

### Sociological theory and evaluation research: an application and its usability for evaluating sustainable development

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# **Sociological Theory and Evaluation Research**

**An Application and its  
Usability for Evaluating  
Sustainable Development**

**Wolfgang Meyer**

**2002**

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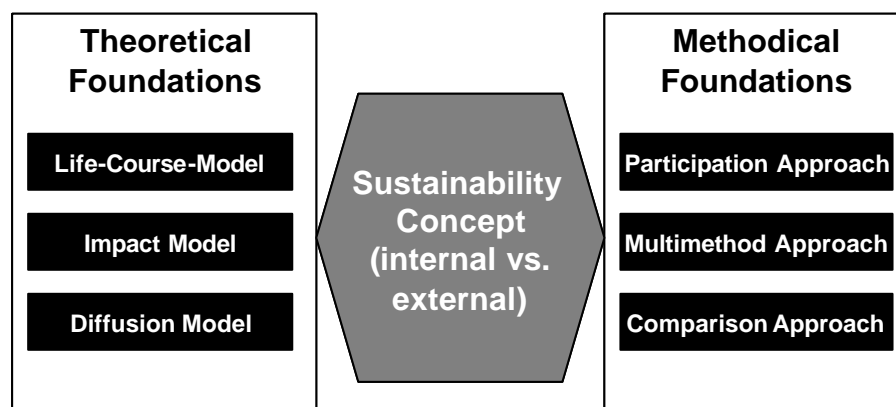
## 1 INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

From the viewpoint of sociology, projects and programs are primarily social interventions within a given social system, arousing social processes which change at least to some extent the social structures and institutions of this system and the social behaviour of its members. The topics of projects and programs are no more than one of the framing conditions of social processes which might have some indirect effects transmitted by subjective judgements of actors and the adaptability of social systems.

Sociological theories try to describe common aspects of assorted social systems, to detect driving forces beyond social change, and to explain causal relationship between different variables within a social process. Therefore, sociological theories should be used as guidelines for evaluation, helping us to understand the impact of social interventions and to focus on the important influencing factors.

As an example for the use of sociological theory for evaluation, this paper will present a concept for ex-post-evaluations of political programs and projects, developed by Reinhard Stockmann in the early 90s (cf. Stockmann 1992, 1996, 1997). Originally used for vocational training projects in the framework of development aid programmes, it has been proved as a useful tool in several countries in four of the five continents on earth and successfully adapted to different other topics. Among others, this evaluation concept has been applied for evaluating environmental communication programmes in the Federal Republic of Germany (cf. Stockmann et al. 2001; Meyer 2002a,b).

**Figure 1: Stockmann's Evaluation Concept**



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This evaluation concept is composed of three main elements (figure 1):

- *theoretical foundations* consisting of three different scientific models derived from sociological theories which complement each other;

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been presented on the EASY-ECO I Conference May 23-25 2002 in Vienna. Additionally it has been published on the conference homepage at "www.nachhaltigkeit.at".

- *methodical foundations* bringing together three more or less different methodological approaches; and
- *a sustainability concept* with its central differentiation between internal and external sustainability of impacts.

The presentation of this evaluation concept<sup>2</sup> will be limited to its theoretical foundations in sociology (chapter 2). The general question here is, whether evaluation concepts basing on different scientific perspectives are useful for evaluating sustainable development processes. To answer this question, a common understanding of sustainability is needed. One suggestion connecting the micro-perspective of impact sustainability, inherent to the presented evaluation concept, and the macro-perspective of sustainable development of societies with its global dimension will be outlined in chapter 3. Finally, the theory-driven evaluation approach of Reinhard Stockmann will be discussed in behalf of its usefulness for evaluating sustainable development.

