

The geo-politics of sustainable development: bureaucracies and politicians in search of the holy grail.

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The geo-politics of sustainable development: bureaucracies and politicians in search of the holy grail

Sonja Boehmer-Christiansen ¹

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Abstract

Debates about implementing 'sustainable development', 'sustainability' or even 'sustainable futures and resource use' are now engaging most intergovernmental and national bureaucracies. The notion itself appears to have replaced or become confused with efforts specifically directed at environmental protection, also a vague and contested notion. The origin, academic approaches and use of the idea is documented and discussed with reference to selected bureaucracies engaged in environmental 'governance'. I ask why and with what impact these bureaucracies have adopted the term in the post cold-war era. The methodology used is political interest analysis: why have bureaucracies adopted the notion so eagerly since the later 1980s? I argue that the sustainability debate served to strengthen bureaucracy during an era when its powers were under attack. The debate promised to extend the role of bureaucracy from that of

agent of policy implementation to that of significant political actor, required to select experts as well as futures. But to what purpose and in whose interest? In seeking 'sustainability' have governments found more than a new tool for governing? I wish to stimulate theoretical and empirical investigations that replace the ubiquitous 'policy-maker' of much academic research with an 'actor' whose spatial nature, political roles and ambitions, as well as legal and resource limitations, are not ignored.



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- The author has worked on environmental policy-making from an International Relations perspective since the mid-1970s, with emphasis on science and politics in marine pollution control, acid rain and climate change. This is my attempt to understand the 'sustainability' dimension of the resulting policies and to present my observations to a geographical audience.

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