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Governance by Diffusion – Implementing Global Norms Through Cross-National Imitation and Learning

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Abstract

Implementing international norms is a core aspect of global governance. It raises the question of whether, and through which mechanisms, developments at the international level can influence domestic policymaking. While students of global governance have placed much emphasis on processes of bargaining within international regimes and hegemonic coercion by individual states or international organizations to explain how international agendas reach the domestic level, this paper argues that diffusion constitutes a third and distinct mode of global governance which has not received due attention so far. The paper first outlines the concept of policy diffusion and distinguishes it from other mechanisms of global governance. It draws on theories on the domestic effects of international norms and institutions developed within the field of international relations as well as theories of policy diffusion and policy transfer developed within comparative public policy. Based on an empirical analysis of the international spread of national environmental policy plans and sustainable development strategies, the paper then demonstrates how cross-national imitation and learning matters as a mechanism of implementing the global norm of sustainable development and how these processes of policy diffusion interact with other, more institutionalized, forms of international governance such as unilateral imposition and multilateral harmonization. The paper concludes with general perspectives on the theoretical as well as practical consequences of conceptualizing policy diffusion as a crucial component of global governance and on its potential as a mechanism for implementing sustainable development.

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1   Introduction

Implementing international norms is a core aspect of global governance. It raises the central question of whether, and through which mechanisms, developments at the international level can influence domestic policymaking. Scholars of global governance have placed much emphasis on processes of multilateral negotiating within international regimes and unilateral coercion by individual states or international organizations to explain how international agendas reach the domestic level. Drawing from an empirical case study on the national implementation of sustainable development, this paper argues that cross-national diffusion constitutes a third and distinct mode of global governance which has not received due attention so far.

The first section of this paper analyses the distinctive characteristics of the concept of sustainable development and what this means for its implementation. The second part introduces the concept of policy diffusion as one of three analytically distinct mechanisms of global governance. It draws on theories of the domestic effects of international norms and institutions developed within the field of international relations as well as theories of policy diffusion and policy transfer developed within public policy. Section three briefly links the typology of governance mechanisms proposed in this paper to the findings of other related theoretical debates. Through an empirical case study on the international spread of national environmental policy plans and strategies for sustainable development, the fourth section demonstrates how cross-national imitation and learning matters as a mechanism for implementing the global norm of sustainable development and how these processes of policy diffusion interact with other, more institutionalized, forms of international governance. The paper concludes with general perspectives on the theoretical as well as practical consequences of conceptualizing policy diffusion as a crucial component of global governance and on its potential as a mechanism for implementing sustainable development.

2   Sustainable Development:
An International Norm for National Implementation

Unlike many other norms which have begun as domestic norms and have become international through the efforts of policy entrepreneurs of various kinds (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 893), the concept of sustainable development is genuinely international in nature, meaning that its origins cannot be tracked down to any national programme or political discourse. It was developed within the United Nations system by the Brundtland Commission and introduced into the political debate through the publication of the Commission's 1987 report *Our Common Future*.[1] A guideline for political action, sustainable development is therefore brought to national gov-

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[1] According to the standard definition of the Brundtland Commission, 'sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987: 43) See, however, the discussion of this definition in Lafferty (2004).

ernments 'from the outside in' (Lafferty, 2004).[2] In addition to being genuinely international, sustainable development is a strongly normative concept 'used to prescribe and evaluate changes in living conditions' (Lafferty, 1996: 189). It thus corresponds to what scholars have termed a 'prescriptive' or 'evaluative' norm, setting basic standards of appropriate behavior for states and organizations as well as individuals.[3]

Through a series of international conferences, the most influential of which were the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (UNCED) and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (WSSD); through the translation of its normative content into a set of more specified rules and guidelines as in the global action plan Agenda 21; and through the setting up of new international bodies such as the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, the concept of sustainable development has over the last decade and a half become successfully institutionalized at the international level. International institutionalization is, however, only a first and far from sufficient step in the process of making this concept operational. The necessary next step is the effective implementation of sustainable development at the level of the nation state, that is, the translation of this set of globally anchored prescriptions into domestic policymaking (OECD, 2001a).[4]

In theoretical terms this challenge of implementing sustainable development 'from the outside in' raises the more general question of whether and how the international agenda can influence or determine domestic agendas. This touches upon core questions of global governance: How do international norms reach the domestic arena? Through which mechanisms do they affect the interests and preferences of national actors (Checkel, 1999; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Cortell and Davis, 1996)?[5] If, as James Rosenau argues, global governance is 'about the maintenance of collective order, the achievement of collective goals, and the collective processes of rule through which order and goals are sought' (Rosenau, 2000: 175), then the question of domestic implementation of sustainable development constitutes a crucial touchstone for the effectiveness of global governance in general, or, in other words, for the international system's capacity to govern itself.

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2   Although an early predecessor of sustainable development can be found in the physical concept of 'sustainability' as traditionally used in German forestry, this older idea was concerned only with the maintainability of national resources and lacked the dimensions of human welfare and social equity introduced by the Brundtland Report (Lafferty, 1996).

3   For a systematic distinction of regulative, constitutive and prescriptive norms, see Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 251-252).

4   For a systematic analysis of early national efforts to implement sustainable development, see Lafferty and Meadowcroft (2000) as well as the five case studies in OECD (2002).

5   This 'top-down' perspective fits well into an emerging theoretical and empirical literature in international relations and Europeanization studies which focuses on the domestic effects of international norms and institutions (Martin and Simmons, 1998) or asks how 'European integration and Europeanization (...) affect domestic policies, politics, and polities of the member states and beyond?' (Börzel and Risse, 2003).

3   Three Mechanisms of Global Governance

The term governance has emerged within international relations studies in the course of the 1980s and has become increasingly popular during the 1990s. Basically global governance means 'the formal and informal bundle of rules, roles and relationships that define and regulate the social practices of states and nonstate actors in international affairs' (Slaughter, Tulumello and Wood, 1998: 371); or, even more broadly, 'the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs' (Commission for Global Governance, 1995: 2). While in definitional terms many scholars today agree on such a broad understanding (Rosenau, 1992), in practice international or global governance is often used as more or less synonymous with the narrower notion of international regimes (Young, 1997: 5-6; Smouts, 1998). Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986: 759) pointed this out already in the mid-1980s, and Martin and Simmons have more recently described the regimes movement as 'an effort to substitute an understanding of international organization with an understanding of international governance' (Martin and Simmons, 1998: 737). This widespread practice of equating governance with regimes is, however, problematic in conceptual terms and is not fully supported by empirical evidence.

International regimes, characterized as deliberately constructed 'social institutions consisting of agreed upon principles, norms, rules, procedures and programmes that govern the interactions of actors in specific issue areas' (Levy, Young and Zürn, 1995: 274; see also Krasner, 1983: 2; Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger, 2000: 3), are conceptually too narrow to grasp all possible mechanisms through which international political factors affect domestic policymaking. Four arguments may serve to substantiate this claim.

First, non-state actors play a more important role in global governance than the concept of international regimes can convincingly account for.[6] While attempts recently have been made to model the role of non-state actors within international regimes (Arts, 2000), these attempts obviously do not aim to theorize their importance *outside* international institutions.

Second, the notion, stressed especially in neo-institutionalist accounts, that regimes are negotiated (Rittberger, 1993; Keohane, 1983, 1984) or 'deliberately constructed' (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger, 2000: 3) excludes important instances of international policy coordination which occur in the absence of multilateral cooperation. The argument put forth here is that both bilateral coercion and cross-national diffusion are important mechanisms of global policy coordination which are insufficiently accounted for in the regime concept.

Third, the notion that regimes include the complete set of general principles and norms as well as specific rules and procedures implies a relatively high degree of international institutionalization in a given issue area. However, as research on international norm dynamics has revealed,

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[6]   On the importance of non-state actors in international politics, see for example Keck and Sikkink (1998) and Risse-Kappen (1995).

institutionalization is not a necessary precondition for international agendas to affect domestic decision-making (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 260). Global norms and principles can become influential domestically without first being spelled out in specific rules and procedures. Global governance, therefore, does not exclusively occur through international regimes.

Finally, in certain fields of global politics – especially those connected with North-South relationships such as development assistance – there is no single set of principles, norms and rules around which the expectations of all actors converge[7] (Smouts, 1998: 86-87). Rather, one group of actors imposes its principles and rules upon another group of actors. Convergence then does not occur at the level of expectations, or – as constructivists might argue – at the level of interests and preferences, but merely at the level of formal policy-outputs.

If international regimes are only one – albeit a crucial – mechanism of global governance, then what other pathways exist through which international processes can lead to domestic policy change? Empirical research on the international sources of domestic environmental politics across a large number of policy innovations and an ample set of countries has revealed that international stimuli can generally influence domestic politics through three analytically distinct mechanisms: multilateral harmonization, unilateral imposition, and cross-national diffusion (Busch and Jörgens, 2003). These mechanisms differ in a number of important ways, notably with regard to the underlying mode of operation, the level of obligation they involve[8], and the specific motivations of national policymakers[9] (see Table 1). While the impact of harmonization and imposition on domestic policymaking has been studied to some extent within international, comparative and European studies[10], the functioning of diffusion as a governance mechanism stands only at the beginning of being systematically explored.[11] In the following, therefore, harmonization and imposition will be treated more briefly, whereas the motivations of policymakers

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[7]   This is Krasner's classical definition of international regimes as 'sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations' (Krasner, 1983: 2).

