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Corporate Responsibility for Global Environmental Change?

The Discursive Power of Business

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Abstract

Recently, business representatives have begun to create networks that contribute to shaping the sustainable development agenda by influencing the establishment of norms, institutions and discourses. At the same time, there is a wide consensus that the power of transnational private actors in global governance has been neglected by scholars of International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE). In the past few years, new theoretical frameworks have been developed in order to identify different dimensions of business power in global governance. These approaches commonly observe the growing importance of the discursive power of business representatives and the lack of studies in this field. This paper refers to the research gap and explores how multinational companies implement discursive power in order to shape the discourse on sustainable development. Furthermore, it is argued that the specific social constructions of the concept of 'sustainable development' demonstrate ambivalences that the corporations have to deal with.

Keywords: *Discursive Power of Business, Global Governance, Corporate Social Responsibility*

1. Introduction¹

In the last years, changing attitudes, expectations of investors and public pressures have urged businesses to integrate ecological² and social norms into their practices and to take part in the global debate on sustainable development. While globalization has reconfigured power relations between national and private actors, transnational corporations are increasingly held responsible for problems like pollution or human rights violations (Brühl et al. 2003: 13). Reframing these private actors from pure profit-seeking entities to "corporate citizens" has raised expectations and encouraged companies to ascertain their role in society (Wright/Rwabizambuga 2006: 92). At the same time, business representatives have started to create networks that contribute to the shaping of the sustainable development agenda by

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² The term *ecological norm* has to be distinguished from the term *environmental standard*. Whereas the latter denominates technical predefinitions of environmental quality standards, the term *ecological norms* deals a priori with rules, customs, traditions and conventions, which influence the behavior of actors and the interaction between them. This definition largely follows Simonis (2003: 143-224).

influencing the establishment of new norms, novel institutions and discourses.

This article searches for answers to the question of how multinational companies implement discursive power in order to shape the discourse on sustainable development. It does not aim at answering the question as to whether companies should integrate sustainable development strategies into their activities. Equally, it does not have in view to interpret how the discursive shaping becomes manifest in the (political) praxis. The article argues that especially the role of intersubjective factors in environmental and social non-state discourses needs to be better understood, and relates the existing gap of knowledge to broader methodological and ontological approaches.

However, transnational corporations, just like other non-governmental and governmental actors, take part in the discourse on sustainable development. Understanding how business is trying to shape the discourse on sustainable development in global governance therefore requires a closer look at the discursive power of these actors. On this note, the present article eschews the traditional paradigms of realism and liberalism in favor of a constructivist approach which is able to capture the process of the discursive construction of norms, ideas and identities. Analyses which adopt the “standard approach” mainly search for true reasons. Constructivism on the other hand concentrates on the discursive construction of norms, ideas and identities. This does not mean that business representatives try to exert their influence to bypass real changes. A constructivist approach enables to avoid rationalist assumptions which affirm that identities and interests are given. It allows the conception that identities and norms are constructed through social interaction. Putting it differently, a constructivist approach fits in well with the objective of this paper, because it emphasizes the ontological status of norms and ideas and the constitutive character of discourses.

Even so, it has to be taken into account that the demand for corporate responsibility is already several hundred years old. In his book “The Theory of Moral Sentiments“ (1761) Adam Smith does for example claim that humans have a natural tendency to “Sympathy”. In other words, they have an innate desire to identify with emotions and to care about the well-being of others. Whereas the accountability of corporations has been mainly addressed at the local area in the past the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility is a new development on the global level (Vogel 2006: 2). Since the 1990s a strong increase in both number and extend of global business commitments has been observed (Vogel 2006: 10) and sustainable development has turned into an essential content of business strategies. Especially big multinational companies respond to these new developments by creating networks and by trying to shape the global sustainable development agenda.

By now the concept seems to operate as a “magic potion“ (Beisheim/Brunnengräber 2003) that can hardly be evaded. Representatives of civil society, of media, of international organizations and of corporations give the favorable impression of addressing the same global problem. The inflationary usage of the catchphrase goes along with a conceptual vagueness. “Sustainable development” has not yet been clearly operationalized nor are there any conventions with respect to its definition. The most common definition seems to be that of the Brundtland Report “Our Common Future“ (United Nations 1987) which was introduced in 1987:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs“ (United Nations 1987).

