

# A politics of confrontation for sustainable development governance

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## Abstract

This paper proposes an alternative qualitative vision on sustainable development that could inspire a global ethics for societal development and intergenerational accountability and, at the same time, expose specific responsibilities for policy, the private sector, science and civil society. The vantage point would be viewing sustainable development as a convergence of interests on three 'policy levels':

**Normative integration:** a 'meta-level' that starts from an interpretation of the concept of sustainable development as a meta-norm under which every human socio-economic activity would need to 'fit';

**Pragmatic assemblage:** a 'medium level' that concentrates on the 'building blocks' of sustainable development and their interrelation;

**Pragmatic assimilation:** a 'ground level' that focuses on how and why specific actors formulate own responsibilities and (eventually) take corresponding action;

The motivation is that, whatever our stake or concern is as citizens, communities, companies or institutions, we all have a joint interest in making these levels 'work'. The challenge for sustainable development governance is then to 'successfully connect' the levels, as this would unveil specific requirements for the way we make sense about our behaviour and rationalise it in view of the totality. Today, the political view is that 'we know what (science tells us) to do' and that governance is about organising our 'good intentions' into a coherent totality (see 'the green economy'). The general assumption is that this is a complex but feasible exercise 'if everybody shows political will'. This contribution argues that this approach is wrong, as this still provides ways for actors to escape specific responsibilities that are crucial for sustainable development. The presentation will elaborate on why and how the three-level picture of sustainable development governance would also make explicit these responsibilities and sketch required institutional approaches for a 'politics of confrontation' that would set this view in practice.

## Key words

sustainable development governance, global governance, ethics, the knowledge-policy interface

## Approach of the paper

This paper is a rather straightforward outline of the rationale of the first part of my research project 'The Possibility of Global Governance', undertaken in cooperation with the Centre for Ethics and Value Inquiry of the University of Ghent. In a next research phase, this rationale will be 'embedded' in a critical analysis of relevant literature from the human and social sciences and illustrated with my experiences within ongoing global governance processes related to climate change and sustainable development as facilitated by the United Nations.

An introduction to the research project 'The Possibility of Global Governance' is taken up in annex A1 to this paper. The writings and activities related to the research are on my research website <http://www.the-possibility-of-global-governance.net/>.

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## Intro Acknowledging confusion in a grim scenery

For decades now, and more than ever before, the global political, social and scientific agenda is set by complex socio-political issues that burden both our natural environment and our human well-being. Sketching what goes wrong in our world today, the picture does not look very bright: threatening industrialisation and urbanisation, environmental degradation and manifestations of technological risk, adding up to structural poverty, economic exploitation, political exclusion, forced migration, terrorism and ethnic and religious conflicts, make the world a hard place to live. The stakes are high, and so are the challenges to tackle them. Taking into account the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Agenda 21 and the many that followed these primordial principle commitments, one can say that our global society has made progress in developing and formulating general ideas about what needs to be done. These ideas are ethically grounded as they typically (and rightly) refer to fundamental values such as human equality and the value of nature, but also in the way they refer to more modern 'organisational' values such as transparency and fair play in politics and markets of goods, services and finance. Guided by these ethics while faced with the observed or expected malaises, one could wonder why deliberations on what would be the right thing to do remain stuck in deadlocks over conflicting rationalities or, in the better case, in vague (re)formulations of non-binding commitments. Is it only self-interest and lack of political will of distinct actors to blame or is there more at stake?

### 1.1 Transparency and its discomforts

*We don't need a joint understanding of the 'earth-society system' to engage in fair and effective global governance. Rather, a first challenge is in creating incentives for meaningful convergences of interest*

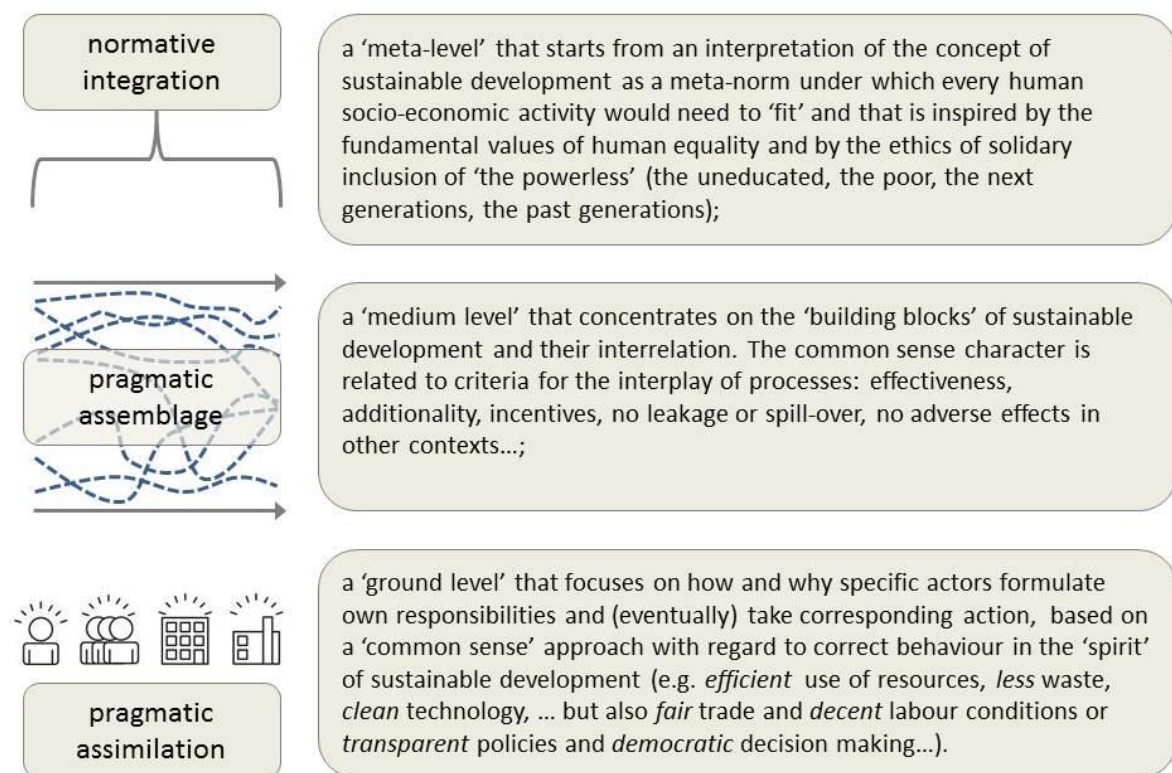
There is some logic in the claim that, in the interest of fair and effective sustainable development measures, it is important to first try to understand and assess 'the system' of the interlinked social practices and their relations with the natural and technological environment. The problem however is that this system is not a neutral given 'out there'. Its own complexity and the existence of uncertainties, ambiguities and unknowns that trouble the assessment of these social practices, of the state of our natural and technical environment and of their impact upon us result in different interpretations of that system. This means that we cannot come to a joint understanding of such a system, let stand that we would be able to converge on how to change it. This has three important consequences that have not only philosophical but also practical policy-related implications:

It is impossible to come to a joint holistic view on the earth-society system in the interest of sustainable development governance. Not only are our actions said to be of contingent nature, also the perception of their effects can lead to different conclusions. If a practice causes a specific 'effect' according to the one, it may cause no effect, a different or even the opposite effect according to another. In other words: what are synergies for the one may be conflicts for the other, which makes it impossible to 'envision' in consensus a holist earth-society system for the totality of practices and their effects, 'bigger' than the sum of its parts, that would ensure sustainable development;

The precautionary principle is an ultimately relevant *moral* policy principle, but its necessity and workability cannot be motivated on the basis of systems analysis;

It is impossible to converge on a compatible top-down / bottom up approach for fair and effective global governance: the way we try to use 'soft' normative references (such as 'sustainable development') to unanimously *extract* practical policies for complex 'unstructured' problems may lead to as diverging views as the way we try to use 'hard' knowledge-based references to unambiguously *instruct* these policies. The faltering climate change negotiation process may currently be the best example of this.

Dwelling on these reflections, as a starting point to an advanced approach to making sense of sustainable development governance, the research proposes a framework that would as well inspire a global ethics for societal development and intergenerational responsibility as a 'local' ethics for concrete action by distinct actors. and this by viewing sustainable development as a *convergence of interests* on three progressive 'policy levels':



Global sustainable development governance in a three-level view : the meaning of the levels  
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The motivation for this three-level view is that it suggests a meaningful framework for deliberating theories of sustainable development while it can also inspire concrete policies and trigger debate on responsibilities of concerned actors. Organising global governance from out of this three-level view would initially be *enabling* but finally *enforcing* for global policy.

#### *the 'enabling' dimension*

Firstly, whatever our stake or concern is as individual citizens, communities, companies or institutions, we can say that we all have a joint interest in making these distinct levels 'work'. What does 'work' mean here? It would be tempting to interpret the bottom level as a practice level, the

middle as an organisational (or negotiation) level and the upper as a 'spiritual' level. This is however not the meaning that is proposed. Our world is not split into a world of reflection, a world of debate and a world of practical action. It is therefore important to note that this view assumes that all kinds of actors (private sector, politics, academia, research and other civil society interest groups as well as individual citizens) play a role on all three levels. In other words: for all actors, the three levels signify a 'responsibility' that concerns a specific morality *and* a specific practical behaviour inspired by that morality. However, this particular view on sustainable development governance would also unveil what is *not* possible in this sense. What follows is a short sketch of what that would imply for the three distinct levels.

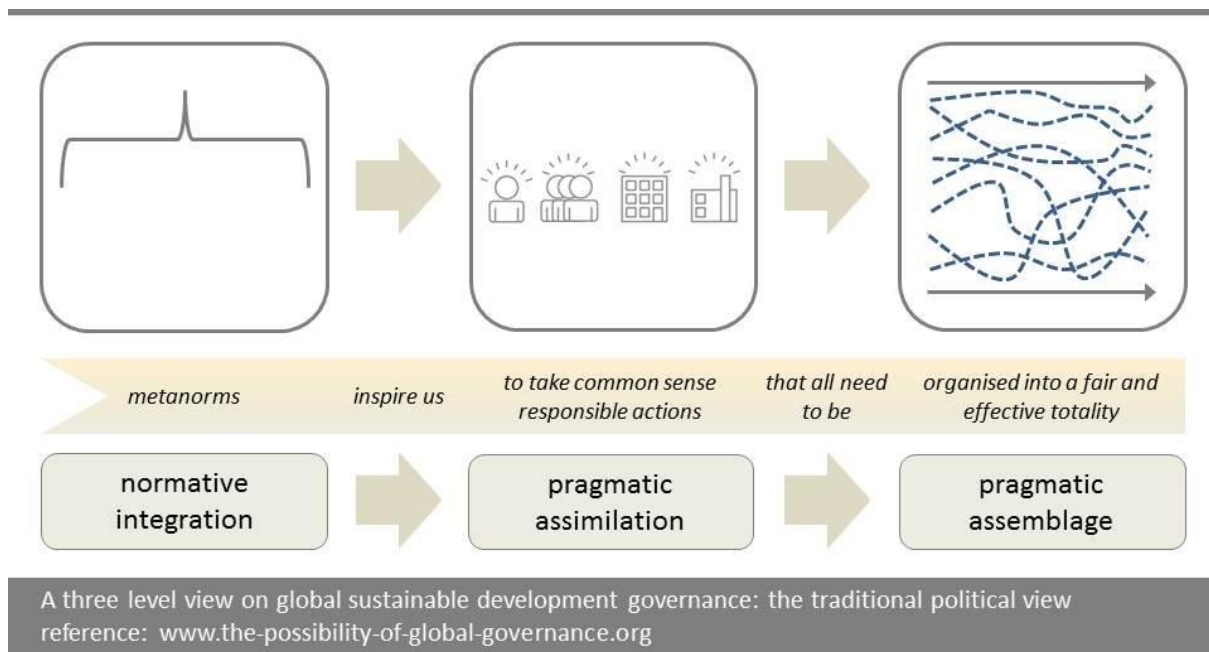
On the 'bottom' pragmatic assimilation level, every actor has an individual responsibility, but none of them *can* and *should* be responsible for the behaviour of others. This is the level that represents our 'daily thinking and action' as citizens, business(wo)men, politicians, consultants, scientists, activists... On this level, the collective responsibility is meaningful in the way it can be understood as a simple 'sum' of all individual responsible behaviours inspired by 'common sense values' (efficient, less, clean, fair, decent, transparent, democratic...). This is the level for which the saying goes that 'everybody should contribute' and that 'we should all act together' (which obviously doesn't mean that every actor would interpret the meaning of these values the same way). Also on the 'upper' normative integration level, none of the individual actors can or should be responsible for the behaviour of others. However, while on the pragmatic assimilation level common sense can be used to inspire the own behaviour, there is *no evidence* on what each actor's responsibility with regard to the own behaviour would be on the normative integration level (there is no evidence in the sense that it cannot be *named*). It should also be noted that, in view of normative integration, the majority of these actors is powerless, as either they don't have the means to make a contribution, or they don't *exist* yet. The result is that, when it comes to care for normative integration, speaking of a practical collective responsibility is meaningless. The collective responsibility can only exist as a joint *will* for reflection on necessary actions and their consequences. Finally, at first sight, the meaning of responsibility at the 'middle' pragmatic assemblage level seems to be more straightforward: in order to ensure effectiveness and additionality of the intentions actors show on the pragmatic assimilation level and to prevent leakage or spill-over or adverse effects in other contexts, actors would essentially be prepared to work together and to be transparent about their intentions. They would be prepared to do this as, from out of their pragmatic assimilations, they understand that being cooperative and transparent would be in their own interest. The additional responsibility is then with the political that needs to assemble these good intentions into a coherent totality.