[8]   Obligation is understood in a formal sense. It 'means that states or other actors are bound by a rule or commitment or by a set of rules or commitments' (Abbott et al., 2000: 401).

[9]   The term 'policymakers' refers to a 'heterogeneous collection of officials and organizations concerned with one or more policy areas' (Rose, 1993: 52).

[10] Research on international regimes or international institutions more broadly has for long been central to the study of international relations (Simmons and Martin, 2002). In the environmental field recent systematic studies on regime effectiveness and compliance with multilateral agreements in the environmental field include Miles et al. (2001), Haas, Keohane and Levy (1993) and Brown Weiss and Jacobson (2000). Reviews of the literature can be found, for example, in Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger (1997, 2000) and Levy, Young and Zürn (1995). Unilateral imposition or coercive transfer of norms, rules and procedures has been critically analysed in the literature on conditionality in development assistance. More recently, the role of environmental conditionality in development aid politics has been systematically explored (see several of the contributions in Keohane and Levy, 1996). Phenomena of unilateral imposition have also been studied in relation to the process of Eastern Enlargement of the European Union and the conditions that Central and Eastern European countries have to fulfil before being granted EU membership (see, for example, Grabbe, 2002; Tews, 2002, 2003).

[11] The idea that diffusion could be understood as a governance mechanism in its own right was first expressed by Kristine Kern (2000: 249). Subsequent diffusion studies in the environmental field have repeated this claim (Kern, Jörgens and Jänicke, 2001: 3-4; Jörgens, 2001: 124-125; Tews and Busch, 2002), but to date no comprehensive and systematic effort has been made to theorize diffusion as a distinct mechanism of global governance and to explore its relationship and interaction with other governance mechanisms.

to engage in processes of policy diffusion and the factors that promote or hinder the global spread of policy innovations will be explored in greater detail.

Table 1: Three Mechanisms of Global Governance

	Harmonization	*Imposition*	*Diffusion*
Mode of operation	Multilateral cooperation and decision-making	Unilateral conditionality (political or economic)	Decentral imitation, persuasion/learning
Level of obligation	Medium to high	High	Low
Principal motivations of national policymakers	– Address trans-boundary problems – Avoid trade distortions	– Join existing international organizations or treaties – Obtain financial or technical aid	– Search for solution to domestic problems – Reduce uncertainty – Avoid negative externalities of other states' actions – Gain internal and external legitimacy
Principal driving force	Interest	Power	Knowledge

3.1   Harmonization

As used here the term 'harmonization' means the conscious modification of internal policies by governments committed to multilateral standards which they have had a hand in drafting (Howlett, 2000: 308). It is roughly identical with regime governance as it relates to the formulation and implementation of multilateral agreements within international regimes as well as to the implementation of decisions taken within supranational organizations such as the European Union. Unlike imposition and diffusion, harmonization involves the deliberate and cooperative attempt by a particular set of countries to solve problems which they are collectively confronted with. The sources and targets of governance are therefore broadly identical. The principal motivations for states to engage in processes of international harmonization are to address collective, typically transboundary, problems which cannot be solved by any one country alone; or to standardize different national regulations in order to reduce barriers to the free movement of people, capital and goods and avoid trade distortions. While states are free to engage in multilateral decision-making and, if they choose, to have an active influence on the outcomes, once an agreement is reached, they are more or less strongly obliged to comply and to implement the agreement in their national context.[12] As Diane Stone argues, harmonization involves some sacrifice of national autonomy and sovereignty (Stone, 2001).

The level of formal obligation involved in harmonization processes is therefore relatively high. It is highest in EC law, due to the supremacy of European over national law and its enforcement

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[12] Normally international accords only come into force after having been ratified by a predefined amount of signatory states. Similarly for individual states they only become effective after these states have ratified the treaty.

by the European Court of Justice, and, to a slightly lesser degree, in binding international ac-cords: Non-binding international commitments (declarations, and programmes of action, in the 'soft-law' category (Shelton, 2000)), involve, on the other hand, only intermediary levels of for-mal obligation.[13]

3.2   Imposition

Imposition occurs when individual states, international organizations or private actors use asymmetric power relationships to dictate their policies to other states. It involves one country being intentionally forced to adopt the policies favored by another country, by an international organization or by a private actor, for example a transnational corporation. While military coer-cion is a very rare phenomenon and plays virtually no role in 'low' politics like environmental protection or sustainable development[14]; economic or political conditionality – as used in devel-opment assistance or in the process of European Union enlargement – are more common forms of imposition. Like harmonization, imposition involves a high level of obligation as states formally commit themselves to implement externally prescribed policies. It differs from harmoni-zation in that the principal motivations of the sources and targets of governance no longer coin-cide. While international organizations basically aim to export their fundamental values and principles or their preferred solutions for particular problems, importing countries are interested primarily in material or political gains such as monetary assistance, access to international trea-ties, or membership in exclusive 'clubs' like the European Union. Usually importing countries have little or no influence on the design of the policies that are being imposed upon them.

3.3   Diffusion

Finally diffusion, in Everett Rogers' influential definition, refers to 'the process by which an inno-vation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of the social system' (Rogers, 1995: 5). It is a process of imitation or learning where information about inno-vative practices in one setting affects policy choices in another (Simmons and Elkins, 2003). Contrary to harmonization and imposition, diffusion occurs in the absence of formal or contrac-tual obligation as no formal commitments towards other governments or international organiza-tions exist to implement a certain policy.[15] The main rationale of diffusion lies in the fact that actors tend to place excessive importance on information that is readily available, thus favoring policies that are already in place in other countries over those policy options that have not yet been adopted elsewhere (Weyland, 2002). Like the related concepts of 'emulation' (Hoberg,

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[13] Note that the degree of obligation is not a measure of effectiveness. The growing concern about EC directives which in spite of being characterized by a high level of obligation are often not implemented properly by the member states illustrates this.

[14] This does not mean that the use of military force plays no role in the fight for scarce natural resources.

[15] Note that 'diffusion', as the term is used in this paper, is not identical with the broader notions of 'spread' or 'proliferation'. Diffusion, understood as the non-compulsory use of foreign exemplars in domestic policymaking, is only one possible cause of the international spread of policy innovations. Other important causes that are identified in this paper include harmoniza-tion and imposition, but also individual national problem pressures such as environmental degradation.

1991) and 'policy transfer' (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, 2000), policy diffusion involves 'the recognition of foreign exemplars and their incorporation into new or existing policies' (Howlett, 2000: 308). However, while emulation and policy transfer relate to individual cases, diffusion, as generally used in political science, comprises the sum of many cases of policy emulation with regard to a given policy innovation. Often, these individual processes are only loosely connected. In other words, diffusion processes become manifest only through the accumulation of individual cases of imitation or lesson-drawing regarding one and the same policy innovation. Its decentralized and unconnected nature – where the policies of one country can be influential in shaping the policies of another without the country of origin even noticing it – sharply distinguishes diffusion from harmonization and, although to a lesser degree, from imposition.[16]

3.3.1 Causes of Policy Diffusion

National policymakers emulate other countries' policies for various reasons. They may act in a rational and problem-oriented manner by looking across national borders for effective solutions to pressing domestic problems. This is what Richard Rose (1991, 1993) has labelled 'lesson-drawing'.[17] In situations where domestic actors face great uncertainties about the likelihood of present policy alternatives to bring about their preferred future outcomes, they may model their own policy choices on those of countries which are generally perceived as being successful. This is, in essence, what DiMaggio and Powell (1983: 151-152) refer to as 'mimetic isomorphism'. Especially at early stages of a diffusion process, state policymakers may also be actively persuaded by other state or non-state actors – such as other states, international organizations, transnational NGOs or participants in inter- or transnational professional networks – to adopt policies that are practised by only a small number of pioneering states (Finnemore, 1993; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Haas, 1992). During the later stages of diffusion processes, when a policy innovation has already been adopted by a fair amount of states[18], the importance of argumentative persuasion or the search for effective solutions to given problems as stimuli for political action may become secondary. Other motivations, such as international pressures for conformity, the attempt of political elites to increase the legitimacy of their actions, and their desire to enhance their self-esteem within an international society structured by emerging normative standards of appropriate behavior, may then become increasingly important (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 895, 902-904).

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[16] Presumably it is this decentralized character, where patterns of global governance are not intentionally produced within international institutions or by powerful nation-states but emerge gradually from a succession of individual actions, which has caused a general reluctance on the part of many scholars to conceive of diffusion as a governance mechanism in its own right.

[17] Although in practice there may be some overlap, analytically it differs from problem-oriented harmonization in that the problems at cause are perceived to be domestic rather than transboundary.

[18] Finnemore and Sikkink speak of a 'critical mass' of countries (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; see also Kern et al., 2001: 10-11).