Until the end of the 1980s the term has turned into an integral component of the political vocabulary of western democracies (Schreurs/Papadakis 2007: xxxix; 202). Nevertheless, in the praxis the term is rather handled flexibly and various actors fill it with different meanings. The lack of regulation and the difficulties for national and international controls strengthen this

phenomenon. Particularly with regard to the legitimization of the free market economy, the recourse to the concept of sustainable development seems to have a special power of persuasion.

In the scientific literature, there are many studies on the impact of globalization. At the same time, there is a general consensus that both the power of transnational private actors in global governance and transnational processes of legitimization have been neglected by scholars of International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE).

“The place of non-state actors and movements remains poorly understood in the mainstream literature, largely because they tend to be viewed, implicitly if not explicitly, through the lenses of an ‘institutional substitutability’ premise. That is to say, if other institutional forms at the international level do not have the potential to replace the territorial state, they tend to be regarded as unworthy of serious consideration: interesting in practice, perhaps, but not in theory” (Ruggie 2003: 13).

In the past, research on the power of multinational companies has been primarily conducted in rationalist terms and has been limited to questions of legitimacy and effectiveness of the integration of sustainable development in business strategies (Conzelmann/Wolf 2007).

“In political science, a standard approach to the study of business power has been to treat business actors as interest groups that seek to influence policy outcomes within the state. Just like other interest groups, such as trade unions, consumer associations, activist groups and religious communities, corporate actors possess a specific set of resources that they can use to shape public policy debates and influence decision-making processes. Their overall influence depends on the relative strength of their power resources and the political strategies they employ” (Falkner 2010).

Recently, new theoretical frameworks have been developed in order to shed light on the gap of research and to identify different dimensions of business power in global governance (e.g. Fuchs 2007; Fuchs/Lederer 2007; Falkner 2008; Newell 2004). These approaches commonly observe the growing

importance of the discursive power of business representatives and the lack of studies in this field.

“In consequence, developments in the discursive power of business clearly deserve attention in efforts to explore the role of business in global governance. Unfortunately, discursive power is the least researched of the three dimensions of the power of business³, so that there is a lack of empirical studies in this field” (Fuchs 2007: 140).

Furthermore, there is an apparent need to analyze the discursive usage of development concepts by businesses as both the definitions and the operationalizations of these concepts have consequences for the identification of policy needs and outcomes. Equally, they are of crucial importance in terms of global and national problem solving, connected as well with highly political implications. The use of development concepts influences how policies are formulated and how actors understand their concerns with respect to development and growth. Additionally, the discursive shaping of sustainable development has the ability to draw on new legitimacy sources because it gives new meaning to existing norms.

In order to give answers to the research question, this article draws back on a case study research design. On this note, the discourse of pan-sectoral organized business actors within the business network econsense⁴ provide evidence and examples for studying how private actors intend to exert influence within the system of global governance. The empirical research of this article is based on semi-standardized interviews with econsense members and on the analysis of documents which have been published by econsense and its members and deal with the role of business for

³ Fuchs identifies three dimensions of the power of business in Global Governance: the instrumental, the structural and the discursive (e.g. Fuchs 2007).

⁴ At the time of the data collection for this contribution, econsense consisted of 25 members: Allianz, BASF, Bayer, BMW Group, Bosch, DaimlerChrysler, German Railways, German Bank, German Telekom, EnBW, E.ON, Evonik Industries, Evonik Degussa, HeidelbergCement, Linde, Lufthansa, RWE, SAP, Siemens, Tetra Pak, ThyssenKrupp, TUI, VCI, Vodafone and Volkswagen. Evonik Degussa left the network in 2008. Deloitte joined in 2009 and in 2010 followed Pricewaterhouse Coopers, Ernst & Young AG and the German Stock Exchange.

sustainable development. The interviews were conducted with the econsense-Senior Project Manager and with representatives of Allianz, BASF, Bayer, Bosch, DaimlerChrysler, Deutsche Bahn, Deutsche Telekom, EnBW, Evonik Degussa, HeidelbergCement, Linde, RWE, SAP, Siemens, Tetra Pak, ThyssenKrupp, VCI, Vodafone as well as Volkswagen. Relevant documents include statements of econsense, sustainability reports of econsense members and published interviews with relevant business representatives related to the corporations' sustainable development strategies. In order to allow a theoretically based empirical analysis, this article introduces a constructivist perspective and implements a discourse analytical approach.