Although all this sounds logic, the claim put forward here is that this approach is insufficient. Picturing sustainable development in this way indeed provides an incentive to reflect and act on the aspects of governance 'within' the three distinct levels, but it unveils also the need to think and act responsible with respect to how these levels *should interconnect* in theory and practice. While this distinction may look artificial, the argument is that the real challenge for sustainable development governance is to 'successfully' connect the levels in the interest of its fairness and effectiveness, and that the intentions of all concerned actors, as described above, would not guarantee this connection. What this means will (hopefully) become less abstract with the focus on the enforcing character of this multilevel view on sustainable development.

#### *the 'enforcing' dimension*

Using the conceptual language introduced above, one can say that today pragmatic assimilation is generally accepted by the distinct actors as the right attitude in the interest of sustainable development. The words *less, efficient, clean, fair, decent, transparent* and *democratic* are inspired

by a common sense understanding of what is at stake, which implies that “we all know what we should do”. Generally speaking, this common sense understanding is a result of the moral progress of humanity during the last centuries in combination with a (post-)modernist instrumental anticipatory thinking with respect to the possible nefast consequences of our industrial-technical practices: the awareness for the need for environmental protection was initially based on the insight that precautionary action could avoid a more ‘expensive’ (both in financial terms as with regard to well-being) restoration afterwards. The original Brundtland definition on sustainable development added the explicit intergenerational dimension to this view and emphasised with this the moral meaning of this attitude rather than the instrumental anticipatory one. Finally, there is the more recent insight that global governance also needs to focus on poverty not only from a solidarity point of view, but also from the more instrumental insight that poor living conditions are themselves reasons for further inefficient production and consumption and environmental degradation. In 2002, the second World Summit on Sustainable Development put poverty eradication at the heart of sustainable development. With the sense for pragmatic assimilation and the contemporary common sense understanding of sustainable development; it thus seems that we have all the elements in place for progress. In other words: it looks as if pragmatic assimilation is common sense for every actor and that it follows immediately out of the metaview of normative integration. In this view, as also suggested in the reasonings on the ‘enabling dimension’, the only thing that needs to be done is to organise and streamline all pragmatic assimilations in a coherent global pragmatic assemblage. Everybody knows that this is an uttermost complex exercise, but the general assumption today is that it is a feasible *fix* in principle, ‘if everybody shows political will’. Today, this is the view of how global governance should be undertaken. It can be represented with the following scheme:



As already suggested above, a principal claim put forward by this research project is that this approach, illustrated by the previous schema, is wrong. Fair and effective sustainable development governance is *not* only a matter of assembling and organising all good intentions ‘inspired’ by the same metanorm, as this still provides ways for actors to escape specific responsibilities that are crucial for sustainable development. This problem manifests in three ways:



## (1) A discourse related accountability problem

The first is that it allows all actors to make easy appropriations of the metanorm (in this case 'sustainable development') to rationalise and legitimate their own behaviour. We see this happening every day. The adjective 'sustainable' is now used to characterise a 'wanted' quality for virtually every possible human activity imaginable, from the original policy context related to energy, environment, and production & consumption to tourism, cities, families, cars, livelihoods, health care, design, leadership, sports, buildings, value chains and dance clubs. This trend is no sign of a democratisation or effective instrumentalisation of the concept. Besides the observation that in most of these popular-cultural appropriations, no attempt is made to rationalise the link between the 'sustainability' of the activity on the one hand and the overall norm of sustainable development on the other hand, one could also note the absence of a usable set of criteria and indicators to 'test' the sustainability of these specific practices bottom-up.

## (2) A system related accountability problem

Secondly, organising global governance in this way prevents actors from direct *organised* confrontation with the adverse effects of the *system* wherein they justify (or thus rationalise and legitimate) their own behaviour. This reasoning can easily be applied to the case of individual citizens and private sector actors (although similar reasonings can and will be made for institutions and nation states later in the research writings). For what individual citizens are concerned, one can say that a developed (industrialised and market-driven) world runs by a system that presents an aestheticised picture of that world to them. Numerous examples can be given of this. As meat eaters, we buy aesthetically prepared and comfortably packaged meat products and we don't see the killing of the animals and their deplorable living conditions necessary to provide us with those products for an attractive price; as food consumers in general, we don't see the overproduction and the food that is spilled every day; as we heat our homes, we don't see the environmental impacts it takes to get that electricity or gas where we want it; etc. For what private sector actors are concerned, we need to take into account that they, together with institutes, public sector actors, states and regions, shape and represent that 'system', which implies that the way they escape from organised confrontation with respect to the justification of their acts is of a different kind. A market-driven socio-economic system may incorporate regulation to steer and restrain practices, it will, by desing, never question the justification of those practices as such. To give only a few examples in this introductory text: financial speculation may disorder the 'real' economy, but it seems to be very difficult to make it directly accountable for this in practice; while production and consumption of commodities may benefit from life cycle assessments for specific products, these will never question the very need for the existence of that product as such (we feel f.i. that there is something wrong with the fact that we can choose from 32 different brands and types of toothpaste in the supermarket, but there is no consensus rationale that tells us what we should do about this).