Moreover, competition among states and the desire to avoid future economic or political disadvantages or adjustment costs may motivate states to imitate the actions of their primary competitors. *Political* competition occurs when states struggle to shape policy developments at the international level in accordance with their national policy patterns and regulatory traditions in order to minimize the costs of political and economic adjustment to upcoming binding regulations (Héritier, Knill and Mingers, 1996; Andersen and Liefferink, 1997; Kern, Jörgens and Jänicke, 2001: 4-5). In the shadow of future international regulations, there thus often evolves an international dynamic where states race to adopt national regulations which are directed towards the same policy problem; but which may differ with regard to administrative and technological details or with regard to the scope or ambition of policy goals.

The result is an often rapid emergence of numerous national regulations in a given problem area. Although these national approaches differ in scope or administrative detail, in their sum they form a global regulatory structure which in turn increases the prospect of international harmonization or further diffusion. Due to the higher probability of binding international regulations, political competition can be expected to be more frequent in institutionally thick environments such as the European Union or – taking into account the considerable geographic overlap – the entire OECD-world.

By contrast *economic* competition may be more likely within institutionally 'thin' international environments or issue areas where formal political authority rests largely with the nation state and has not been handed over to supranational or international institutions. Economic competition occurs when the increasing international economic integration and the mobility of trade and capital flows create pressures 'to modify regulatory policies in order to sustain or improve national competitiveness in a global economy' (Tews, Busch and Jörgens, 2003: 572; Holzinger and Knill, 2003). The result may be a 'race to the bottom', where countries lower their regulatory standards in order to avoid capital flight (Drezner, 2001a: 57-58). In practice, however, this process may be more complex, involving changes in policy instruments rather than directly lowering standards of environmental or social protection. An illustrative example can be found in the field of environmental protection, where it has proven almost impossible to lower emission standards once reached (Vogel, 1997: 558). Instead direct and legally binding regulations by national governments are being increasingly complemented or even substituted by softer instruments such as voluntary agreements between government and polluters or by unilateral self-commitments of polluting industries (De Clercq, 2002). In the wake of this change of instrument it becomes easier to set less ambitious policy goals or relax monitoring requirements, and thus de facto lower the environmental standards domestic industries have to comply with. Often such indirect weakening of environmental standards occurs through, and is justified by, the emulation of widely acknowledged foreign models such as the Dutch negotiated agreements ('covenants'), or of concepts advocated by international organizations like the OECD. Rather than inventing completely new approaches to environmental protection, countries thus

often tend to imitate the policy changes introduced by their primary competitors in order to relax their own environmental and social protection standards.

However, instead of inducing a 'race to the bottom', the result of economic competition may also be a 'race to the top' where countries seek to emulate new and ambitious programmes at an early stage of their international diffusion in order to secure 'first-mover advantages' and not lag behind other states (Porter and van der Linde, 1995). In addition national policymakers may be encouraged by their domestic industries to raise regulatory standards to the level of the more strictly regulated markets. The reason behind this is that international firms will in any case have to meet the standards of the most highly regulated markets if they want to sell their products there. Instead of manufacturing products with different environmental properties for different markets, they may be interested in harmonizing product standards at the level of the most highly regulated market in order to be able to produce similar products for all markets at overall lower costs (Vogel, 1997: 561-563).

3.3.2   Determinants of Policy Diffusion

Independent of the concrete motivations of actors to engage in processes of imitation or learning, four groups of factors influence the probability, the speed, and the course of policy diffusion: (1) the existence of international or transnational channels of communication through which information on policies in other political constituencies can be communicated; (2) the specific properties of policy innovations; (3) the specific structure of the problem that a given policy innovation is expected to deal with; and (4) the national capacities for adopting particular policy innovations.[19] These factors help explain why some policy innovations spread faster than others, why some countries are faster than others in adopting policy innovations, and why the speed of diffusion varies from one set of countries to another (Jörgens, 2001).

Transnational channels of communication provide the basic infrastructure for knowledge about new policy instruments, programmes or institutions to travel from one jurisdiction to another. In a very basic sense, they take the form of international or global issue-networks where state and non-state actors meet on a regular basis to exchange information and to coordinate national policies and programmes. Examples of such issue-specific networks include: transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) and epistemic communities (Haas, 1992) which internationally promote their subjective framing of specific policy problems and their causal beliefs of how to solve these problems; intergovernmental networks of policymakers, experts and NGO-representatives which centre around specific policy innovations such as national environmental policy plans (International Network of Green Planners) or national ecolabels (Global Ecolabeling Network); and international organizations like the United Nations, the OECD or the

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[19] For a detailed account of the effects of these factors on the diffusion of environmental policy innovations see Kern, Jörgens and Jänicke (2001) and Tews, Busch and Jörgens (2003).

European Union which provide issue-specific arenas where national officials regularly meet, exchange information and coordinate their national policies (Kern, Jörgens and Jänicke, 2001).

In addition to providing arenas where national policymakers regularly meet, many international organizations and intergovernmental networks are actors in their own right, describing and examining policy innovations or best practices in front-runner countries, and making this information available in a wide range of publications, in internal policy papers, and at international conferences. Elizabeth Bomberg and John Peterson (2000:19) have identified 'institutionalized peer-review and identification of best practice according to agreed criteria ('benchmarking')' as one of the major tools of policy transfer within the European Union. The explicit aim of these benchmarking activities is to foster the international diffusion of policy innovations in a given issue area and to harmonize national regulations and strategies at a high level (Kern, Jörgens and Jänicke, 2001: 9). With regard to sustainable development, the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development regularly publishes status reports on the national implementation of Agenda 21 – the latest of which was prepared for the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. In a similar vein think tanks, consultancy firms or foundations regularly disseminate information on best practice and advocate new policies at the national and international level (Stone, 2000).

While the existence of international channels of communication determines whether policy diffusion can occur at all, the specific *properties of policy innovations* are decisive for the speed at which an innovation spreads in the international system (Jörgens, 2001). Policy innovations whose adoption requires only incremental changes to existing policy styles and institutional structures are more likely to be adopted than policies which conflict strongly with existing regulatory traditions (Rose, 1993: 135f.; Kern, Jörgens and Jänicke, 2001: 11-12). Similarly when policies contradict the interests of important domestic actors, national policymakers are likely to encounter strong opposition against their adoption. Generally, it can be expected that redistributive policies spread more slowly than regulative policies, and that regulative policies in turn diffuse less rapidly than distributive or informational approaches (Lowi, 1972; Kern, Jänicke and Jörgens, 2000). Scholars of organizational sociology argue that policy innovations practiced in pioneering countries diffuse more rapidly throughout a social system if it is possible to detach them from the specific national context in which they evolved, and to develop an abstract model that can be applied to a wider range of national contexts (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 155-156; Strang and Meyer 1993). Or, as Strang and Soule put it: '(...) practices do not flow. Theorized models and careful framings do' (Strang and Soule, 1998: 277).

Of course theorizing requires an agent that engages in this task. Developing abstract and universally applicable models is, therefore, one of the core strategies of transnational advocacy networks, international organizations or epistemic communities which seek to empower international norms at the level of the nation state. It is obvious, that the inherent properties of individ-

ual policy innovations make them more or less suitable for generalization and thus affect their prospect of diffusion.

Similar to the characteristics of policy innovations, the specific *structure of the problems* that policy innovations are designed to tackle may also influence the speed of diffusion. In their large-scale comparison of national environmental policies, Martin Jänicke and Helmut Weidner have demonstrated that 'the structure of the problem, in terms of its visibility and urgency, the availability of a standard technological solution and the societal importance and composition of the relevant target groups', significantly determines whether a problem reaches the domestic agenda or not (Jänicke and Weidner, 1997: 310).

Finally the *national context of the adopting state* acts as a filter for the transfer of policies from one political setting to another. The domestic context includes administrative or regulative traditions and national policy styles as well as national capacities to actually adopt and implement a given policy. It is of crucial importance not only to processes of policy diffusion, but has also repeatedly been identified as a decisive factor for international harmonization, that is for the national transposition and implementation of international or European law. The basic proposition developed, especially in the literature on Europeanization, is that the 'goodness of fit' between the European and the domestic level (that is, the degree to which European norms 'resonate' with domestic political, institutional and cultural structures) conditions the degree and extent to which national settings can change in response to international norms (Cowles, Caporaso and Risse, 2001; Börzel and Risse, 2003; Checkel, 1999). While in cases of international or European obligatory harmonization the pressure for change is high and will thus lead to some kind of national adaptation (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002); in cases of non-obligatory diffusion, misfit between global norms and domestic structures may completely preclude national adoption of a policy model or lead to substantive changes of the original policy model in the course of adoption (see for example Rose, 1993).

Besides the 'goodness of fit' between global norms and domestic structures, the national political, financial, scientific and technological capacities to implement a particular policy innovation determine whether a country voluntarily adopts a foreign model or not (Tews, Busch and Jörgens, 2003: 575-576; Kern, Jörgens and Jänicke, 2001: 8). The limited capacity of many, especially developing or transitional countries, may constitute a crucial obstacle to 'soft' policy diffusion as it can be expected that countries first implement those norms and policies that are set down in international obligatory law or which they are coerced by other states or organizations to implement. Voluntary imitation or learning, then, may be found especially in those areas where harmonization and imposition are largely absent.