## 2 SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND THE EVALUATION CONCEPT

Theory-driven evaluations (e.g. Chen 1990; Chen & Rossi 1980) have two main advantages: on one hand, theories guide the evaluation process by telling evaluators which questions should be asked, which causal linkages should be identified, and how the findings can be ordered and classified. On the other hand, evaluation results help social scientists to clear-cut common research questions, to test thesis logically derived from basic theories, and to verify general formulated classification systems for its usability. Stockmanns evaluation concept, as mentioned before, is based on three interrelated theoretical models. These models are widely recognised and acknowledged not only in sociology but also in various other disciplines of social sciences and its theoretical assumptions are proved by an impressive amount of empirical research. Nevertheless, in all these research fields (life-course, organizational, and diffusion research) new findings will always lead to slightly modifications for clarifying specific issues and findings from evaluation studies are contributing to this process. Accordingly, the evaluation framework presented here is steady in its basic elements, but always changing in its specific details not only because of the need for adaptation to a broad range of evaluation topics.

The concept of *life-course research* designates an interdisciplinary program of research that has emerged in the last twenty years and whose goal is “the reproduction and explanation of the living situations and events within the lives of individuals as well as of overall societal processes within a standardized, formal, categorical, and empirical frame of reference” (Mayer 1990: 9). The individual life-course in focus is recognized as a structured sequence of activities and events framed by institutionalised sequences of positions and transitions which determine the opportunity structures of individual decisions at each different point in time by using age-based legal norms or other forms of culturally based selection mechanisms. Originally developed for the sociological analysis of individual life courses, this model also have

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<sup>2</sup> The description of the evaluation concept is in main parts a shortened and updated version of passages from Stockmann (1997), which is recommended for further information. The use of this text occurs by permission of the author.

been used as a heuristic, explanatory framework in other scientific disciplines like for instance psychology or business administration. In economics, for example, the sequence of product cycles is studied in order to be able to evaluate and compare the life-long effects of different product variations (cf. Schmidheiny 1992: 27). In organizational research, the life-course model influenced several theoretical developments in evolutionary and population ecology (cf. Hannan & Freeman 1998, 1989; Carroll 1988; Kieser 1988, 1989, 1992, 1993). All these different approaches share a common definition of life-course as a “continuous succession of event-defined phases” (Friedrichs & Kamp 1978: 16), which are linked by an endogenous causal relationship on the temporal axis.

Referring to this theoretical tradition, the ongoing history of projects can be characterized in the following way:

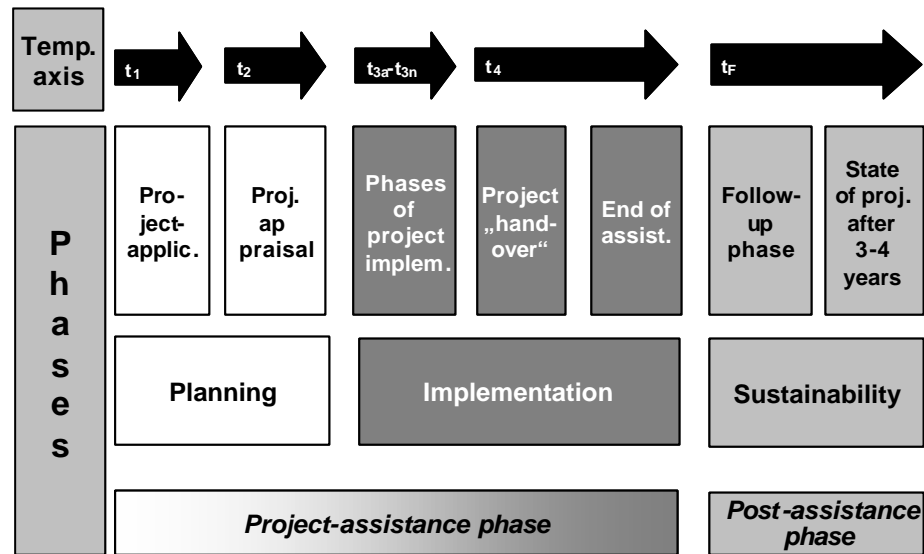
The “birth” of a project is marked by the communication of “project ideas”, ranging from voiced suggestions to well-prepared proposals. Developed by various actors with the most diverse of interests, this “project ideas” always *aim at the improvement of social action* for goal attainment and in almost any case a variety of social groups is getting involved in project realization. Therefore a more or less formal *application procedure* is necessary before a project is official started. For example, within international cooperation projects agreements between the contributing nation states, state agencies and/or private enterprises have to be signed, which sometimes deserves long-standing negotiations. Commonly, the project itself is carried out by only one executing agency under its own authority, *implementing innovative measures and processes within its social system*. During this implementation process, external supporting organizations have to be informed about the projects progress by regular reports. Project assistance definitively ends with the submission of a final report which should provide information about objective achievement, project impacts, and experiences gained. As far as most sponsors and stakeholders equate the “life of the project” with its implementation process, the period following the end of project assistance seldom gain the needed attention. Nevertheless, *the sustainability of impacts reached by project intervention will not show before the end of external support*.