A definite assumption of this article is that the formation of sustainable development must be understood from the context of social settings. Political science has thus far failed to pay enough attention to questions of how and why knowledge and power structures are being generated. While scientific studies often search for the causality between human action and political change, this study aims at concentrating on the way discursive power of business is being exercised. What is the role of the determinants 'sustainable development' and 'growth' in corporate discourse? How are these terms differentiated? How are they correlated? What influences the process of discursive shaping?

In order to give answers to these questions this article is divided into four sections. Subsequent to this introduction, the article refers to the case study research design and introduces the business network econsense as a useful and typical example for this study. Third, the concepts of "discourse" and of "discursive power" are exemplified and the methodological approach of this study is briefly pointed out. It is argued that a discourse analytical approach can be useful to analyze the discursive shaping of sustainable development. Fourth, the article sheds light on the question of how econsense members intend to shape the discourse on sustainable development. On this note, this article identifies a discrete type of influence which results from the

constitutive character of discourse. Finally, the last section summarizes the major arguments and outlines some prospects for further research.

2. *Econsense*

The present article takes *econsense* as a typical, relevant and useful example of a business network of transnational organized corporations.⁵ It has a pan-sectoral or cross-sectoral membership base, including chemical, pharmaceutical, automobile, aviation, metal, cement, packing, software, communication and power industries, as well as financial services companies. The business network was established in 2000 and deals exclusively with topics around business and sustainable development. It pursues shaping the discourse on sustainable development by providing dialogues between representatives of corporations, politicians, academics, and other stakeholders. It understands itself as a dialogue platform and think tank for sustainable development which pursues the aim to diffuse sustainable development and corporate social responsibility in the whole world “as ambitious models and guiding principles”. Emphasizing that the technological know-how and the innovation and investment strength of businesses have an important responsibility for the success of sustainable development, the members of *econsense* stress that they

“have pledged to move forward the implementation of these approaches through an open discussion process” (*Econsense* 2009).

Econsense is a non-profit association and is financed by contributions of its members. The network could be regarded as a promoter that helps to change the operations of corporations in favor of sustainable development. Yet, it could also be seen as an organization which engages in significant efforts of

⁵ Small and medium-sized enterprises as well as companies with the origin in developing and newly industrializing countries are not yet members of the business network. Generally, the mentioned enterprises are not so much interested in sustainable development or do not have the necessary material resources in order to integrate sustainable development into their business strategies and to take part in the discursive shaping of the leitmotif, so far. Thus, in place of representativity one should rather use the term relevance.

greenwashing or political greenwashing⁶ and allows businesses to adopt the image of a promoter of sustainable development.

However, the business network attempts to position itself as a leading pro-sustainable development organization. It advocates itself as a solution-provider in the debate on long-term policy and regulations, and has sought to showcase its members as proper stewards of environmental and social objectives, committed to supporting sustainable development. The business platform believes that its proactive and cooperative approach provides it with opportunities to participate in dialogues with governments and other important stakeholders. Thus, a proactive strategy is seen as an effective means to increase influence by falling back on discursive power. This article also aims at questioning the image cultivation by analyzing the way in which econsense members try to shape discourse and by shedding light on the question of how the process of influencing norms, ideas and identities takes place.

It has to be taken into account that econsense is a platform of companies with one base in Germany. One might want to object that analyzing a quasi national organization does not fit well into a global governance debate. However, all companies are globally active and not all of them have their origin and their head office in Germany. Furthermore, econsense cooperates closely with the World Business Council of Sustainable Development (WBCSD)⁷ and, at the European level, with CSR Europe⁸. Consequently, the discourse of econsense and its members on sustainable development provides a useful and typical example for this study.

⁶ 'Greenwashing' refers to efforts by actors to pretend environmentally responsible behavior. 'Political greenwashing' describes efforts to give the impression to support the same goals as policy-makers do, in order to influence political processes.

⁷ The WBCSD is a global business network with around 200 corporations and deals with business and sustainable development.