4   Theoretical Relevance of the Typology of Governance Mechanisms

The typology of governance mechanisms put forward here is consistent with other scholarly efforts to systematize the ways in which states are influenced by their external environment. The triad of harmonization, imposition and diffusion was first introduced to describe the exogenous determinants of national policymaking by Colin Bennett (1991) and Michael Howlett (2000) in their work on international policy convergence.[20] Both authors argue that – in addition to contextual factors like the general functional prerequisites of modernization (Collier and Messick, 1975), or more idiosyncratic national factors – the increasing convergence of national policies is the result of international or transnational influences that can best be systematized through these three mechanisms. In a similar vein Dolowitz and Marsh (2000: 13-17) conceptualize different types of policy transfer along a continuum ranging from voluntary lesson-drawing to obligated transfer and to direct imposition. Finally, with a focus on the study of international regimes, Oran Young distinguishes three different paths to regime formation which closely resemble the broader governance mechanisms proposed here: 'negotiation', where international regimes are set up by explicit agreements; 'imposition', where regimes are externally forced upon actors; and 'spontaneous emergence', where governance evolves from the converging expectations of many individual actions (Young, 1983: 98-101, 1997: 10-11).

Governance processes similar to those observable in the world of states can also be found in the world of organizations. In the field of organizational sociology, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) have argued that institutional isomorphism – that is, the process through which organizations within a given social system grow similar over time – can be either 'coercive', 'mimetic' or 'normative'. Contrary to the model proposed here DiMaggio and Powell subsume both asymmetric power relationships and legal standard-setting under the heading of 'coercive isomorphism'. In return, both mimetic and normative isomorphism are variants of what is here labeled diffusion. While these differences are mainly attributable to differences in the subject of analysis – nation states in the one case and societal organizations in the other – the work of DiMaggio and Powell makes a strong argument for the importance of non-hierarchical imitation and learning, even in those environments where authoritative decision-making by governments is a valid option.

In more abstract terms the three governance mechanisms identified in this paper reflect the three major structuring forces of modern society: interest, power and knowledge. Interest and cooperation stand at the core of rationalist and neo-institutionalist theories in international relations[21]; power and coercion are the central explanatory categories of realist and neo-realist approaches[22]; and knowledge and the diffusion of principles and ideas are given particular em-

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[20] The terms Howlett (2000) uses are 'harmonization', 'domination' and 'emulation'. Bennett (1991) originally had distinguished four international causes of policy convergence: 'emulation', 'harmonization', 'elite networking', and 'penetration'.

[21] Keohane (1984), Martin and Simmons (1998), Simmons and Martin (2002).

[22] For a recent and differentiated application of the neo-realist paradigm with regard to global governance, see Drezner (2001b).

phasis in constructivist and idealist accounts[23]. The typology of governance mechanisms developed here is thus not exclusively linked to any particular theoretical school in international relations, but can serve as a heuristic device within realist, rationalist, and constructivist frameworks.

Of course the differences in this typology are mainly analytical. The three governance mechanisms are not always empirically distinct. For example when the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund require that countries change their national economic policies as a precondition for development loans, this process would normally be classified as a case of external imposition, where IMF or World Bank conditions stand in opposition to the interests of national policymakers. Research on IMF and World Bank conditionality has shown, however, that, in some cases, national policymakers actually favor the external imposition of the policy models advanced by international organizations so they can blame the external donor organization for unpopular policy choices which, in fact, they have deliberately chosen (Vreeland, 2003). Formally such a case would be classified as imposition. Substantially, however, it would at least in part resemble harmonization in that the motivations to act of both the source and the target of governance are partly identical and the new policies have been purposely chosen by the adopting country. While in concrete empirical settings, the borders between the different governance mechanisms may at times be blurred, analytically the typology helps to shed light on the different motivations of actors to implement global norms domestically and to explain different degrees of norm implementation across countries and issue areas.

In the next section the analysis focuses on the international spread of national environmental policy plans and sustainable development strategies in order to assess the role policy diffusion plays in this process, and to find out how diffusion interacts with harmonization and imposition in an integrated attempt to improve global governance for sustainable development.

5   Explaining the Global Spread of Sustainable Development Strategies

5.1   Implementing Sustainable Development Through National Sustainable Development Strategies

National environmental policy plans and sustainable development strategies constitute one of the most important attempts to adapt the global norm of sustainable development to individual domestic contexts (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000; Jänicke and Jörgens, 2000a; Dalal-Clayton, 1996: 3). This makes these initiatives an ideal object for an empirically grounded analysis of how – that is, through which governance mechanisms – the international norm of sustainable development reaches the national level.

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[23] See for example Risse, Ropp and Sikkink (1999), Checkel (1999), Finnemore (1996), and – within sociology – Meyer et al. (1997).

Basically environmental policy plans and sustainable development strategies can be defined as comprehensive governmental programmes of action which are developed with the participation of a wide range of societal actors and which formulate medium- and long-term cross-sectoral goals and priorities for an economically and socially sound environmental policy (Jänicke, Jörgens and Koll, 2001). Empirically, two types of strategic approaches can be distinguished: *environmental policy plans* (or 'green' plans) which focus predominantly on the solution of environmental problems and perceive social and economic aspects merely as important constraints for the attainment of environmental goals, and *sustainable development strategies* which follow a more holistic approach and attempt to set separate goals for all three dimensions of sustainable development, that is, formulate environmental, social and economic goals. Ideally both environmental policy plans and sustainable development strategies involve the following key elements (Jänicke and Jörgens, 1998; OECD, 2001b):

- the formulation of long-term goals for environmentally sustainable development (goal-orientation),
- the foundation of these goals in a detailed analysis of the whole range of national environmental and sustainable development problems (problem-orientation),
- the cooperative development of goals and actions among the relevant national ministries and agencies (policy integration),
- the involvement of polluters and target groups as well as concerned societal groups in the process of decision-making (target-group policy and participation),
- regular reporting and policy-evaluation (monitoring), and
- the continuous development of the strategy process (process-orientation).

Since the late 1980s, 140 countries in the world have adopted official national 'green plans' or sustainable development strategies (Busch and Jörgens, 2003, see Figure 1). While most national strategies differ substantially from the ideal-type model outlined above – notably with regard to the extent of societal participation, the problem-adequacy of goals and measures, the degree of policy integration and the quality of reporting and monitoring foreseen in the strategy – clearly they have to be interpreted as part of a worldwide process of putting the global concept of sustainable development into practice at the domestic level (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000; Jänicke and Jörgens, 2000b; Lafferty, 2004).

From a governance perspective this impressive global spread of sustainable development strategies raises the following questions: How has the proliferation of green plans and sustainable development strategies come about? What have been its main causes and driving forces? Through which mechanisms has the global norm of ecologically sustainable development been sought implemented at the national level? And how have these mechanisms interacted with each other? These questions will be addressed in the following by assessing the role of harmonization, imposition and diffusion as analytic processes affecting the global spread of strategic sustainable development plans and how these mechanisms affected each other.

