

**Good Leadership and Sustainability – Attitude, Agency and Structure.
The congruence of leadership ideals in developing and modern states and its
consequence for sustainable development.**

Habilitation concept paper

With more recent increase in knowledge about climate change, sustainability has developed from a disputed concept towards an acknowledged necessity. Current media reporting focuses on consumer attitude change and technical solutions of eco-efficiency, while organizational problems or structural change do not feature prominently, except in some suggestions put forward by NGO thinkers (Hawkins, Monbiot, Korten). In this respect, these suggestions target a problem which has occupied modern social science for some years now: the relation between structure and agency (Giddens, Bourdieu). This study focuses on the role of leadership within organizations as the appropriate locus for the changes needed to achieve sustainable solutions. The central argument is that sustainability requires equitable access to resource use because the biologically anchored human “sense of justice” simply cannot tolerate unfair distributions in the long run. (Injustice itself is unsustainable) Decisions for a more fair distribution can only be made in positions of leadership – and only by people who want to do more than simply exercise a function defined in an existing structure: by people who want to *exercise* “leadership” as defined similarly in both very traditional contexts (and here the study draws on empirical material from the LAGSUS research project) and in modern industrial contexts (and here the study draws on literature from management as well as NGO contexts). From this juxtaposition of empirical material and literature review the conclusion is drawn that the role of (social) science itself is affected: to maintain or rebuild its public credibility, a publicly acknowledged engagement in action research to create the structural conditions for sustainable solutions to resource use seems a plausible way. This will necessarily involve cooperation with actors from different spheres of society, including presently opposing sections such as business leaders and environmental or social activists from the NGO sector – and in both cases “building trust” could be the “label” and criterion for such engagement.

Chapter One: From normative concept to acknowledged necessity: the concept of sustainability

Traces the history of the concept of sustainability from the Brundtland report over the Millennium Development Goals to the concept of “ecological footprint” (including the earlier concept of “ökologischer Rucksack” in Germany), and argues that the most recent reports of IPCC have given the concept of sustainability an new urge. At the same time there is a danger that the focus on climate change will lead to an increased attention to technical issues, rather than issues of distributional justice, which are central to the concept of sustainability.

Chapter Two: Organizing sustainability: the need for equitable solutions

This chapter picks up existing arguments that an equitable distribution of resources is central to achieving sustainability: without present-day equitable distribution it is impossible to achieve the long-term inter-generational equitable distribution of resources characteristic for sustainable solutions. The chapter expands the discussion by claiming the existence of a “common sense of justice” as a biological – but culturally mediated - characteristic of human beings, based on evidence from interviews in different continents and more recent biological research results. It is suggested that the space for cultural modulations of the biological “sense of justice” is limited – and hence the possibilities of making unequal distributions appear justified and legitimate (which are at the core of Bourdieu's theory)

Chapter Three: *Equitable Solutions and Leadership: The congruence between “indigenous” and “modern” concepts of “good leadership*

This chapter draws attention to the congruence between concepts of “good” leadership in modern management and NGO literature (particularly in the context of sustainability) and images of good leadership as expressed by leaders and “followers” in countries as different as Indonesia, Namibia, Uganda, and Ivory Coast. Three aspects are treated in more detail:

- a) intellectual capacity (refers to knowledge of facts, problem solving, and vision)
- b) communication skills (listening skills and respect for the “followers”; building trust; recognizing and mediating conflicts between followers; mediating between followers and external agents)
- c) personal skills (“self-mastery” and giving a model of ethical behaviour – including a fair management of access to and distribution of resources)

The literature: “No fear management” “Leading quietly” “sustainable leadership” “Social problems and the CEO, Harvard Business Review; literature on trust

Chapter Four: *Structures and Leadership: The necessity of the “right” attitude at the top of hierarchies*