⁸ CSR Europe is a European association of some 70 corporations. It wants to support business members to integrate Corporate Social Responsibility into their business strategies.

In order to better understand how the discursive shaping of sustainable development can be analyzed, the next section shifts attention to the concepts of discourse and discursive power.

3. Discourse and discursive Power

Discourse should not be considered a synonym for discussion. Discourse is broader and can be defined as

“a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (Hajer 1995: 44).

According to Foucault, power is not only exercised in institutions but also through the shaping of discourses. Discourse is produced in social interaction and should not be primarily perceived as a medium through which individuals can manipulate the world. It is rather itself a part of reality and constitutes the discoursing objects (Foucault 1983).

In the scientific literature, discursive power is often described as the third dimension of power (e.g. Lukes 2005). In contrast to the first and the second face of power, the third one is the most insidious and hidden from view. It is the power to influence desires, thoughts and beliefs.⁹ Thus, discursive power is related to norms, ideas and social interaction:

“Discursive power shapes perceptions and identities and fosters the interpretation of situations as of one type rather than another. Thus, it influences the frames of policy problems and solutions, of actors in the political process, and of politics and the political as such” (Fuchs/Lederer 2007: 8).

Although this article refers to ideas of Foucault it does neither pursue a structuralist analysis nor does it adopt a discourse-theoretical perspective. It rather implements some elements of discourse analyses that build up on

⁹ Furthermore, Lukes underlines the prominent importance of this dimension of power by arguing that “power is at its most effective when least observable“ (Lukes 2005: 64).

Foucault and integrates a social constructivist approach. Thus, discourse is not considered to be structural in nature (Jäger 2004). Much more, it is assumed that both structure and agency play an important role with respect to the power which can be exercised through discourse.¹⁰

However, the approach of this article assumes that the realities of sustainable development and growth are constituted and formed in discourse. Consequently, discourse is not only a dispute about which sorts of action should be taken but it is also a contextual examination about which meaning is given to reality and which interpretation or understanding of sustainable development is enforced. Hence, the theoretical approach is based on the understanding of “discourse as the power-suffused result on many people speaking to each other” (Onuf 2007: xv). The next section aims at shedding light on the discursive shaping of sustainable development by econsense representatives. On this note, the article does also draw back on methodological concepts of discourse analysis.

4. The discursive shaping of sustainable development

In the last years, business has particularly tried to exert discursive power with respect to sustainable development. Regarding environmental topics, the scientific literature particularly observes the shaping of such discourses as “greening of industry”, “green and competitive”, “ecological modernization”, or “corporate environmental responsibility”. Joining social and environmental issues, these concepts have been expanded into the general term of “corporate citizenship” (Fuchs 2005: 151). Nevertheless, the concept of sustainable development has not yet been homogeneously defined, nor can investigations on sustainable development be clearly operationalized. The concept can rather be perceived as a leitmotif or a ‘regulative idea’ (Luks 2000: 13). Interpretations of the concept are heterogeneous and ambivalent (Martin/Benn/Dunphy 2007: 95). However, both its conceptual openness

¹⁰ It has to be taken into account that the scientific literature does often not distinguish between discourse-theoretical and discourse-methodological perspectives. This does unfortunately lead to misunderstandings about the questions of how to understand and how to analyze discursive power.

and its highly persuasive power resulted in an increasing adaptation of the concept by state and non-state actors which filled it with different meanings. At the same time, there is a lack of theoretically based methodological studies which analyze how business representatives take part in the discursive shaping of sustainable development. In order to better understand how discursive power of business is being exercised, this chapter interprets the way econsense members intend to shape the discourse on sustainable development.

In general, for the members of econsense, sustainable development implies economic, social and environmental aspects. According to econsense 'sustainable development' is

“about establishing a balance between economic, social and ecological interests. The principles of sustainable development require the harmonisation and integration of economic, ecological and societal interests – also against the background of global responsibility and the needs of future generations. (...) It is important to realise here that sustainability is more than a pure environmental issue, and can therefore not be reduced to mere ecological interests. It is vital to put to use the whole spectrum of economic and social development opportunities, and understand sustainability as an overarching concept for optimising all three target dimensions (social, ecological and economic)” (Econsense 2009).