Figure 1: Worldwide Spread of Green Plans and Sustainable Development Strategies
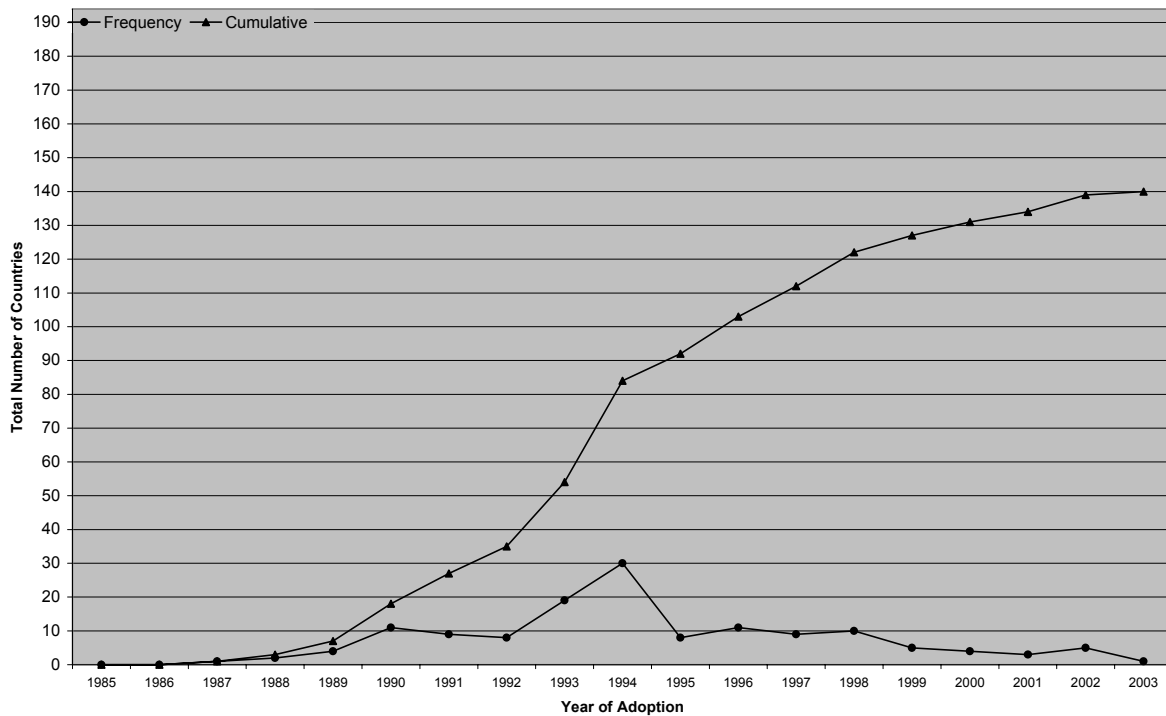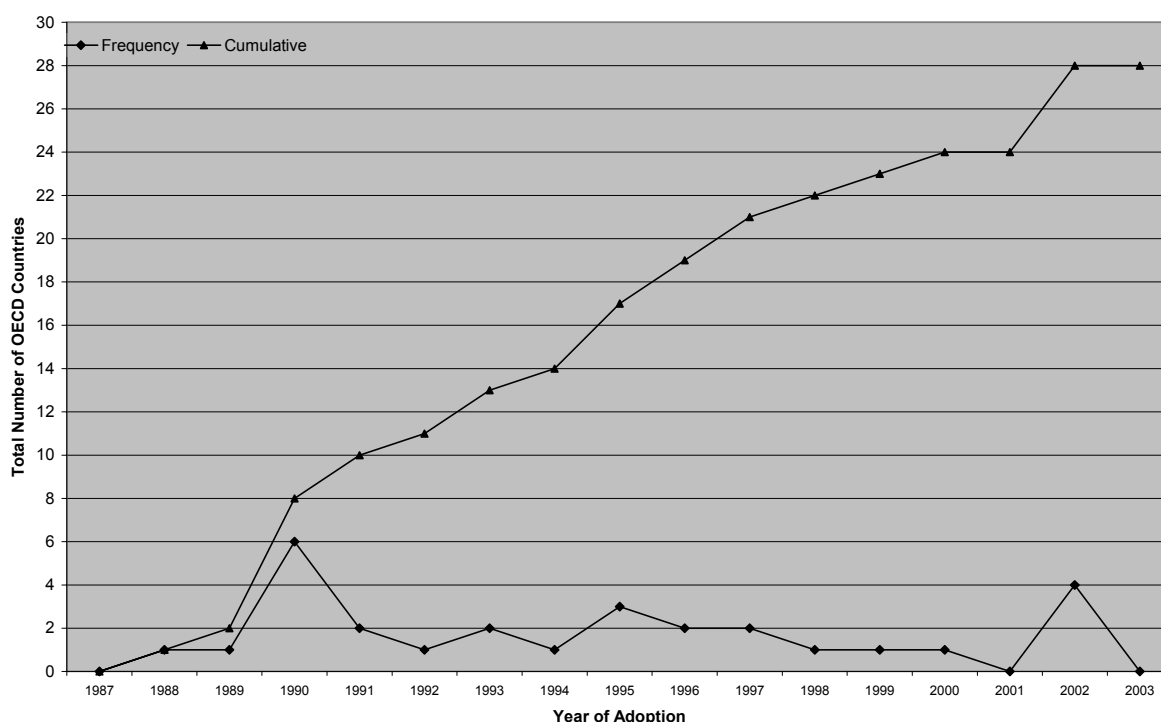

Source: Busch and Jörgens (2003)

5.2   Planning for Sustainable Development in Industrialized Countries: From Problem-pressure and Diffusion to International Harmonization

Among OECD member states the initial stimuli for the development of national environmental and sustainable development strategies were twofold. On the one hand environmental pressures had increased in most industrialized countries throughout the early 1980s, and public concern for environmental protection had grown significantly due to widely visible environmental disasters such as the large-scale forest dieback in Germany and other European countries in the mid-1980s or the Chernobyl accident of 1986. On the other hand the development of the concept of sustainable development, with point of departure in the Brundtland-Report of 1987 and with an emphasis on long-term sustainability, an integrated approach to environmental, social and economic problems, and a more participative model of decision-making and implementation, provided a common theme for future environmental policy (Jänicke, Carius and Jörgens, 1997: 24).

Against this background the first OECD countries to adopt a national green plan were Denmark and the Netherlands. Both the Danish Action Plan for Environment and Development of 1988 and the Dutch National Environmental Policy Plan (NEPP) of 1989 were influenced by domestic environmental pressures as well as the UN-backed concept of sustainable development. However while the Danish action plan went relatively unnoticed, the Dutch NEPP received considerable attention outside the Netherlands, and was rapidly elevated into a widely recognized

model for the national implementation of sustainable development (Liefferink, 1999). Shortly after the publication of the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) the Dutch government designated sustainable development as 'the general guideline for overall Dutch government policy' (Bressers and Plettenburg, 1997: 125). The NEPP specified this claim by setting an overarching target of achieving sustainable development in the Netherlands by the year 2010. With a rather technocratic vision of sustainable development (aimed predominantly at 'reducing environmental impacts rather than promoting societal change' (Bennett, 1997: 81)), the NEPP set the stage for a first generation of green plans and sustainable development strategies which were mainly concerned with the ecological dimension of sustainable development.

Figure 2: Spread of Green Plans and Sustainable Development Strategies in the OECD

Source: Busch and Jörgens (2003)

In the course of the 1990s, the Dutch National Environmental Policy Plan was directly or indirectly imitated by several industrialized countries and by the European Commission, and served as an important source of inspiration to others. The European Union's Fifth Environmental Action Programme of 1992 entitled 'Towards an Environmentally Sustainable Development', which itself strongly influenced the development of green plans and sustainable development strategies in numerous Western and Eastern European countries, was directly modeled upon the NEPP. Just like its Dutch counterpart, it is built around core environmental themes and target groups, and calls for a shift from hierarchical regulation towards a stronger involvement of societal actors and a broader mix of instruments in environmental policy (Donkers, 2000). This close similarity was mainly a result of the active promulgation of the NEPP-approach by the Dutch government, which also included (significantly) the relocation of Dutch

civil servants who had been involved in the development of the NEPP to the European Commission. Consequently several of the key participants in the preparation of the Fifth Environmental Action Programme were were 'schooled' in the Netherlands, including the Commission's Director General for the Environment as well as one of the lead authors of the Action Programme (Liefferink, 1999: 273). Other national strategies that were modeled upon either the NEPP or the Fifth Environmental Action Programme include the Portuguese and Latvian national environmental policy plans, both adopted in 1995; and the Irish sustainable development strategy of 1997 which centers around key polluting sectors and introduces sectoral 'task managers' who are to oversee the implementation of the strategy for the various sectors and who strongly resemble the 'target group managers' introduced by the Dutch NEPP (Bressers and Plettenburg, 1997: 116).

While the NEPP was diffused to the EU-level through active promotion and persuasion on the part of the Dutch government, the Austrian National Environmental Plan of 1995 in turn emulated the European Union's Fifth Environmental Action Programme in a clear effort by the Austrian government to appear modern and ecologically responsible. As stated by Pleschberger:

> '(...) the Austrian plan is the imitation and adoption of "higher" environmentally related policy developments. Old and new documents of the global and European environmental policy are repeatedly mentioned as reference sources in the national plan. In addition, the target sectors selected as areas for policy involvement are drawn from the Fifth Environmental Action Programme of the EU. This shows that the new Austrian environmental policy places itself demonstratively within the context of supranational and global environmental policy which serves as the legitimizing source for national policy efforts' (Pleschberger, 1999: 222).

The development of the Canadian Green Plan in 1990 was to an important degree the result of a movement of decision-makers from one political setting to another, as the ideas developed in the Brundtland Commission quickly spread to the Canadian political debate through the involvement of high-level policymakers who were active in both the domestic and the international arena (Gale, 1997: 100-101).

In addition to the above illustrated cases of bilateral policy transfer and 'policy insemination', the spread of sustainable development strategies within the group of industrialized countries was from the early 1990s on strongly influenced by an increasing international coordination and institutionalization of diffusion processes. The most important step in this regard was a recommendation put forth in the UN 'action plan' from Rio, Agenda 21, stating that:

> 'Governments, in cooperation, where appropriate, with international organizations, should adopt a national strategy for sustainable development (...). This strategy should build upon and harmonize the various sectoral economic, social and environmental policies and plans that are operating in the country. The experience gained through existing planning exercises such as national reports for the Conference, national conservation strategies and environment action plans should be fully used and incorporated into a country-driven sustainable development strategy. Its goals should be to ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations. It should be developed through the widest possible participation' (United Nations 1994, Article 8.7, p. 67).