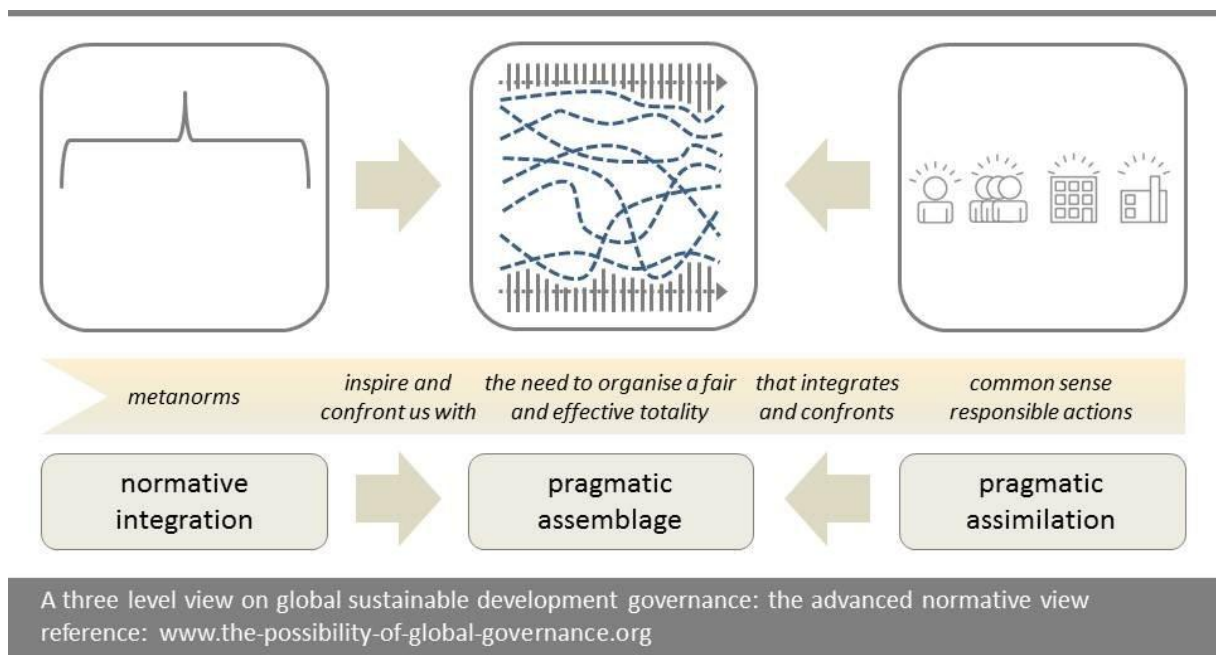
## (3) A solidarity related accountability problem

The third problem with this view is the most abstract, but also the most fundamental. It is the problem that this view on organising global governance does not contain incentives to enforce an organised solidarity with the poor. Even more: it doesn't even contain incentives to *enable* organised solidarity with the poor. From out of the perspective of inequality, one can of course say that pragmatic assimilation is a luxury problem, and that it provides a chance for spoiled

citizens, companies and nations from the wealthy part of the world to show some commitment and to compensate for their past and present ‘ill-considered’ behaviour. But while commitment has the character of common sense when it comes to use resources efficiently, produce less waste, make technology clean, keep trade fair, labour conditions decent, policies transparent or decision making democratic, pragmatically putting the commitment of solidarity with the poor and the weak in practice is less evident. On top of that, although we don’t like to say it loud, we understand that, in addition to the fact that their need for support is unquestionable, also the poor and the weak would need to show some kind of good intentions in the end. What the character of these intentions should be will be reflected upon later in the research, but one thing can already be mentioned here: these intentions will not have the character of pragmatic assimilation, and they will be the same as the ‘higher’ intentions also these ‘spoiled’ citizens, companies and nations would need to show. What is relevant here is that adding up the pragmatic assimilations of those ‘who can afford it’ is an insufficient and even false basis for a practical fair and effective implementation of the idea of solidarity.

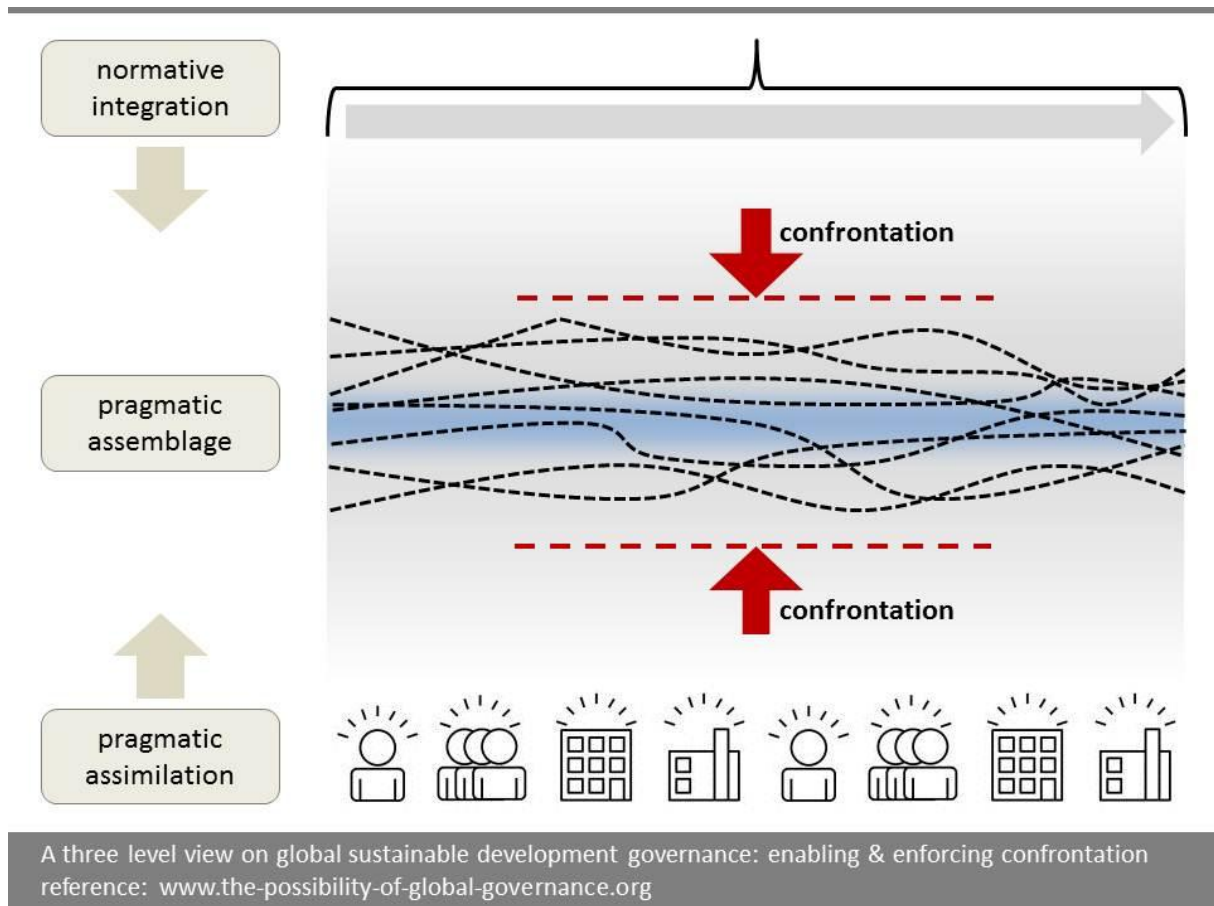
These three reasons motivate an alternative picture of global governance that would also make explicit these ‘additional’ responsibilities. That alternative leans on the understanding that pragmatic assemblage as sketched above is *not* instrumental (in the sense that it does not concern the rational solution of a complex puzzle), but that it is *normative* in its own sense. In terms of the three-level view, pragmatic assemblage should be ‘forced in between’ the metalevel of normative integration and the ground level of pragmatic assimilation. It is thus the pragmatic assemblage of our practices that should be inspired by the metanorm of sustainable development, not our pragmatic assimilations. Some would say that this understanding inspires global governance already today. The three arguments made above may suggest that this is not the case (and there will be more developed further in the research).