The problem of the relationship between structure and agency has a long history in the social sciences, and more recently, solutions have been proposed by Giddens and by Bourdieu. This chapter argues that Bourdieu's concept of the interplay between “field” and “habitus” allows a more accurate understanding of structural change than Giddens' concept of “structuration”: It argues that Bourdieu's concept can be understood as offering a space for structural change through individual change – if scientists can overcome the unconscious nature of habitus by self-reflection in their work, others may achieve this in their own positions within the “field” as well. Thus, it is possible to loosen the binding nature of habitus and initiate deliberate action aimed at changing the “rules of the game” – and the concomitant structures of or in organizations - in a way not exclusively dictated by considerations of the accumulation of the various forms of capital, as Bourdieu suggests: This is what is required for sustainability: the mechanisms for access to and distribution of resources need to be changed beyond simple changes of consumer behaviour. The point is that such changes can only be made by people in leadership positions (because that is where the requisite knowledge and formal authority is located) – and they can only be made if those filling the leadership positions can find an alternative grounding for making decisions than the logic of the accumulation of capital (in all the various forms described by Bourdieu): if they can change their attitudes towards a logic of cooperation, as advocated by various voices, and as recently found more congruent with “human nature.”

This chapter will also contain a short review of contrasting theories of power as the concept through which the differential radius of action of different actors (according to their positions in power structures and/or their accumulated power resources (have been explained). It is argued that the concepts of “power with” or “power to” which have more recently been developed in participatory approaches to development offer an alternative to the traditional social science view of “power over” – and hence offer a *theoretical* position for the cooperation between “leaders” – who are “power-holders.” i.e. decision-makers within organizational hierarchies - and both “followers” and the “general public” at which the majority of current NGO-activities is directed.

Chapter Five: *Structural Change and Social Science: The need for action research as engaged science*

Having shown in previous chapters that *theoretically* change is possible through deliberate action “at the top” – motivated by insight into necessities (including public pressure) *and* personal attitudes (psychological needs as well as ethical / spiritual orientations) – through the

creation of spaces for self-organizing activities “from the bottom” within existing hierarchies, through -changes in the “operating procedures” of hierarchies, as well as by changing the hierarchies themselves, this chapter argues that such changes (described as necessary in preceding chapters) can be assisted by scientists through a more direct involvement in these changes. “Actors” who are confronted with a lack of time for reflection as one of the preconditions for struggling within their respective “fields,” could gain from the scientists who enjoying the advantage of having time for reflection offered by the field of science – and scientists could gain a better understanding of the nexus between action and reflection by engaging at least part of their time in action under the condition of the actors they work with, i.e. they could gain a better understanding of “praxis” in Bourdieu’s sense: they would gain a direct understanding of the extent to which involvement in a field of action limits or fosters self-reflection – including not only issues of effectiveness, but also of justice – and the building of trust seen as necessary for all forms of cooperation.

It is argued that an open (transparent) “support for trust” suffices as a criterion for engagement in action research – both as an ethical decision-criterion for the choice of engagement for the researcher(s), as an orientation-criterion for the “clients” of such research (who then have a transparent indicator for the success of the research enterprise as well as the credibility of the researchers), and finally for rebuilding the lost trust of the public in a science often seen as compromised through funding from industry.

Finally, the chapter suggests a “tool” for the achievement of such credibility both within the action research contexts and in the communication with the public: “collaborative self-reflection” - which refers to a dialogue between actors engaging in authentic self-reflection *about* that self-reflection. In the case of action research for the support of trust this becomes the dialogue between a scientist reflecting on how s/he gains knowledge about the building of trust and actors engaged in activities in which trust plays a more or less central role, reflecting about their activities. It is suggested that “trust” is a suitable general criterion because – as the “common sense of justice”- gaining trust is a biologically anchored human capacity which can only be tricked to a certain extent. “Authenticity” – which has been discovered as an essential element of both NGO activities and leadership in management contexts – may be hard to define – but is even harder to fake.

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