The recommendation of Agenda 21 was not legally binding for the signatory states and did not specify any point in time for when compliance was expected. It therefore involved a relatively low degree of formal obligation. It entirely changed, however, the political-institutional issue structure in which national governments operate. Following the Rio Earth Summit a wide range of domestic or transnational governmental or non-governmental actors started using Agenda 21 and its prescription of national sustainable development strategies as a point of reference for their demands. Shortly after UNCED the OECD included the existence or non-existence of a green plan or a national sustainable development strategy as a criterion for evaluation in their national 'Environmental Performance Review' process: a high-level peer review and bench-marking exercise whereby national environmental policies are evaluated by changing teams of experts from other OECD countries, with the results promulgated through a widely disseminated book series (OECD, 2001c). The international environmental NGO, Friends of the Earth, developed detailed proposals of ambitious sustainable development strategies for the European Union, the Netherlands and Germany, and initiated public campaigns to urge governments to engage in the process of strategy formulation (Jänicke, Jörgens and Koll, 2000: 222). Also in direct response to the Agenda 21 recommendation on sustainable development strategies, an International Network of Green Planners was set up in 1992 by policy experts from the environmental ministries of Canada and the Netherlands, from Malaysia, UNDP, UNEP and the OECD as a global forum for policymakers to share information, learn from national experiences and promote the diffusion of national green plans and sustainable development strategies.[24] Finally, at the domestic level, opposition parties as well as environmental groups have regularly pressed governments to develop sustainable development strategies by pointing to the recommendation laid down in Agenda 21 and to the fact that virtually all world governments have formally approved the global action plan.

During the period following the Rio Conference the number of OECD countries which had formally adopted a green plan or a sustainable development strategy rose from ten by the end of 1991 to 21 in 1997 (Figure 2). Almost all of these national plans and strategies include prominent references to the 1992 Earth Summit and Agenda 21's admonition to develop national sustainable development strategies. Many of the European strategies additionally refer to the 5th Environmental Action Programme of the European Union. Although these references cannot be interpreted as proof of a causal relationship, they at least indicate strong and high-level awareness among national policymakers of the international dynamics that have evolved around the issue of sustainable development strategies.

The above examples as well as the pattern of spread illustrated in Figure 2 thus strongly suggest that cross-national diffusion has played a significant role for the dispersion of green plans and sustainable development strategies throughout the OECD. Moreover, they shed light on the specific pathways through which diffusion occurs. Diffusion can, however, only explain one

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24 The history of the INGP as well as its aims and activities are described in detail on the INGP-website (http://www.ingp.org).

– albeit a significant – part of the international emergence of strategic environmental planning. On the one hand some of the national approaches have clearly been primarily triggered by national problem pressures and unique political developments at the domestic level, as for example the UK White Paper from 1990 on 'This Common Inheritance' (Wilkinson, 1997), or the French Green Plan of the same year.

On the other hand, in the course of the 1990s, a gradual shift of the dominant governance mechanism regarding the promotion of national sustainable development strategies in industrialized countries from diffusion to soft harmonization can be observed. The recommendation of Agenda 21 that all nations adopt a sustainable development strategy was an initial – albeit very general – initiative to coordinate the manner through which sustainable development was to be implemented domestically. In 1997 the General Assembly of the UN reaffirmed and strengthened this claim at their 19th Special Session (the so-called 'Earth Summit plus 5') by setting a definite deadline, the year 2002, for the completion of the national sustainable development strategies (UN, 1997). While UN declarations and action programs as well as General Assembly resolutions do not constitute binding international law in a strict sense, both Agenda 21 and the 1997 resolution contain supervisory mechanisms which are characteristic of so-called 'hard law'. In 1992, following the Earth Summit, the Commission on Sustainable Development was created as a supervisory organ to oversee the implementation of Agenda 21. Five years later, in 1997, the UN General Assembly concluded that all nations were to present their sustainable development strategies at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg – thus creating a public venue where non-compliance by any country would be widely visible to other states as well as a wide range of domestic and international NGOs. It can be argued, therefore, that in the course of the 1990s, and especially since 1997, 'soft-law' harmonization has increasingly become a dominant mechanism of global governance for sustainable development.

This shift towards 'soft' harmonization became possible, among other reasons, because by 1997, roughly 120 countries throughout the world had already adopted some form of national environmental or sustainable development strategy (see Figure 1). Thus by 1997 a point had been reached where it would have been difficult for any single country to openly refuse to adopt a national programme for sustainable development or to oppose a corresponding decision within the United Nations. The rapid diffusion of this policy innovation throughout most of the 1990s thus paved the way for subsequent legal harmonization.

But what were the broader effects of this change of governance mode? First of all it can be observed that after 1997 the spread of green plans and sustainable development strategies did not accelerate. Compared to the dynamic period from 1994 to 1997, the rate of national adoptions clearly decreased after 1997. If we take into account, however, the fact that approximately three quarters of the OECD countries had already introduced a national strategy by the year

1997, and that in some of the remaining countries such a step was being openly debated[25], it is doubtful that the decreasing rates of adoption are causally related to the shift towards legal harmonization.

The picture of a general slowdown of the spread of environmental strategies in the late 1990s fades even more if one differentiates between environmental policy plans and sustainable development strategies and focuses on the international spread of the latter, more comprehensive, approach to strategic planning.[26] Altogether, since 1997, 15 out of 29 OECD countries have formally adopted a national strategy for sustainable development (Figure 3). Three more countries – the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain – have presented a complete draft strategy together with a plan to officially adopt their sustainable development strategies by 2004. Hungary has only recently started preparing a strategy which is to be completed in 2004. Only four OECD countries – Mexico, New Zealand, Turkey and the USA – have not yet adopted a national sustainable development strategy or announced its publication for the near future.

Figure 3: Spread of Sustainable Development Strategies in the OECD
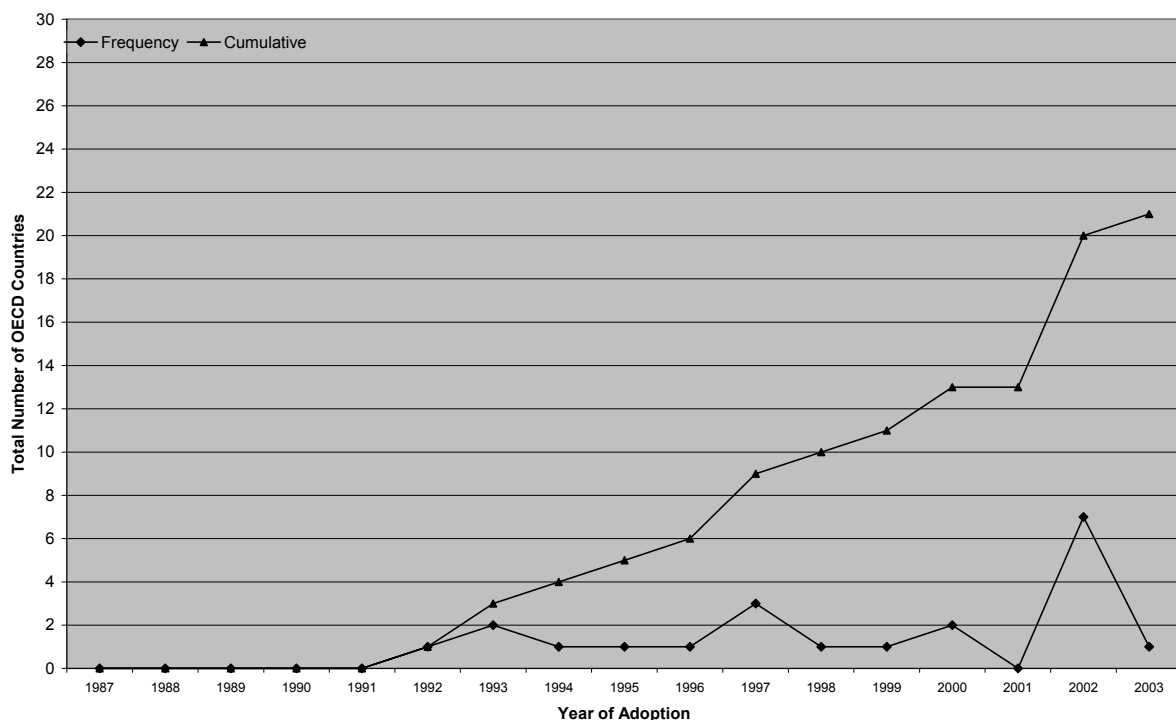
Source: Busch and Jörgens (2003)

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25 For a contribution to the German debate on the formulation of a national environmental policy plan, see Jänicke, Carius and Jörgens (1997).

26 From the late 1980s until the second half of the 1990s the formulation of environmental policy plans was the dominant approach to implementing sustainable development domestically. Sustainable development was mainly understood by policymakers in the sense of 'ecologically' sustainable development. This understanding of sustainable development gradually changed in the late 1990s and the early 2000s to include economic and social goals on an equal footing. As a result comprehensive sustainable development strategies increasingly replaced the more environmentally focused green plans as the prevalent measure for implementing Agenda 21. In the course of this redefinition of sustainable development, many countries that already had a national green plan in place began to engage in a parallel process of formulating a sustainable development strategy (examples are Denmark, France, Austria, Portugal and the Netherlands).