The statement above illustrates that 'sustainable development' is seen as a very open concept which allows various interpretations and operationalizations for the individual members of econsense. With regard to the integration of the principles of sustainable development in business's activities, econsense suggests that all of these three interests have to be accommodated in a balanced manner:

“in each specific case, sustainable development means liaising to determine how 'environmentally compatible', 'economically profitable' and 'socially beneficial' can actually be harmonised. It will not be possible in each case to achieve a solution which completely satisfies all needs. Economic success is the essential basis for the achievement of environmental and social objectives.

The responsible and prudent use of all economic resources is the key question in the implementation of a sustainable economy” (Econsense 2009).

It is not surprising that econsense firms work on a variety of issues related to sustainable development. Depending on the corporation’s special interests they engage in diverse panels dealing with special topics on business and sustainable development like demographic change or climate change. Furthermore, they integrate different issues in their sustainability reports. The Allianz Group¹¹ even declares the dismissal of employees as an activity which promotes sustainable development:

“Our commitment to ensuring customer satisfaction involves offering the best-possible value, and this has meant unavoidable reductions in staff numbers. This was not a decision we took easily. It is always sad to have to restructure in this way, but we do so in the knowledge that making these difficult changes will help ensure a sustainable and competitive future” (Diekmann 2007: 2).

This understanding does even imply that sustainable development is not related to social and environmental aims but to the company’s development and especially its economic growth. The German telecommunication company ‘Deutsche Telekom’¹² does not state this so obviously but also refers to its workforce restructuring and the broad range of staff development measures. In contrast to Allianz Group, ‘Deutsche Telekom’ stresses that these activities are necessary because of “profound changes in economic structures and business models” (Deutsche Telekom 2006: 2).

In the end, even the reports about the business’ activities with respect to sustainable development are differently appointed. There exist a few concepts: Corporate Social Responsibility Report, Corporate Responsibility Report, Sustainability Report, Corporate Citizenship Report and so forth. Interviews conducted with business representatives for this study showed that each of these concepts does not have a clear definition nor are there

¹¹ The Allianz Group is a global services provider in insurance, banking and asset management.

¹² Deutsche Telekom is one of the world's biggest telecommunications companies.

conventions in terms of the differences. Thus, sustainable development and Corporate Social Responsibility are in some cases defined synonymously, in other cases they are used differently. Some corporations use the same concept; but each of them rather imposes its individual definition. The definitions may change over time. E.ON used to apply the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility. After some years it changed it to Corporate Responsibility because the company came to the opinion that the term Corporate Social Responsibility emphasized the social dimension of sustainability (E.ON 2008). In order to avoid confusion this article uses the term 'sustainability report' as a unifying set of all concepts.

However, although econsense members have different perceptions about what sustainable development is all about, the econsense network of globally acting companies can be understood as a typical example for a discourse-coalition which draws on common story-lines.

Discourse-Coalition and Story-Lines

While there is a plentitude of actors who take part in the discursive shaping of sustainable development, the business discourse on sustainable development can be described as a discourse-coalition. 'Discourse-coalition' is a concept that assumes

“that in the struggle for discursive hegemony, coalitions are formed among actors (that might perceive their position and interest according to widely different discourses) that, for various reasons are attracted to a specific (set of) story-lines. Discourse-coalitions are defined as the ensemble of (1) a set of story-lines; (2) the actors who utter these story-lines; and (3) the practices in which this discursive activity is based. Story-lines are here seen as the discursive cement that keeps discourse-coalition together. Discourse-coalitions are formed if previously independent practices are being actively related to one another, if a common discourse is created in which several practices get a meaning in a common political project” (Hajer 1995: 65).

Hajer relates this concept to the discourse on ecological modernization, but the business discourse on sustainable development can also be seen as a typical example. It draws on story-lines, reduces discursive complexity and plays an important role in reproducing and transforming discursive order. Moreover, Econsense members organize diverse practices and intend to influence the global sustainable development agenda.