In summary, the life-course of a project can be roughly divided into three primary phases: in donor-supported (a) planning and (b) implementation phases during the period of assistance, and (c) in the period following completion of donor assistance (the sustainability phase), when the project is continued under the exclusive direction of the implementation agency (cf. Fig. 2).

As mentioned above, the formulation of project idea, in most cases to be found in aid applications can be taken to mark the beginning of the life-course of a project ( $t_1$ ). The different phases of a project ( $t_2$ - $t_4$ ) can be distinguished from one another by using the self-defined stages in project applications. The end of project assistance is normally well-defined and characterized by the removal of external experts and the discontinuation of donor aid. To define the closing stages of project ( $t_f$ ) is by far more difficult, for even if the donor organisation has terminated all direct assistance and the project organization has been dissolved, the established structures should (and in most cases will) continue to produce effects. Therefore the retreat of external support only marks the entrance of the project into a new and very critical phase of its “life”. Now the implemented problem-solving model and the developed measures have to show their capacities without the donor’s assistance and without the special status guaranteed by the project agreement. It is only in this “proving” phase that it can

be seen whether a project has achieved sustainability or not. In general, the “proving” phase is also marked by ongoing (but less documented and observed) changes of the applied structures and measures, primarily needed to adapt the project infrastructure to the modified situation after the retreat of donor’s assistance. The “real end” of a project is the slowly transfer of innovations implemented by the project to some kind of durable “routine of action”.

**Figure 2: Life-Course Model**



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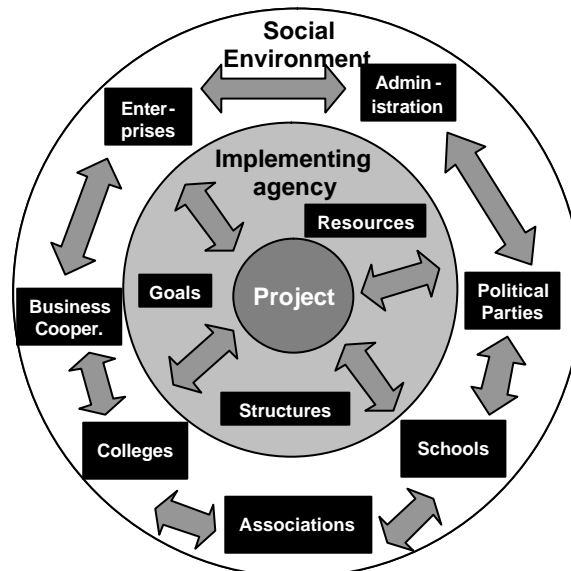
Life-course research is not limited to describe such kind of historical processes but also tries to explain them by using theoretically derived models (including both internal dynamics and exogenous influences) at well-defined points of transition. Hence, one important contribution of life-course research to the evaluation concept presented here is to put the focus on different transition points in project history (e.g. the beginning and the end of external support) and to use the former historical development as one important explaining factor. However, life-course research also shows, that the explanation of social processes can not be reduced to self-determined historical evolutions but have to be supplemented by causal impact models linking different aggregation levels of social systems.