What is even more striking than the rapid spread of these strategies, however, is the fact that roughly one third of all OECD countries – ten out of 29 – have either formally adopted their strategy or presented a complete draft in the year 2002, the year agreed by the UN General Assembly as the official deadline for compliance. All of these more recent strategies and most of the earlier ones make a clear reference to Agenda 21 and to the 1997 decision of the UN General Assembly as important external stimuli.[27]

In sum the analysis of the spread of green plans and sustainable development strategies in OECD countries shows that while in the first phase from the late 1980s to the second half of the 1990s diffusion was the dominant mechanism of global governance for sustainable development, in 1997 this mechanism was complemented by a process of 'soft' harmonization of national sustainable development processes. Since roughly three quarters of all OECD countries had already adopted a green plan or sustainable development strategy at the time of the UN decision, the overall spread of these programmes did not accelerate in response to the shifting mode of governance. However, a distinction between green plans and sustainable development strategies reveals that, especially in the year 2002, there has been a rapid spread of the latter which can only be explained by the harmonizing power of the resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1997 and the substantial pressure placed upon countries by the requirement to present their national strategies at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development.

5.3 National Action Plans and Strategies in Developing and Transitional Countries: Imposition Through Economic and Political Conditionality

The active propagation of the policy innovation by international organizations such as the UN or the OECD; the existence of a model strategy that is sufficiently general to fit different national contexts; the growth of transnational communication networks to spread information on this policy innovation; and the adoption of a formal obligation for countries to develop a strategy by 2002 – all were factors that applied not only to OECD countries, but also to the developing countries of Africa and Latin America and to the transitional countries of Central and Eastern Europe. However the dominant governance mechanism for implementing sustainable development at the national level in developing and transitional countries was neither diffusion nor harmonization, but imposition. More precisely economic conditionality was the principal mechanism through which the global goal of Agenda 21, stipulating that all countries should adopt a national strategy for sustainable development, was implemented in these countries. And international organizations were the main actors pushing developing countries to prepare environmental and sustainable development strategies.

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[27] This overwhelming compliance with non-binding international 'soft law' also makes a strong case for managerial explanations of compliance with international agreements which argue that states possess an inherent motivation to act in accordance with norms which they have voluntarily agreed to and that this motivation can be strengthened by non-coercive tools such as monitoring or reporting (Chayes and Chayes, 1993; Brown-Weiss and Jacobson, 2000).

The single most important actor in this respect has been the World Bank. In 1987 the bank started to support National Environmental Action Plans (NEAPs) – national planning processes to 'describe the basic environmental situation of a country, identify the principal causes of environmental problems and draft a strategy by which to tackle prioritized problems' (Heidbrink and Paulus, 2000: 16) – in Madagascar, Lesotho, Mauritius and the Seychelles. In 1990 the International Development Assistance (IDA), a World Bank affiliate that provides low-interest loans to the world's poorest countries, started urging its borrowers on a more general basis to develop national environmental action plans. Finally this approach was formalized in 1992 when the World Bank adopted its Operational Directive OD 4.02 on Environmental Action Plans. By making NEAPs a *necessary precondition* for gaining access to funding, this operational directive effectively made this type of environmental strategy mandatory for IDA countries (Heidbrink and Paulus, 2000: 19). For other countries the World Bank strongly recommended that they elaborate NEAPs. Besides being a precondition for external financial aid in general, NEAPs also pointed out specific environmental projects that could be financed by external donors.

The preparation of national environmental action plans in all IDA borrowing countries and in most other developing countries throughout the 1990s was, therefore, mainly driven by external imposition through economic conditionality. Without this external pressure the number of countries voluntarily preparing national environmental strategies would certainly have been much smaller. The example of national conservation strategies – which since the early 1980s were technically and financially supported by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in cooperation with the UN Development Programme (UNEP) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and which can be regarded as an early predecessor of NEAPs – shows that also in the absence of economic coercion, the willingness and capacity of governments in developing countries to prepare national environmental strategies depends strongly on external initiative and funding.

In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and in the New Independent States (NIS) which emerged from the former Soviet Union, international organizations were also the main driving forces behind the preparation of national environmental strategies. Besides the World Bank, which was the main supporter of the development of national environmental action plans in the New Independent States, the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the OECD played a major role for the proliferation of strategic environmental planning in this region. Since 1991 environment ministers of UNECE member countries have regularly met at high-level conferences under the title 'Environment for Europe'. At the second meeting in Lucerne, Switzerland (1993) the Environmental Action Programme for Central and Eastern Europe (EAP) was endorsed, recommending that CEE countries and NIS 'develop new environmental policies adapted to the emerging market economies and democratic societies'. Key characteristics of this approach were 'priority-setting, cost-effective use of resources and a balance of policies, institutional and investment actions' (OECD, 1998: 6). Implementation of the EAP should occur, among other means, through the elaboration of national environmental action programmes and

was to be coordinated by a special task force based at the OECD (Connolly and Gutner, 2002; OECD, 1998).

Within this special Eastern European setting the proliferation of national environmental action programmes occurred through a combination of bilateral imposition based on economic dependency and diffusion based on direct interaction of policymakers and the organized exchange of information on national best practices within a transnational network. This issue-specific network of coordinators of national environmental action programmes (NEAPs) was established under the EAP Task Force. It 'brought together national environmental officials from all CEECs and the NIS who had the primary responsibility for developing environmental policies and preparing NEAPs. The main function of the Network was to support a mutual effort in "learning by doing" – exchanging experience, identifying "best practices", and stimulating co-operation and support among network members' (OECD, 1998: 20). At the same time within this network, 'various bilateral and multilateral agencies provided support for the development of NEAPs in some countries' (OECD, 1998: 20) resulting in NEAPs 'being implemented throughout CEE, primarily at the direct instigation of aid donors who have insisted on such planning exercises as a necessary prerequisite to cost-effective environmental investments' (Connolly and Gutner, 2002).

Between 1991 and 1999, 16 out of 18 Central and Eastern European countries adopted a national environmental action plan, and by 2003, all CEE states possessed such a strategy (Figure 4). In the New Independent States the elaboration of NEAPs started later than in the CEE countries, but has developed at a similar pace in the late 1990s, mainly due to World Bank support (OECD, 1998: 49).

Figure 4: Spread of NEAPs in Central and Eastern Europe
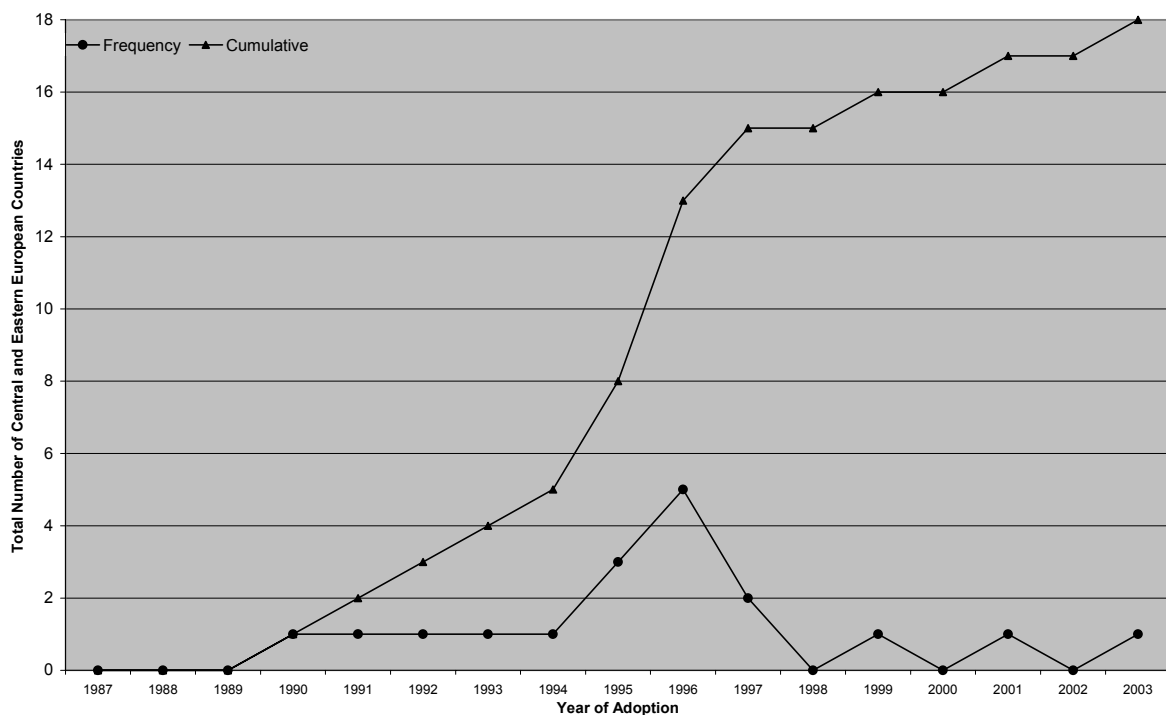
Source: Busch and Jörgens (2003)

At first glance the fast proliferation of environmental action plans and programmes in developing and transitional countries seems to suggest that economic conditionality, combined with the coordinated dissemination of guidelines and information on best practices, constitutes a mechanism of global governance that is comparable to the voluntary diffusion or the negotiated harmonization of national policies. This picture changes, however, if one takes a look at the elaboration of more comprehensive strategies for sustainable development which go beyond the narrow field of environmental policy, and which explicitly include goals and measures in the social and economic sphere. While in the OECD almost all countries followed the formal obligation of Agenda 21 and the UN General Assembly to adopt such a strategy by the year 2002, compliance in the group of CEE countries and New Independent States has been much weaker, with only 10 out of 18 countries having adopted a sustainable development strategy by then (Figure 5). Almost half the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well as the overwhelming majority of the developing countries have, therefore, not been able to move from the adoption of an environmental action plan – which constitutes merely a first, far from sufficient, step in the process of implementing sustainable development domestically – to the development of a comprehensive national strategy of sustainable development which better takes into account the interdependencies between environmental, social and economic goals.