Proceeding from the simplified picture above, the alternative could thus look like this:





For pragmatic assemblage, in this second view, the meaning of the term 'pragmatic' will become different from that of our pragmatic assimilations. While the 'pragmatic' of pragmatic assimilation concerns our 'possible' behaviour in the light of our good intentions (the same as in the first view on global governance), the pragmatism of the *assemblage* will have to do with the way we make sense of facts, norms and behaviours approaching the assemblage 'from both directions'. And it is this 'making sense of' that gives pragmatic assemblage its normative character: its normativity is in the way the 'act' of assemblage, as well discursive as in negotiation as in our practical behaviour) can work *confrontational*. This is visualised in the next picture.



In a politics of confrontation, 'connecting the levels' lead to specific requirements for the way we make sense about our own behaviour and that of others and rationalise it in view of the totality. The requirements concern specific 'interaction qualities' that cannot and *should not* always be enforced by clear-cut regulation. What is essential is that this 'politics' *would need to care for as well an 'enforcing' as an 'enabling' of that confrontation* (the final aim of this research project is to argue that this 'enabling' dimension would need to be ensured through the implementation of an advanced conception of 'distributive justice' (caring for a 'sharing of knowledge capacity', a 'sharing of deliberative space', and a 'sharing of freedoms of collective choice' – see the overview scheme of the research project).

Returning to the language of responsibilities as used for the pragmatic assimilation and normative integration level, it turns out that on the pragmatic assemblage level, individual actors are not only

responsible for their own behaviour, but also for that of others. What would that mean in practice? The idea is simple, but it has far-reaching consequences. From out of a common interest in the pragmatic assemblage of our 'well intended practices and actions', our responsibility as individual actors is in making our behaviour and intentions 'debateable', which means that this responsibility not only concerns understanding 'transparency' in the traditional senses of 'no double agenda's' or 'no misuse of cheap labour in developing countries', but also and essentially in the sense of *public reflexivity*. In a politics of confrontation, that attitude of public reflexivity with regard to our own behaviour logically extends to inquiring the practical and intellectual 'environment' we refer to in making sense of our own behaviour, and thus also to inquiring into the behaviour of others. This 'inquiring into' combines an attitude of 'open curiosity' with one of critical suspicion. As a simple example: in terms of corporate social responsibility, we may not be directly responsible for the environmental damage caused by a specific company, but we are responsible for asking them to give account about it.

Today, our socio-political society is not organised in the way described above. Neither the spiritual-ideological perspective, nor the practical setting is available. Seeing the reality in terms of the three levels, there might be a joint interest in making those levels work 'in principle', but there is no coherent spirit or action to also make them work in practice. We have no grand political idea that would inspire, instruct or steer pragmatic assemblage from the normative perspective described above. The liberal normative understandings of freedom and market potential have today translated and incorporated 'pragmatic assimilation' as an economic incentive (from eco-cars over eco-consult to the metanorm of 'the green economy') but has, to name only one, not provided a satisfactory answer to the problem of 'spill for the sake of efficiency' (as f.i. in the fishery), let stand that it would say something meaningful about global solidarity. On the other hand, the socialist normative understanding of solidarity – in the sense of supporting the weak by raising them up to a societal 'performative level' - is obviously valuable as such, but it does not bring forth a meaningful understanding of how it would inspire, instruct or steer pragmatic assimilation by these individuals. The current optimist view is that the totality and additionality of bottom-up actions inspired by pragmatic assimilation will do the job, albeit in a clumsy way, or maybe even provides a 'momentum for change' towards a new enlightened spirit. The current pessimist view is that all these actions together are not doing the job because they are counterproductive rather than additional, for the simple fact that many of them are inspired by self-preservation instead of assimilation. A normative view on pragmatic assemblage could already start with confronting these opposing views, in a deliberative setting...

## 1.2 The intellectual defy of public reflexivity

*/// We don't need to overcome polarisations over fundamental norms to guide our socio-economic interactions. Rather, a second challenge is in creating incentives for meaningful divergences of opinion*

A first concern with regard to the interconnection of the three levels is the need to create incentives for meaningful divergences of opinion. This is a three-step process.

The first is a joint preparedness to move away from governance themes that are characterised by a 'sterile consensus'. Today, environmental degradation, and in particular climate change and loss of biodiversity, have been put forward as among the most urgent global challenges to tackle. Others would claim that global social challenges such as poverty eradication and fair trade are of prime concern. What these issues have in common is that, despite of the urgent need to tackle them, in their use as vantage point 'to get things done', they do not provide the necessary incentive for

responsible acting. In short: nobody is in favour of environmental degradation in general or climate change in particular, and nobody is against biodiversity. In the same perspective, nobody is in favour of poverty or against fair trade. While this 'consensus' may seem to be a necessary condition to motivate negotiators to take action on the particular issue, as a vantage point, it does not trigger meaningful divergence in opinion in itself. What happens in reality is that, in light of these crucial but 'sterile' issues, there is the tendency to define a guilty party, and observation of current global negotiation processes on e.g. climate change or biodiversity learns that this trend rather obstructs than facilitates political negotiation. Therefore, the very idea of consensus over 'what needs to be tackled' is meaningless and misleading. In most contexts, al but not understood in a historical perspective, the question of how to define so-called 'shared but differentiated responsibilities' is a moral question but not a guilt case. This research project argues that, although the above listed malaises can still be considered as the reasons of restorative or precautionary action, they should not longer been used as 'thematic' vantage points for deliberations on who should do what.