How different elements of social environment effects the performances of one social actor and, vice versa, how the behaviour of a single actor is contributing to social change on macro levels of society, are leading questions for sociology since its beginning. Hence, sociological theory in general is trying to develop useable *impact models* which are able to include causal linkages between different levels of social aggregation. For evaluation research, three different aggregate levels of social systems could roughly be distinguished: projects, organizations, and the social environment (which of course could be differentiated in several elements by a great amount of criteria varying with research questions or the peculiarities of an individual case study). Such kinds of interrelationships are in focus of *organizational theories* and therefore should be added to the evaluation concept on the next step.



Projects are embedded within the organizational structures of an *implementing agency*, e.g. business enterprises or non-profit organizations. In principle, the interventions of a project can be oriented toward the creation of (internal) changes in the implementing organization itself as well as in other (external) social systems. As a result, the implementing organizations can be objects that are transformed, but they can also serve as transmitters for the diffusion of innovatory processes. According to this view, projects are organizational means to influence *surrounding social systems*. Project inputs, organizational capacities of implementing agencies and several determining factors from the social environment represent the independent variables and general contextual conditions for the achieved project results, both intended and unintended. The interdependence of various factors on different aggregation levels can be schematically represented in figure 3.

**Figure 3: Impact Model**



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One highly recommended paradigm of organization theory conceives organizations as open social systems that are – according to intention – rationally organized in order to achieve specific *goals* (cf. Kieser 1993: 161ff., Thompson 1967: 66ff.). The (more or less) functional organizational *structure* tries to bring the activities of their members and the needed investment of their financial and technical *resources* into a common line. According to this theoretical paradigm, three main elements of organizations can be distinguished:

- **Goals:** The pursuit of goals is seen as the main reason for the formation of organizations (cf. Barnard 1938: 37). Goals produce common points of reference among participants (cf. Blau & Scott 1963: 2f.; Mayntz 1977: 58ff.). In general, organizations develop interrelated *target systems* by building a hierarchical and horizontal order of their set of goals. Therefore, the embeddedness of project goals within organizational goal systems has to cause attention during evaluation.
- **Structures:** The *formal structure* of an organization refers to the relatively stable network of social relationships that assigns individual members a definite position. Moreover,

formal structures produce relatively constant behavioural patterns leading to *routine processes* within organizations. In addition, *informal relations and informal communication processes* determine individual behaviour. Characteristic for these kind of *network structures* are the leading forces of “trust” (because the cooperation is voluntary) and “weak ties” (instead of formally fixed and strongly regulated relationships) linking individuals (cf. Brunsson 1985; Chisholm 1989; Kersten 1998; Lane & Bachmann 1998; Marin & Mayntz 1991; Weyer 2000). For projects the successful and durable integration of its infrastructure in existing formal and informal structures within the implementing agency is of great importance.

- *Resources: Members of organizations* are the main “tools” of an organization. The capacity of individuals to fulfil the demands of their assigned position within the organization depends on several factors e.g. formal education, task specific training, appropriate job experiences, motivation etc. The importance of *financial resources* is similar obvious: without funding or self-financing, no organization can secure its long-term existence. Finally, the *technology* used to realize the goals of the organization should be mentioned. On one hand, existing organizational resources and their availability for the purposes of the project are limiting factors for the possibilities to achieve its goals. On the other hand, projects are merely implemented to improve such personal, financial, or technical resources.

Furthermore, the internal project outputs (the organizational dimensions changed by project outputs) become the independent variables with which changes in sectors outside of the implementing organization are to be produced. These external sectors (such as the political, the economical, or the ecological system) now take on the role of dependent variables. Since environmental projects always wants to achieve certain impacts outside the implementing agency (e.g. improving the ecological quality), the *diffusion* of output is one important criteria for evaluating project’s effectiveness.

