learning.
2. Knowledge on the Evolution of Societies for Sustainable Land Management
How Can Knowledge on the Evolution of Societies Support Sustainable Land Management? The Lüneburg Heath as a Case Study

The Lüneburg Heath is a large area of heath, geest and woodland in the northeastern part of the state of Lower Saxony in northern Germany. It has extensive areas of heathland typically covered by *Calluna vulgaris* and inherits rare animal and plant species.

However, the heath is not a natural landscape, but the product of an unsustainable style of living. Already horticultural and agrarian socities formed it by over-grazing of the once widespread forests on the poor sandy soils.

Since economic structures changed and heathland farming died out at the end of the 19th century, the question today is how to sustain this landscape and its species.
Knowledge on the Evolution of Societies

Segmentary Societies

Intermediate Societies

Modern Societies
## Stages of Societal Evolution

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<td>Religion, Incest Taboo, Language, (primitive) Technology</td>
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</table>
Societal Drivers of the Development of the Lüneburg Heath - The Segmentary Society

- Landscape developed over a long period of time;

- Periods when the heathlands spread and dominated the scene alternated with periods when only small areas of heathland existed.

- The segmentary societies were not attached to a certain place. After they cleared the land by fire, they could use it for the cultivation of crops only for a short time, because the soil degraded quickly.

- Land management: The settlements moved frequently and woods elsewhere were cleared.

- Low population density.
Societal Drivers of the Development of the Lüneburg Heath – The Intermediate Society

- A continuous reduction in the woodlands and a considerable increase of heathland can be shown by the pollen analysis not until after 1000 AD.

- The crucial driver is the emergence of the Frankish Empire as an agrarian society:

- Christianity as a cultural legitimation for a centralised state authority, an established structure of social classes and an upcoming bureaucracy take control of the population.

- Rural settlements became permanent.

- To farm the land more intensively, people invented the typical heath farming economy, which led to the heathland spreading.
Societal Drivers of the Development of the Lüneburg Heath – Trends towards Modernity

- The abolition of serfdom started in 1833 in the Kingdom of Hanover.

- Heathland areas that were common land for the villages were divided amongst the individual farmers.

- Sheep farming declined and heathland farming died out at the end of the 19th century. Farmers sold their land to Prussia or the Hanover monastic chamber, who afforested the land with pines. As a result the area of heath was drastically reduced.

- The Romantic movement inspired a positive assessment of the aesthetics of heathland. Civic engagement for the preservation of the endangered landscape emerged.

- In 1933 the Lüneburg Heath was designated as an official nature reserve.
Features of the Modern Situation

- The normative idea of modernity is that the individual members of society shape their living conditions. Civil society is a concept to remind the members of modern societies that they are responsible for shaping their living conditions actively.

- Modern societies are characterised by differentiated subsystems which unfold rule-based rational control of the world. They are functioning rationalized, which means they are influencing actions based on considerations of efficiency and calculation rather than on motivations derived from morality or emotionality.

- The subsystems of modern societies operate independent of civic engagement.
3.

Avoiding Failures by Understanding Societal Development
How to deal with the current situation?

(1.) Let's do it like our ancestors.

- Determine the adaptive problem of a societal structure.
- Describe the problem.
- Think carefully about solutions. Try thought experiments.
- Find a solution.

(2.) Who is responsible? We/the civil society.

- Scientists have an enormous influence on shaping the world. They invented pesticides, but they also described the risks and dangers of pesticides.
- The normative structure of the modern society encourages everybody to contribute his ideas and skills to shape our living conditions.

(3.) Under modern conditions governance for sustainability can only be legitimised by deliberative and participative processes.
In a globalised world endeavours towards sustainable development and adaptive management should be aware of the fact that different societal orders exist contemporaneously.
Thank you very much for your attention!

Jens Jetzkowitz