Important story-lines include: The “voluntary” promotion of sustainable development by business actors appears as a positive-sum game, it improves the reputation of the companies, it can be treated as a competitive edge because companies themselves realize that they could profit from this new commitment and it is inalterable because social stakeholder groups had acquired risen expectations of what business representatives should communicate. Furthermore, the role of corporations is presented as indispensable for a sustainable development. In this context it is especially interesting that Econsense tries to strengthen the credibility of the free market economy or to exert influence on political structures:

“Integrated discussions are (...) essential to solve the urgent sustainability issues and their conflicting goals. An integral view is required alongside targeted actions. The role of business on this issue is clear: these challenges cannot be solved without the innovative power of the business world. But the force of innovation requires room to prosper and flourish. Without reliable legislative frameworks, business will not commit itself to making the investments on which the urgently required innovations depend. This applies to short-term decisions, and particularly to long-term innovation decisions which can only be reached in the presence of stable and predictable frameworks” (Econsense 2007: 7).

In addition, it is argued that ecological and social objectives have to be part of a successful business strategy, that sustainable development can be used to influence norms and values, and that the concept combines ecological and social objectives with the principle of economic growth. Growth is for the most part even presented as the predominant objective within the concept of sustainable development as such. Econsense does itself argue that economic

growth is even a contribution to sustainable development since it creates new jobs and promotes innovation and efficiency. Nevertheless, interviews with econsense representatives showed that within the business network there is no unanimity with respect to the differences between the two concepts.

Difference between sustainable development and growth

On the one hand, sustainability reports of econsense members put forward sustainable development and economic growth as necessary and mutually supportive goals. On the other hand, interviews with econsense members showed that there is no unity with respect to the differences between the concepts. While the neoclassical definition of growth generally refers to the increase in the value of goods and services, the perceptions of the interviewed business representatives on the difference between the two terms differ widely. In all, three perspectives can be distinguished:

1. First, some business representatives emphasize the point that sustainable development and growth have to be considered as contradictions. They argue that in contrast to the concept of sustainable development, the term 'growth' could not be divided into ecologic, economic and social objectives. With this in mind, business representatives claim that corporations should integrate sustainable development instead of growth into their business strategies in order to introduce a new strategy.
2. Second, business representatives are of the opinion that there is no difference between the two concepts and that the goal of sustainable development is still economic growth. They stress that growth has to be sustainable growth for corporations and that growth always has to consider economic, social and environmental aspects simultaneously. Based on this perspective, there can be no sustainability without

growth and sustainable development is just a new appellation for the same paradigm.

3. Third, some business representatives argue that the concepts cannot be considered as contradictions but that sustainable development – in contrast to growth – implies an evaluation. Concerning this, some business representatives emphasize that there are three types of growth: One which implies a short-term perspective with negative impacts concentrated on economic success; the second type of growth has neither a positive nor a negative impact, and the third type of growth implies a long-term perspective and refers to a sort of ‘qualitative growth’. This third type of growth may be compatible with sustainable development.

By and large, while sustainable development and growth tend to suffer from conceptual underpinnings and it seems to be difficult to figure out what these terms do exactly mean for a specific corporation and which implications they have. As there is no unity with respect to its definitions, implementations and operationalizations, business representatives have the possibility to fill the concepts with own interests and perceptions. Nevertheless, although a lack of regulation with respect to the term sustainable development can be noticed, the next section of this article argues that corporations are not completely independent in the process of discursive shaping.

Rules and ambivalences of the discourse on sustainable development

Sustainability reports of econsense members frequently emphasize the economic component of sustainable development, which they accuse to be often neglected by other actors. What might be seen as a clever move or trick also reveals ambivalences inherent in the concept of sustainable development. It further implies that the economic, ecologic and social components do not have an a priori harmonic relationship. A naive

understanding of sustainable development might presuppose an outbalanced coalition of economic, ecologic and social dimensions. However, while in some cases the three aspects might interact even synergistically, there exist apparent conflicts in other cases. Industries like the automotive or aviation industry are presently not sustainable in terms of environmental demands but are indispensable with respect to economic and social aspects (transport, working places), taking into account the highly mobile Western lifestyle.