The second, motivated also from out of the previous considerations, is a joint preparedness to organise global governance into parallel *neutral* themes that deal with specific aspects of the organisation of our society. These themes, organised in four categories, are

Human intellectual capacities	education and personal development research
Human natural capacities	natural habitat health and sanitation
Functional means	resources, energy, labour, finance, markets, institutions
Functional ends	water & food, housing & urbanisation, mobility, production & consumption of commodities, cultural support & heritage

The themes can be meaningfully framed and demarcated from other concerns, which provides also an 'objective' way to consider cross-cutting issues (f.i. climate change and biodiversity). While the themes as such are 'neutral', also the care for their compatibility and integration as thematic processes is a matter of pragmatic organisation or, in the terminology of the previous section 'pragmatic assemblage'. In a globalising world, there are in principle no cultural or national-specific views on the relative importance of one theme over the other (in terms of attention and financial means).

With the organisation of governance into neutral themes, and with the view of sustainable development governance as a three level 'morality & practice' system, there is finally the possibility to deal with specific concepts that, in the way they work as cross-cutting mediating factors 'in between' the three levels, prevent to rationally 'connect' these levels. These concepts, although unwanted in the way they manifest, also have a 'neutral' character, as today they are accepted as inevitable consequences of socio-political, socio-cultural, technical and economical interaction in the process of 'progressive civilisation'. They include

technological *risk*, environmental *occupation*, heritage *depletion*, information *mediation*, occupational *instrumentalisation*, market *dependency*, political *authority* and socio-cultural *determination*.

Today, whether we want it or not, striving for social well-being *implies* these 'artefacts of civilisation'. They are neutral from the perspective that it makes no sense to be 'against risk', 'against environmental occupation' or 'against political authority' etc.. However, the fact that they are neutral does not mean that society would be able to come to a consensus on them. Not only is there the existence of specific unknowables, they are also (each of them in their specific way) marked by moral pluralism, in the sense that, even if we all would agree on the related knowledge base, opinions would still differ on the acceptability of specific practices of technological risk, environmental occupation, heritage depletion, information mediation, occupational instrumentalisation, market dependency, political authority and socio-cultural determination. Observations, science and mapping of opinions may thus inform us about options, they cannot clarify the choices to make. This makes it impossible to determine in consensus what would be an *acceptable* risk, occupation, depletion, mediation, instrumentalisation, dependency, authority and determination. What is then the use of this particular approach to making sense of issues? The motivation is that focussing deliberation around these neutral artefacts of civilisation *within the context of a specific neutral theme* provides incentives to 'map' meaningful divergences of opinion and the possibility to 'unveil' intentions of and responsibilities for distinct actors on all three SD policy levels. While this can be done without the need to define specific guilty parties, it still provides a possibility to meaningfully defend the own stake.

### 1.3 Prosperity without truth

/// *We don't need to protect traditional social, political and cultural identities for prosperity. Rather, a third challenge is in creating incentives for meaningful atmospheres of trust*

Today several old and new boundary conditions, said to be needed for the system 'to work', are contested. They are understood as 'norms' to take into account, and work as well as a 'limiting factor' to our collective behaviour or as a privilege in that behaviour:

[1] Taken in a first set, these are state sovereignty, military defence and economic growth. Given that, in principle, prosperity does not *necessarily* depend on these criteria, it is impossible to rationalise their relevance as benchmarks for that kind of policy making that would want to comply with (meta-)normative references such as sustainable development or social equality.

[2] Secondly, there is the difficult question of whether sustainable development governance either *needs* global peace or *can contribute to* global peace. In other words, the question is whether sustainable development governance should 'move on despite of' ongoing political, religious and ethnic conflicts (based on the assumption that these should be 'fixed' by diplomacy and/or military intervention) or that it should also aim at taking the sting out of the conflict settings by tackling the issues 'at their socio-cultural roots'. Common sense tends towards the second option, but in reality politics is narrowed to the first. The claim is that we should think positive, that there is no time to loose and that old conflicts will disappear and new (e.g. caused by food, oil or financial crises) will be avoided if we manage to enable every human being 'to enjoy and take part in the socio-economic system'. That view however also serves strategic power interests (organised through nations and markets) rather than social justice as a basis for sustainable development. In terms of fostering people's capacities to contribute to and enjoy well-being, the prime concern is *not* basic education and job creation, but *critical-intellectual* personal development.

[3] That would however imply that, thirdly, a more fundamental set of boundary conditions that were meaningful in the historical development of (the system of) humankind are not longer relevant in the current context of globalisation. These are the general condition of cultural integrity,

identity and descent, and, in the necessary context of the global, the specific condition of 'geographically determined' integrity, identity and descent (regional, national, communal). While cultural 'differences' between collectives might be 'identifiable', every attempt to 'frame' them is doubtful and eventually suspicious. Today, the right to be educated and to develop a critical sense in order to become a more vocal citizen and to stand stronger in society implies 'by definition' a learning environment and method with a universal character. In other words: there can be no cultural-specific approaches to individual and collective knowledge capacity building. Any critique that this would lead to a flat bleak world or that this view is the result of a new kind of intolerance should also motivate why we would still need to nominate and demarcate identities today and is therefore a priori suspicious. Tolerance is by definition tolerance of the uncertain, the ambiguous, the unknown and even of the unknowable in their various alienating emergences. Ethical and aesthetical diversity originates from contingent dynamics driven by 'capable' interacting human beings, not from artificially demarcated multiculturalisms.

[4] Finally there is the question of human reproduction in face of the threat of global overpopulation. In the interest of fair and effective global governance, and also in the spirit of the previous point, there can in principle be no 'bottom-up' cultural-specific approaches to population growth control (which doesn't mean that, today, there can be no control policies targeted to specific groups from out of an emancipatory concern).

Advancing on the previous reflections, the claim is that there are only two relevant universal boundary conditions for prosperity. These are the global and the equal. The equal (and not 'freedom') is the only objective vantage point to inspire and instruct the organisation of people's capacities and responsibilities. Globalisation, on the other hand, is the unavoidable result for a society of interacting intelligent humans driven by curiosity, interests and self-protection (what would one expect otherwise?).

Together with the contested boundary conditions for prosperity, there are the current 'metacriteria' that, although potentially positive in their intention, are open to multiple interpretations and strategic appropriations due to their conceptual rather than practical meaning. One can define three sets of criteria. The first set consists of the 'dynamic' criteria of 'progress', 'change' and 'transition' on the one hand. The second concerns the 'framing' criteria of 'the green economy', 'global justice' and that of sustainable development itself on the other hand. The third set concerns the ontological criteria of truth and, maybe surprising in this context, that of beauty. Both are very abstract in meaning, but, in various ways, constantly referenced in socio-political discourse. The notion of beauty refers in this context to some kind of 'organisational' beauty. One likes, as *reference*, to envision a world consisting of clean environments wherein everything runs smoothly and interacts logically. Reality is of course different. We know that our society interacts in a clumsy way and that our environment is, if only because of natural decay, not perfect and clean. While the natural environment is always neutral and timeless, our constructed human environment is always conditional and old, as from the moment something is created, it is eligible for decay and thus old.