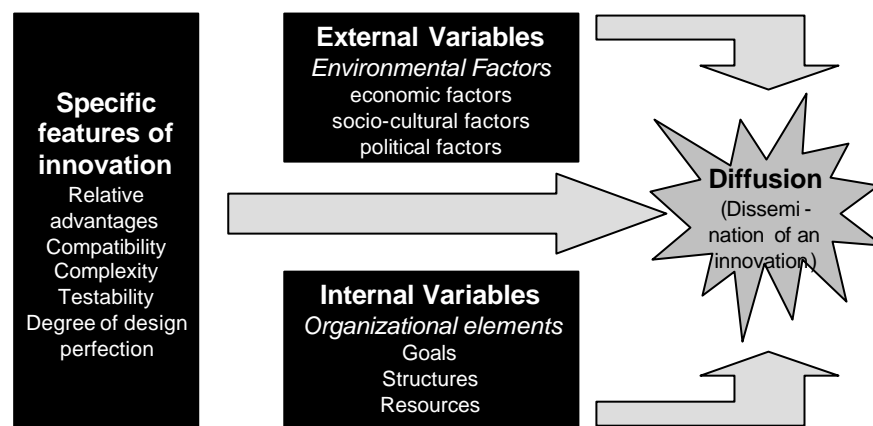
Sociological *diffusion studies* (c.f. Rogers 1995: 38ff.) consider the social conditions for spreading social innovations. For this purpose, diffusion is defined as “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (Rogers 1995: 5). Mohr (1977: 19ff.) identified three groups of variables influencing this process (figure 4):

- The first group refers to the *specific qualities of the given innovation* itself as they have been observed and judged by those people concerned by implementation processes. Numerous studies show that the chances of adapting an innovation will be greater “the more advantageous, the more compatible with existing production conditions, the less complex, the more testable and observable the innovation appears to the user” (Mohr 1977: 60). These specific qualities are not “naturally” inherent but ascribed characteristics, sometimes mainly a result of prejudice against the new techniques or measures within the group of potential users.
- Another important source of influencing factors are elements of the formal and informal *structure of organizations* that introduce innovations: Are those innovations compatible to adapters goal system, do they have enough personal, financial and technical capacities for implementation, are their organizational structures suitable for implementation and are they involved in communication networks which are appropriate for spreading the

knowledge about innovations?

- Furthermore, the *social environment of the diffusion process* has to be taken into account. In most cases, political and economic institutions (e.g. environmental laws, labour market) and actors (e.g. political parties, enterprises) are important for project success. By comparing different societies, socio-cultural factors (e.g. working attitudes) proved to have serious effects as well (cf. Stockmann et al. 2000: 258ff.; Stockmann 1997: 172ff.; Stockmann & Leicht 1997: 104ff.). This can also be verified in transnational diffusion processes (cf. Becker et al. 2001: 331ff.).

**Figure 4: Diffusion Model**



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To sum up this short description of theoretical foundations and sources of the evaluation concept presented here, the integration of three different theoretical approaches derived from sociological theory have to be mentioned. The *life-course model* represents the point of departure: it emphasizes a temporal perspective and the processual character of projects. According to this model, projects constitute themselves out of a series of sequential and distinguishable phases. The individual phases are interconnected and causally linked along the temporal axis.

As far as the life-course model does not give any generalised advice on causal relationship between variables at different points of time, additionally an *impact model* is needed. The one used here is derived from organization theory. According to this model, organizations are open social systems that aim to create rational structures for the achievement of specific goals. The constitutive features of an organization are: its goal-system, formal and informal structures and networks, and their technological, financial and personal resources. By analysing the project's impact on and the interrelationship of these elements over time, the changing problem-solving capacities of the project-implementing organization during project's life can be observed.