Conceptual differentiations between sustainable development and growth can serve as a first indication for the analysis of discourse-inherent rules. On the one hand, Econsense and its members put forward sustainable development and economic growth as necessary and mutually supportive goals. On the other hand, the priority of economic growth is underlined. The economic growth of corporations is even described as the necessary basis for the economic success of companies in order to give the impression that social and ecological issues can only be considered by having economic success (e.g. Econsense 2008). The use of sustainable development in corporations is so different that corporations partly even describe issues and actions as sustainable which have negative social or ecological impacts. This phenomenon does also indicate that the “new” paradigm of “sustainable development” is preferably taken as the “old” one of economic growth.

Thus, ambivalences can prove to be fruitful ‘find spots’ to analyze the constitutive character of discourse. Ambivalences are able to disclose contradictory descriptions and uncertainties in processes of discursive shaping. Companies try to get over ambivalent challenges by interpreting discursive elements according to their interests and by trying to fade out contradictions. Hence, the analysis of ambivalences points towards a discrete type of influence. In other words, the discursive shaping of sustainable development by business representatives is affected by discourse-inherent rules the corporations have to deal with. The rule of the priority of economic growth, for example, is challenged by new concepts, and

from this breaking point arise conceptual distortions along which the discourse takes place.

Another example is the discourse-inherent ambivalence between preservation and development, between the demands of the present and more or less probable demands of future generations. Econsense does for example try to avoid this ambivalence by linking the term development with the increase of economic productivity and the term preservation with the means of existence of companies. With reference to the demographic change econsense connects, for example, the term “sustainable” with the term “productivity”.

“The deeply ingrained certainty and reliance of Germans and Europeans on the notion that each succeeding generation will have greater strength and resilience than the current active generation because of their greater numbers is no longer viable. The achievement potential of European societies built up to date will only be sustainable if the productivity of the economies in Germany and Europe can be boosted to levels which far exceed anything previously achieved” (Econsense 2006: 6).

In this example econsense uses the concept “sustainable” in order to link it with economic development. Thus, “sustainable” is reduced to economic issues by linking it with the terms “achievement potential” and “the productivity of the economies”.

However, it seems quite obvious that predictions about what will be are uncertain; objectives to be achieved are not self-understood. There is no fixable status quo for an ever changing nature and a restless world. Development is the only alternative, and development consumes resources. While negative impact is secure for a couple of technical applications, others are unknown or yet unknown. Even restrictions which are imposed in favor of sustainability may have a negative impact in unpredictable ways.¹³ The

¹³ See for instance the development of the governance of biofuels. By the time, a series of environmental and social problems of some of the products have been recognized and have pushed civil society groups to raise criticism against this emerging industry. Despite

inherent ambivalences and the uncertainty of predictions along with the plentitude of aims fostered by several agents form the platform for ongoing political negotiations and open a fascinating stage for the political.

A balance between ecological, social and economic interests does not seem probable, at least not over more than just a limited time period. While some major objectives can be formulated, operationalization is another challenge. How can the impact of business activities be measured quantitatively and what does harmonization of the three pillars (economic, ecologic and social) empirically mean? Obviously, a corporation which does not pay enough attention to its economic growth does not have the chance to be successful or survive. Most business representatives do not even pretend to pursue all three pillars equally. They rather emphasize that a corporation must above all pursue economic aims. Moreover, econsense representatives argue that a corporation which actually has big economic problems would not start social or ecological activities unless its survival significantly depends on this engagement.

Ambivalence may also be seen between sustainability inside and outside the corporation. For instance, the transportation company Deutsche Bahn has often been blamed for its high ticket prices. It has been argued that social and ecological objectives could be fulfilled at the same time by reducing prices. More people would take the train instead of the car and people with less money would also have the possibility to travel. Nevertheless, economic objectives would be missed on the side of the corporation. The Deutsche Bahn staff gets elaborated salaries which are said to be only preserved by high ticket prices. Thus, there is a wide spectrum of perceptions regarding the question of what sustainable development is all about and which aspects have to be fulfilled in each specific case. This forms place for an even more fundamental political discourse including different viewpoints.

increasing interests of business and massive support by governments the future of this industry is currently left in question.