In the research it is argued that, while it is still meaningful to reason in the sense of sustainable development, the only metacriterion for global governance that can have a universal and objective character is that of 'the human possibility', with the possibility in the sense of the *potential* of both the individual and the interacting collective. Although this criterion sounds very abstract, it will be argued that, as a *condition*, it is the only condition that can be meaningfully coupled to those of social justice and 'societal trust' and that, more essential, it provides a better incentive to reason on *practical* policies and measures for prosperity than the concept of sustainable development itself.

In conclusion, in addition to acknowledging cognitive complexity and moral pluralism as incentives for meaningful convergences of interest and meaningful divergences of opinion respectively, global prosperity can thus be deliberately approached only by acknowledging and accepting the relativism of the traditional and modern boundary conditions and metacriteria for human prosperity mentioned above. Today however, there is no joint acknowledgment that a politics of global governance should *also negotiate* the meaning and relevance of these types of boundary conditions and criteria before using them to inspire and instruct practical politics.



## **A1 Background information on the research project 'The Possibility of Global Governance'**

### *Introduction*

'The Possibility of Global Governance' is a research project about the global ethics of sustainable development governance. It does however not initially focus on the ethical *implications* of the complex problems listed above. Rather the emphasis is on the ethics related to the way we make sense of them in interactive knowledge generation and decision making.

The motivation for this focus is based on the reasoning that whenever we people gather around a common interest in a political context, whether driven by unselfish enthusiasm or pragmatic commitment, whether as a way to 'stand stronger together' or as a way to strategically enforce power, we do this through particular rationalisations of the knowledge and values related to the issue at stake and of our interest connected to it. These rationalisations are not noncommittal, as their impact goes beyond 'mere language'. They inspire, enable, stimulate, initiate or eventually enforce settings and practices that shape our social reality. On the one hand, rationalising knowledge and values in function of a particular interest and rationalising the particular interest itself is necessary if one wants to make a meaningful point in that governance exercise of 'balancing benefits and burdens' in face of the complexities, uncertainties, ambiguities, unknowns and unknowables that typically mark the issues mentioned above. On the other hand, even *with* a sense for effectiveness and fairness, the quest for recognition in that exercise makes many actors to rationalise their case into cognitive and moral comfort zones that hinder or even obstruct a conciliation in the interest of reaching consensus.

From this perspective, the vantage point of the research is that the quality of governance essentially depends on the quality of the working of 'the knowledge-policy interface', and that this 'quality' concerns a specific morality with regard to the generation and metamorphosis of knowledge prior to and in decision making itself. The final aim of the research is to argue for a specific human rights based approach to sustainable development governance that advances from that specific morality suggested above. In the interest of better clarifying that final aim into the overall approach of the research, a more extended elaboration on that principle is included here.

### *The human rights principle for sustainable development governance*

Sustainable development is impossible without a continuous respect and care for the implementation of human rights. However, in considering the relation between the challenge of implementing human rights on the one hand and the challenge of implementing sustainable development on the other hand, we need to recognise that a full implementation of human rights would not automatically lead to sustainable development. This claim advances from the recognition that fair and effective sustainable development governance concerns a fair and effective organisation of our human socio-economic interactions. Taking into account the fact that this organisation essentially concerns an exercise in coordinating complex systems of interlinked socio-economic processes in a dynamic of increasing globalisation, a fair and effective dealing with sustainable development challenges will always be troubled by the difficulty of negotiating a consensus that integrates and balances reasonable but often incommensurable and conflicting interests. Not only do we have to deal with the complexity of acquiring knowledge about those systems and of their relation to our natural and technical environment, we also need to take into account the fact that our global challenges are essentially cases of moral pluralism. That is: even if we would all agree on the knowledge base of a specific sustainable development-related problem, then opinions could still differ about the acceptability of proposed solutions. Indigenous knowledge and the natural and social

sciences can inform us about the character of options, they cannot always clarify the choice to make. Moral pluralism thus requires us to acknowledge that, in many cases, we have to deal with limits to knowing of problems and solutions and with a plurality of opinions on problems and solutions.

From a human rights perspective, this requires us to engage in processes of deliberate knowledge generation and decision making that would generate societal trust primarily by their open, inclusive and deliberate method instead of only by the rationality of their envisaged solutions. There is no single objective path for sustainable development. Sustainable development relies as much on human individual and collective creativity as it relies on human individual and collective responsibility. In this respect, we are aware that there will always remain a vague line between what should be 'enforced' in the interest of human rights, human equality and human solidarity on the one hand and what should be 'left open' to contingent dynamics relying on the power of individuals and communities to employ creativity, commitment and solidarity on the other hand.

In this sense, sustainable development is a collective human responsibility that also implies specific individual human rights with regard to 'knowing', 'expressing opinions' and 'decision making'. In other words, human rights for sustainable development are not only about combating poverty and providing equal access to basic needs (water, food, energy, health care and shelter) and justice, but also about having equal access to that kind of knowledge generation and decision making that recognises limits to knowing and plurality of opinions, and that aims to make sense of and give meaning to the world, ourselves and the issues at stake.

The previous rationale motivates the human rights principle for sustainable development governance that is put forward in this research project. That principle sounds as follows:

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

1. the equal right to aid and access to justice of those in need today
2. the equal right to have access to and to participate in the socio-economic dynamic and to deliberate adverse effects of that socio-economic dynamic
3. the equal right of those of the future to govern their own needs,