Finally, to answer the question of the extent and the process of external diffusion of project innovations, the results of sociological *diffusion studies* have been introduced. According to this, the subjective judgement of innovations attributes and features, the organizational capacity to spread these innovations, and the social conditions of such a diffusion process must be analysed. Since the aim of projects is to produce impacts that go beyond the confines of the implementing organization itself, the diffusion effects achieved represent a further important criterion for assessing sustainability.

### 3 MICRO- AND MACRO-PERSPECTIVE OF SUSTAINABILITY

The term “sustainability” has been used for more than twenty years in project management literature to describe the durability of intervention impacts. Therefore, in difference to the now dominating sustainable development debate which limits the use of this idiom to macro-processes (e.g. global development or at least the development of whole societies), “sustainability” refers particularly to the micro-level of social change which is directly associated with projects and programs. However, even if attention is restricted here to this long-standing scientific debate on the micro-level aspects of sustainability, no common understanding of sustainability can be found.

Among the huge amount of more or less different definitions, especially the categorical schema developed by Elshorst proved to be useful. Elshorst (1993: 132f.) considers a “hierarchy of sustainability”, which distinguishes four different stages:

- (1) *Project-oriented sustainability*: structures and measures developed through the implementing phase are continued without any fundamental changes;
- (2) *Production-oriented sustainability*: the implemented structure is able to continuously adapt the developed measures to the changing needs of the target-population;
- (3) *System-oriented sustainability*: the effects achieved are not only limited to the point of project intervention, but are also able to improve the performance of the embedding social system as a whole;
- (4) *Innovation-oriented sustainability*: the effects within a social system are not only limited to the impact of structures and measures developed during implementing phase of the project, but generate the capacity to develop innovations in order to adapt the implemented structures and measures to changing conditions of the embedding social system as a whole.

Although these four categories are more likely different dimensions of sustainability than a hierarchy, they help to classify the various definitions of sustainability, which are merely concerned with the first two categories. According to Elshorst’s understanding, the definitions limited to the first dimension of sustainability are too strongly project oriented and lack a development-oriented perspective, increasing the danger of producing only some “islands” of success (cf. also Braun 1993: 26). Those definitions tied to an output- (or production-) oriented understanding of sustainability are not able to overcome this disadvantage. In addition, concentrating on outputs might reduce the focus only to the goals pursued and therefore only

intended effects will be perceived. Even the few definitions including the third aspect of sustainability mentioned by Elshorst are limited, neglecting the creation of problem-solving institutions within a social system as a result of single projects or programs.

Actually, the main goal of “sustainable development” is a fundamental change of social systems including new innovative capacities for permanent adaptation to changing conditions. Thus, especially impacts on the last dimension of sustainability should be reached by project and programs contributing to this target. While reaching this target, the precise ascription of the impact of original project interventions to effects measured in future times will become increasingly difficult. By achieving the capacity to innovate, structures and measures created during the lifetime of project assistance will move away from their original form with every adaptation process. Contrarily, keeping a structure or a measure once developed for ever will surely lead to new problems and limitations caused by changing needs and claims of the social environment.

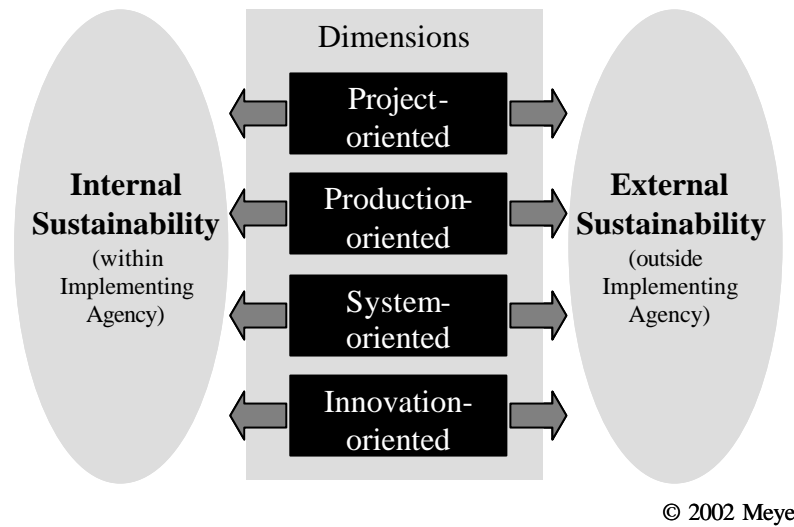
Having this in mind, a structural and a dynamic component of sustainability can be distinguished (cf. USAID 1987:14):