This striking difference between the group of industrialized countries, which overall has successfully established the strategic framework for implementing both the ecological core of sustainable development and its broader social and economic implications, and the group of transitional and developing countries, which in their large majority have not been able to move beyond the adoption of rather narrow national environmental action programmes, can be explained by a combination of two factors: (1) the governance mechanism through which the global norm of sustainable development has been transported to the national level; and (2) the domestic political and institutional capacities for its actual implementation.

Contrary to the other modes of global governance – harmonization and diffusion – imposition through economic conditionality leaves little choice for the target countries to set their own political priorities based on their national political, adminstrative and scientific capacities. In developing and transitional countries, where the domestic capacities for implementing sustainable development are limited, the external imposition of national environmental action plans has absorbed most of these capacities. In fact, a closer look into the national reports prepared for the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg by Central and Eastern European countries and the NIS reveals that many of these countries explain their failure to elaborate a national sustainable development strategy with their lack of capacity to engage in different processes of reporting and strategy formulation at the same time.[28] While most indus-

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[28] The national reports to the World Summit on Sustainable Development can be found on the internet under http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/prep_process/natlassessrep.html and http://www.earthsummit2002.org/es/national-resources/nssd.htm.

trialized countries and the European Union hold sufficient capacity to engage in successive or overlapping planning processes, many Eastern European and most developing countries concentrated their scarce financial, administrative and technical capacities on fulfilling the requirements imposed by multilateral or bilateral donor organizations and subsequently failed to fulfill their international legal commitments.

Figure 5: Spread of Sustainable Development Strategies in Central and Eastern Europe
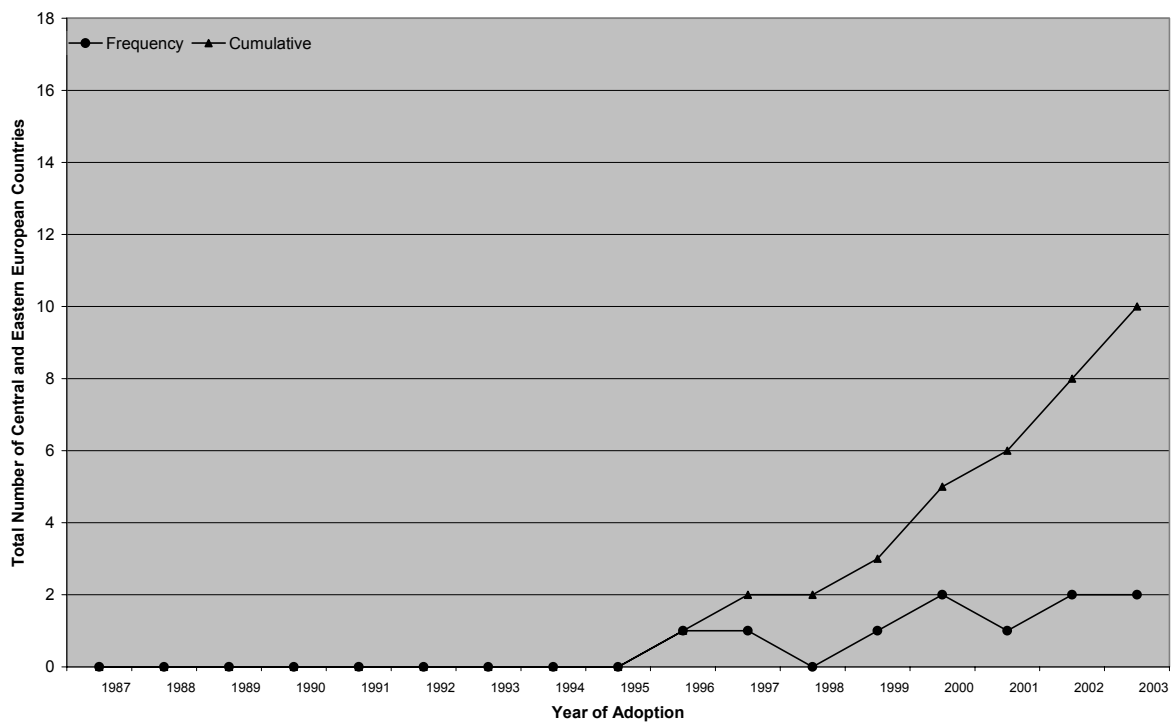
Source: Busch and Jörgens (2003)

6   Conclusions

The analysis of the worldwide proliferation of green plans and sustainable development strategies shows that diffusion is an essential component of global governance for sustainable development. As a mechanism of global governance diffusion is analytically distinct from harmonization and imposition. While each of these three mechanisms by itself is an important source of order in world politics, it is the interaction of the three mechanisms that is most interesting from a policy-analysis point of view. The case study of green plans and sustainable development strategies illustrates this interaction and shows how the different governance mechanisms can both strengthen or obstruct each other.

In the early phases of global regulation of an issue area, diffusion can play an important role in the process of agenda-setting. Especially in those issue areas where international harmonization is difficult to reach – that is in almost every case of regulatory or redistributive intervention restricting economic activity or any other type of individual or collective behavior – processes of

loosely coordinated cross-national imitation and learning can gradually build up a critical mass of proponents, increase acceptance in the more reluctant countries, and thus pave the way for subsequent legal harmonization. As the example of green plans and sustainable development strategies shows, diffusion can also significantly increase the legitimacy of a global norm, thus making it nearly impossible for any modern and 'civilized' state to openly oppose it.

However, once harmonization is reached, imitation and learning do not simply stop. Rather, once a legal agreement has been reached, the dissemination of information on model policies and examples of international best practice within transnational networks and the emulation of these models by individual countries can be seen as an important vehicle for the implementation of the agreement. As the case study clearly demonstrates, the mechanisms of diffusion and harmonization regularly interact with each other, leading to a process of mutual re-enforcement. In this combined governance mode, where diffusion and harmonization interact in a specific way, harmonization determines the general direction of domestic policy change, while diffusion has an important impact on the speed and the distinctive details of national implementation.

One major lesson that can be drawn from this case study is, therefore, that the creation of favorable conditions for policy diffusion is an essential, but often underestimated, aspect of effective global governance. Contrary to the negotiation of international treaties and agreements, the improvement of the infrastructure for diffusion can be carried out unilaterally or within a small group of pioneer countries and international organizations. The creation of the International Network of Green Planners by a group of Dutch and Canadian policymakers, or the inclusion of green plans as a criterion for evaluation in the OECD Environmental Performance Reviews series, can serve as examples.

Contrary to harmonization and diffusion, imposition depends primarily on asymmetric power relationships. As a mechanism of global governance, it mainly serves to force developing countries to implement an international norm which they presumably would not have adopted voluntarily or voted for in international negotiations. While imposition is generally very effective in determining domestic policy outputs, the comparison of the proliferation of NEAPs and sustainable development strategies in Eastern Europe and in the developing countries shows that, ultimately, national capacities are a decisive constraint for the domestic implementation of global norms, and that governance by imposition more than any other form of global governance binds scarce national capacities and thus strongly restricts the policy options of developing countries. If too many national capacities are bound by hard conditionality, this obstructs the diffusion of new policy innovations which may be more effective or more problem-adequate than those transported to the national level by processes of imposition.

Moreover, as the case study demonstrates, imposition by economic conditionality has more immediate effects than processes of 'soft' international harmonization. In cases where processes of imposition and harmonization pursue divergent goals, countries with scarce domestic

capacities will most likely implement those imposed by economic conditionality at the expense of those goals that had been jointly agreed upon in multilateral negotiations.

Effective governance for sustainable development must, therefore, take into account the various interactions between all three mechanisms of global governance. While the analysis presented here highlights the importance of the unilateral development of policy models by pioneering states or international organizations and the creation of favorable conditions for policy diffusion, thus paving the way for subsequent processes of international harmonization; it also cautions against an excessive and uncoordinated imposition of foreign models on developing countries which are constrained by their limited administrative, financial, scientific and technical capacities.

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