5. Concluding Thoughts

The article searched for answers to the question of how corporations implement discursive power in order to shape the discourse on sustainable development. To that end, the discourse of econsense and of its members provided a useful and typical example for a discourse coalition that was built “in the struggle for discursive hegemony” (Hajer 1995: 65) and can be characterized by a set of common story-lines. It was also illustrated, however, that sustainable development is seen as a very open concept which allows various interpretations and operationalizations for the individual members of the econsense network. On the one hand, econsense companies emphasize the economic component within the concept and the sustainability reports put forward sustainable development and economic growth as necessary and mutually supportive goals. On the other hand, there is no consensus with respect to the differences between sustainability and growth. While some corporations emphasize the point that sustainable development and growth have to be considered as contradictions, others identify small differences or are even of the opinion that the two concepts cannot be distinguished.

In general, it can be observed that the pan-sectoral members in the transnational network prefer to use sustainable development instead of growth to describe their own business strategy. Not least because they are confronted with dissimilar expectations, problems and own interests, and because the concept of sustainable development is open enough for corporations to fill it with business interests. Thus, the catchphrase does also serve as a new business strategy which improves the reputation of the companies but allows at the same time pursuing business’ widely differing strategies. Sustainable development can be used in order to legitimize ideas of the business community, to exert influence on structures and to strengthen the credibility of the free market economy.

Furthermore, it was argued that the specific social constructions of the concept of sustainable development demonstrate ambivalences that the corporations have to deal with. Ambivalences served as an indication to

disclose contradictory descriptions and uncertainties in processes of discursive shaping and to analyze the constitutive character of discourse. Obviously, there is another discrete type of influence that can be traced back to discourse-inherent rules. The rule of the priority of economic growth, for example, is challenged by new concepts, and from this breaking point arise conceptual distortions along which the discourse takes place.

However, the construction of the diverse interpretations and forms of implementation of the concept is an ongoing process in which several actors take part. Not only businesses but also national actors and civil society groups try to influence the discourse on sustainable development. On the one hand, the openness of the concept can be regarded as a chance, because its definition can be negotiated through an unbureaucratic and open process. On the other hand, it also contains the danger of dominance of structurally superior actors.

Nevertheless, discourse is produced in social interaction and discourse is itself a part of reality and constitutes the discoursing objects. Accordingly, discursive power is related to norms, ideas and social interaction and is connected with highly political implications. While both the definitions and the operationalizations of these concepts have consequences for the identification of policy needs and outcomes, there exists an urgent need to analyze and assess the discursive use of development concepts by businesses.

To outline some prospects, further research on possibilities of combining the theoretical approach of constructivism with empirical investigations could be of great use for better understanding processes of shaping discourses and the interplay between non-state actors and structures over time. Empirically, research in Political Science has for a long time neglected intensive studies on the discourses of business actors with regard to sustainable development. A number of publications point out the importance of discursive power and underscore the different levels of the power of business but there is still a

need for an examination of the discursive use of concepts by non-state actors – especially corporations. Therewith, a deeper analysis of the discourse on sustainable development of other business networks like the WBCSD, CSR Europe or other organizations dealing with business and sustainable development could be interesting and fruitful. A future, longitudinal analysis of the econsense could be of great use, bearing in mind that there is the possibility to uncover discursive shifts and changes and to better understand the interplay of actors and structures over time. Does the discourse of the business representatives on sustainable development change? And if so, how does it change? Answers to these questions would be useful for improving the understanding of the interplay between discourses, norms, structures and different actors.

Furthermore, the effects of the discursive formations of multinational companies on political decisions have been insufficiently researched so far. To which extent is political action already determined by the discursive influence of multinational corporations? Can the exercise of business discursive power be observed in political processes? And if yes, what impacts do they have on democracy – are they signs of a greater democratization or of a growing influence of economic interests on key environmental and social issues? How are the national and the economic discourse on sustainable development interlinked? Until now, no satisfactory responses have been found to these questions.

While this study was concentrated on an analysis of the business network econsense, it was in a way limited to the OECD-world. At the same time, multinational companies do also exercise discursive power in less developed countries. Especially for the generation of new markets developing and newly industrializing countries seem to have a growing importance. How and why do multinational companies exercise discursive power in developing and newly industrializing countries? What differences can be noticed here in comparison to the discursive power in OECD countries? What role does the exercise of discursive power have for both the countries and the

multinational corporations themselves? What implications does this have for the emergence of functional equivalents of statehood? To better understand the political effects of the shaping of discourses by private actors these developments are especially interesting to observe.

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