- On one hand, sustainability can refer to those *structures and institutional regulations* created during implementing phase as *performance potential* to act in conformity with project objectives (“*what is left behind*” - UNDP 1988:14).
- On the other hand, sustainability focuses the *performance* ability of the structures implemented to provide the *services and tasks* for project’s target groups even after the ending of outside support (“*what is set in motion*” - UNDP 1988: 14).

Due to the fact that the structural component (“what is left behind”) focuses mainly on the development *within* the implementing agency, this aspect of impact sustainability has been called “*internal sustainability*”. In opposite, the dynamic part (“what is set in motion”) refers principally on the development *outside* the implementing agency and is therefore termed “*external sustainability*” (Stockmann 1997: 94f.). For *internal sustainability*, the existing structure of implementing agency at the time of ex-post evaluation should not only be compared with the originally planned and implemented infrastructure, but it should also be asked whether it is (still) able to produce innovations confirming with project objectives. For *external sustainability*, the analysis of dynamics caused by these activities should not be limited to the target population and its reaction, but should also include observable impacts in other social environments. The limits of this investigation should be revealed.

By adding the different aspects mentioned here, one will get an impact sustainability concept consisting of two components and four dimensions as presented in figure 5.

Figure 5: Impact Sustainability Concept



Thus, eight different areas of sustainability can be distinguished for evaluating the durable impacts of project interventions. The social theory-driven evaluation concept briefly outlined in this paper is able to capture these research fields and to answer the guiding research questions summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Research Fields for Impact Sustainability

<i>Dimensions of Sustainability</i>	<i>Internal Sustainability</i>	<i>External Sustainability</i>
Project-oriented Sustainability	Project infrastructure (e.g. project staff) is still existing within the implementing agency	Products and services developed during implementing phase are still available for the target group
Production-oriented Sustainability	Structural changes of the project infrastructure occurred for improving the offered services due to target groups demands	Products and services developed during implementing phase have been updated and adapted to changing needs of target group
System-oriented Sustainability	Comparable infrastructure with similar tasks have been build up in other organizations and became some kind of standard	Products and services developed during implementing phase have become of common use within the whole social system
Innovation-oriented Sustainability	New-build institutions within the social system guarantee a constant progress of the infrastructure and its innovative capacity	New-build institutions within the social system guarantee a constant progress of products and services due to the needs of the target group



As already mentioned before, during the 90s a significant change in scientific discussion on sustainability has to be noticed. Moreover, increasing public interest accompanied this academic debate, especially compared to the highly specialised and very small circle of project management experts discussing the topic of impact sustainability until then. Turning point was the so-called “Brundland-report” of the World Commission on Environment and Development, published in 1987. This report defined a development ‘that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission 1987: 8) as “sustainable development” and opened a new public discussion on “sustainability”. In the following years, some basic agreements were signed by political decision-makers from most countries in the World. Especially the World Summit in Rio de Janeiro 1992 and the Agenda 21 were important milestones on the new pathway of global policy. Although a lot of too optimistic expectations had been disappointed, this kick-off led to a bunch of activities on global, national, and local level of politics since then.