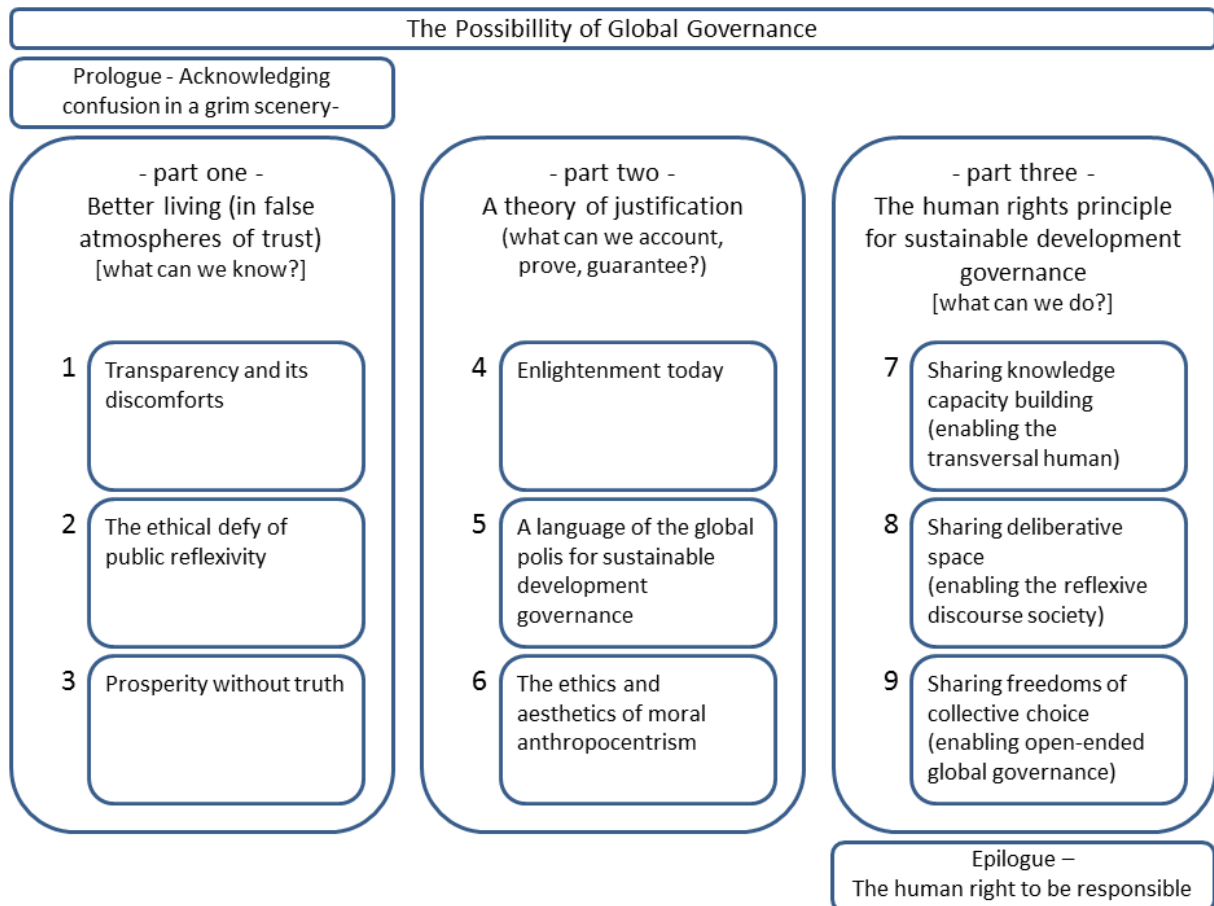
sustainable development governance implies the equal right for every human to contribute to making sense of what is at stake. This right can be fulfilled through the implementation of a 3-fold concept of distributive justice:

1. a sharing of knowledge capacity building  
[> implying pluralist and reflexive basic and advanced education and inclusive and transdisciplinary research as policy supportive knowledge generation]
2. a sharing of deliberative space  
[> implying inclusive, deliberative multi-level decision making]
3. a sharing of freedoms of collective choice  
[> implying global governance as a continuing process of engagement]

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

### Research project structure

The reflections and argumentations in this study are organised into three parts. The first advances on a critical (but compassionate) inquiry into our capabilities as sense-making agents in a socio-political context 'in face of complexity'. What may first look as a total deconstruction of these capabilities will (hopefully) also be seen as a reconstruction of what we can and cannot know and should and should not know in the interest of sustainable development governance. Although the titles of part 1 suggest a philosophical approach, the reasoning set out is fairly straightforward and aims to motivate a specific 'consensus' view on sustainable development governance that would unveil 'methodological' responsibilities and inspire practical policies. The second part is a philosophical reflection on what the meaning of societal justification *can* be, taking into account the possibilities of and limits to sense-making in interaction. It sketches the consequences for an engaged 'enlightenment-thinking' and makes a plea for moral anthropocentrism as the only possible 'human socio-political condition'. This enlightenment and this moral anthropocentric stance are then put forward as the fundamentals for a language of the global polis for sustainable development governance. The study argues that 'nobody can speak that language alone', that the conditions to inspire, enable, stimulate, initiate or enforce it are far-reaching and that these conditions cannot be installed by quick politico-economic or socio-political fixes. Based on these reflections, the third part develops and motivates 'the human rights principle for sustainable development governance' as sketched above and uses this principle to suggest a new understanding of the idea of deliberative democracy and to motivate a consequent moral and practical framework for sustainable development governance.



## A2 Bio Gaston Meskens

Gaston Meskens is a researcher in philosophy, lecturer, writer and artist with an academic background in sciences (master degrees in theoretical physics and nuclear physics from the University of Ghent, Belgium). His current research with the Centre for Ethics and Value Inquiry (Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, University of Ghent, Belgium) is concerned with conditions for human intellectual capacity building in the interest of sustainable development governance. In that context, he initiated the research project 'The Possibility of Global Governance' and the related web platform.

Gaston Meskens has build up fifteen years of experience in participative and transdisciplinary research on sustainable development governance and with working in and around the agora's and arenas of the policy processes of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), the United Nations Non-Proliferation Treaty process (UN-NPT) and the related research activities of the European Commission. In the UNFCCC context, he currently also formally engages as board member of the Constituency of Research-oriented Independent Non-Governmental Organisations towards the UNFCCC.

Early in his research career, he became critical with the way concrete workings of the 'traditional' science-policy interface tend to become hindered by mediation from out of various institutional comfort zones. In the interest of developing a parallel case-related research, and given his academic background nuclear physics, he co-founded a Science & Technology Studies group that engages in critical technology assessment research and that takes nuclear technology as a study case. The motivation and vantage point for the research is that, similar to the case of other risk-inherent technologies, the use of nuclear technology concerns a complex societal justification exercise of which a deliberate social justice approach is obstructed by ongoing strategic demarcations of interests by distinct actors involved. In the nuclear case, these strategies give freeways to transnational policy - private sector dynamics without proper consideration of ethical issues related to waste management and proliferation. In the context of this research, Gaston Meskens has been advocating (and continues to do so) a responsible and transparent approach to the nuclear issue in various research and policy processes (in European Commission funded research projects on governance, as invited expert in Belgian parliamentary hearings on the ethics of nuclear technology, in Expert Committees of the International Atomic Energy Agency and of the OECD, and in UN missions in the frame of sustainable development). In this part-time engagement, parallel to his main research on sustainable development governance, he is now mainly working as lecturer on the Ethics of Technological Risk Governance in various national and international academic programmes and as advisor on transdisciplinarity in research and education.