

ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE GERMAN STATE OF BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG

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Summary

The term “sustainable development” is a prophetic combination of two words which unites both aspects—economic progress and environmental quality—in one vision. This vision of an economic structure that meets all needs of this generation without restricting the needs of future generations is highly attractive, because it reconciles the terms “economy” and “ecology”—terms seen so often as opposites—and postulates a generally acceptable distribution rule among generations. Lest the concept of sustainable development deteriorate into meaningless pleas, it must be nailed down and laid out into definite requirements. What is needed is a description of the concept that is as exact as possible, and details how to operationalize it. Such a definition should allow for flexibility—but not arbitrariness—in implementing the concept. At the same time, the concept must have the strength of broadly accepted reasons behind it in order to remain applicable above and beyond the interests of the various players involved.

1. Introduction

The concept of “sustainable development” has mushroomed in recent years. It was originally introduced as a microeconomic concept in forestry meaning a strategy aimed at providing wood continuously without wiping out the forest. Since the mid-1980s, however, it has blossomed as a popular catchword to describe a wide range of attempts to correlate economic development with the maintenance of ecological capacity and values. At the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, the concept of sustainable development played a central organizing role. More than 300 pages of recommendations for sustainable development were collected and published as Agenda 21. In addition to the United Nations, many other national and international organizations have jumped on the sustainability

bandwagon. These include the World Bank, ecological research institutes, and corporate groups. Entire new research institutes have been set up throughout the world with “sustainability” as their field of concentration.

The popularity of the term is, of course, no guarantee that it is useful. Indeed one might argue that its broad acceptability is evidence of lack of specific meaning. However, widespread thought, discussion, and the organization of activities around the theme of sustainable development does reflect very widely shared concerns about how human and environmental welfare can be maintained and improved. The objective is to catalyze a public process through which sustainable development can be both conceptualized and made practical for the region defined by the state of Baden-Württemberg.

This objective is fundamentally grounded in ethics. The welfare of future generations is a basic ethical concern, and such welfare embodies both human and environmental values. It is our belief that work within a region offers the best practical hope at this time for developing effective political agreement on a conception of sustainable development and on operations in support of that conception. A political region is large enough to include many communities and economic interests which must be reconciled; thus many of the challenges of sustainability will be engaged. States or regions are small enough, however, for the voices of individual communities and economic sectors to have significant weight, and it is at the community and sector level that there are people and policy instruments prepared to begin the critical moves toward sustainability.

Both conceptual and practical obstacles lie in the path of this program. There is substantial disagreement and uncertainty about the meaning of sustainable development. Broad definitions such as that of the Brundtland Report, “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, p. 387), promote agreement but provide little practical guidance, while attempts at specificity are likely to reveal conflicts in values and interests. Even if there were agreement on a general concept there would be further disagreement about how to apply the concept at a regional level, and any selected approach will raise analytic uncertainties: how are a large number of activities by disparate communities to be amalgamated while simultaneously addressing interactions with entities and systems outside the region. And there are deep strategic differences between those interested in developing a vision of the future, and those whose goal is to identify incremental steps toward improving the future.

Our approach is directed toward encouraging a democratic process leading to practical steps within Baden-Württemberg toward sustainability. The pilot program consists of the following steps:

- An inventory of existing economic structures in Baden-Württemberg: The aim of this survey is to characterize the present situation of the state and to assess the potential for possible conversion processes to reach a more sustainable economic status.

- Conceptualization of the terms “sustainability” and “qualitative growth” and their operationalization for a regional conversion strategy.
- Assessment and analysis of renewable and nonrenewable natural resources, energy needs, and human resources: This assessment provides the basis for identifying those economic sectors for which conversion processes are needed most urgently.
- Quantitative assessment of the carrying capacity and the appropriated carrying capacity for Baden-Württemberg: The goal of this research phase is to identify and quantify the material flows from and into Baden-Württemberg and assess their impacts on sustainability inside and outside the state.
- Formation of a catalogue of indicators for constant measurement of the improvement or deterioration of the quality of the environment in relation to sustainability.
- Drawing up case studies from agriculture, forestry, trades, medium and small enterprises, and waste management.
- Analysis and evaluation of conversion strategies and instruments which promise to facilitate the transition of the present economy into a sustainable economy: A strategy workshop is planned to design efficient, practical, and cost-effective policy tools. The results of this workshop form the basis for multiple workshops with representatives of industry, political and social institutions, and the public.

The enormous variety of approaches, perspectives, and orientations to sustainability pose a particular challenge for this approach, which has its own orientation—namely to further practical near-term steps toward sustainability within Baden-Württemberg and to do so by catalyzing democratic processes. The strategy we have chosen to follow is based on three elements:

1. A recognition that the common elements in people’s various conceptions of sustainable development have substantial political force.
2. Recognition of the great diversity in people’s detailed conception and use of the term sustainable development, and appreciation of this diversity as a potential resource as well as a potential cause of disagreement.
3. A concern for the practical definition and pursuit of these issues over a limited time in a specific region.

This strategy consists of the following steps which will be described in detail in the next sections:

- (a) construction of a broad working definition of sustainable development which, we hope, will achieve general acceptance;
- (b) development of a set of operating understandings or principles which reflect the diversity of perspectives;
- (c) development of the concept of “qualitative growth” as a basis for considering incremental economic change;

(d) characterization of sustainability within a region including its links to the outside world; and

(e) development of operational principles to serve as practical guidance for bringing about substantial progress toward sustainability within the region.

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Biographical Sketches

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