In spite of this on-going and still increasing public attention, there is up to now no general agreement on what “sustainable development” really should be and how it can be reached by global policy. While most authors refer to the Brundland-definition of “sustainable development”, specification problems associated with this definition are still unsolved (as a summary of the scientific debate on sustainable development see Minsch 1993). The suggestion here is to understand sustainable development (the macro-perspective of sustainability) as a *social integration process on three different dimensions*:

- As mentioned in the Brundland-definition, sustainability should be the *integration of needs between different generations of human beings*. This means incorporation on the *time-dimension*, with the demand to include a long-term perspective into nowadays political decisions.
- These political decisions can not be assigned to one specific level of political institutions, but requires horizontal and vertical linkages of policies. Local action for sustainable development has to be framed by national regulations, which itself have to be harmonized with global agreements. Therefore, new institutions to organise such a comprehensive decision process *integrating several territorial levels of political action* have to be developed within the political system.
- Finally, sustainable development needs to be supported by different social groups with diverse interests. Therefore, new forms of governance including the civil society and NGO’s into political decision processes are needed. Moreover, corporate social responsibility for sustainable development has to be developed within each sub-system of society. Broadly discussed was the *integration of ecological, economical, and social targets*, offering the chance to include environmental and social aspects in business decisions and to legitimate business action from a social and environmental policy view (cf. Minsch 1993:9).

These three aspects – target, territorial, and time-integration – seem to be the common understanding of sustainable development, irrespective of different connotation or main emphasises. Thus, projects aiming to support sustainable development can be judged by their contribution to these three aspects of social integration. Furthermore, their interventions should lead to durable progress – and this is the linkage to the micro-perspective on impact sustainability. To sum it up: an evaluation of sustainable development has to measure

changes of social integration on target-, territorial-, and time-scales. Sustainable betterment of actual integration structures and processes on a societal level needs sustainable impacts of political programs and projects on the micro-level. Moreover, newly implemented structures need to be able to adapt themselves continuously to changing societal conditions (innovation-oriented sustainability).

#### 4 USABILITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Stockmann's evaluation concept basing on social theories has obviously some strong advantages for the target of evaluating sustainable development:

- This evaluation concept *considers each type of impact sustainability* on the micro-level of programs and projects. Especially it is able to capture the aspect of "innovation-oriented sustainability", which is seldom recognized by evaluation studies or sustainability definitions – but which is also of prior importance for sustainable development processes and its evaluation.
- The social theories used as a fundament of this evaluation concept are highly acknowledged not only in sociology but also in several other scientific disciplines. Their general formulations are open for adaptation to a great variety of research topics. Nevertheless, they are also precise enough to develop testable thesis. Thus, Stockmann's evaluation concept proved to be *useful for a huge range of applications*.
- All three dimensions of social integration important for sustainable development are mentioned by this evaluation concept: "Targets" and "Territorial" (represented in the "multi-level"-character of the impact model) social integration are key elements of organizational theories as well as "Time"-integration is the central aspect of life-course-models. Therefore, Stockmann's evaluation concept seems to be *well-prepared for evaluating sustainable development projects*.

Although the evaluation concept presented here seems to be quite useful for evaluating sustainable development, some limitations have to be stated here, too:

- Stockmann's evaluation concept is *strongly restricted to the micro-level* of program and project evaluation. A transfer to the macro-level of societies would extremely increase the complexity of this method, making it almost impossible to handle it.
- Although all three dimensions of social integration have been recognised, the analytical focus is the project under investigation. Thus, social integration of targets is limited to stakeholders and their interests, social integration of territories is limited to implementing agencies and their immediate social environment, and, finally, social integration of time is limited to "life-time" of projects. Doubtless this perspective is not *able to catch all facets of sustainable development*.
- Finally, sustainable development is not *restricted to the social dimension* of projects and programs. Of course, the environmental impact as well as the economical impact has to be measured adequately and evaluated by appropriate methods. Therefore, evaluation concepts from other scientific disciplines must be added to Stockmann's sociological concept. Nevertheless, this seems to be an easier task than the other ones above.



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