BUSINESS POWER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF DISCOURSES

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Abstract

Significant attention has recently been paid to the role of business in global governance. There is a general 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). Changing attitudes, expectations of investors and public pressures have urged businesses to integrate ecological and social norms into their practices. Recently, business representatives have begun to create networks that contribute to shaping the sustainable development agenda by influencing the establishment of new norms, novel institutions and discourses. Political science has for a long time tended to neglect the role of transnationally organized actors as well as transnational processes of legitimization. In the past few years, new theoretical frames have been developed in order to better understand the power of private actors and identify different dimensions of business power in global governance. These authors adopt diverse theoretical perspectives but they commonly observe the growing importance of the discursive power of business and the lack of theoretically based empirical studies in this field. At the same time, there is an apparent need to analyze and assess the discursive use of development concepts by businesses. This paper aims to show how business networks influence the discourse on sustainable development. Furthermore it is argued that the specific social constructions of the concepts of ‘sustainable development’ and ‘growth’ demonstrate ambivalences that the corporations have to deal with. The discourses of pan-sectoral organized business actors within the business network econsense provide evidence and examples for studying how and why private actors exert influence within the system of global governance. This study introduces an alternative methodological approach which draws on constructivist ideas and implements the qualitative content analysis and a discourse analytical approach.

Keywords: Business, sustainable development, discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis, constructivism

Resumo

Recentemente tem sido dispensada uma significativa atenção ao papel dos atores empresariais na Governança Ambiental Global (GAG). Há um consenso geral que o poder das redes de atores empresariais transnacionais na GAG tem sido negligenciado pelos estudiosos das Relações Internacionais (RI) e da Economia Política Internacional (EPI). Entretanto, nos últimos anos, novas abordagens teóricas foram desenvolvidas a fim de melhor compreender as dimensões do poder dos atores empresariais na GAG. Essas novas perspectivas teóricas reconhecem geralmente o crescimento do poder discursivo dos atores empresariais e constatam a falta de estudos empíricos nesse campo. Logo, este artigo mostra, através do

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estudo de caso da *Econsense*, como as redes de atores empresariais transnacionais influenciam o discurso do desenvolvimento sustentável no âmbito da GAG.

Palavras-chave: Redes de atores empresariais transnacionais; desenvolvimento sustentável; análise do discurso; *Econsense*.

1 INTRODUCTION

Changing frameworks have increasingly forced corporations to integrate ecological\(^2\) and social norms into their activities and take part in the debate on sustainable development. While globalization has reconfigured power relations between national and private actors, transnational corporations are more and more held responsible for problems like pollution or human rights violations (Brühl, Feldt, Hamm, Hummel & Martens, 2003, p. 12). Business representatives have started to create networks that contribute to shaping the sustainable development agenda by influencing the establishment of new norms, novel institutions and the discourse on sustainable development.

“The concurrent reframing of private actors, especially multinational companies (MNCs), from pure profit-seeking entities to ‘corporate citizens’ has broadened public expectations of the scope of their mandates and responsibilities, and has prompted many MNCs to reexamine their role in society” (Wright & Rwabizambuga, 2006, p. 92).

However, political science has for a long time tended to neglect the role of transnationally organized actors as well as transnational processes of legitimization. In the past few years, new theoretical frames have been developed in order to better understand the power of private actors and identify different dimensions of business power in global governance (e.g. Falkner, forthcoming; Fuchs, 2007; Fuchs & Lederer, 2007; Newell, 2004).\(^3\)

These authors adopt diverse theoretical perspectives but they commonly observe the growing importance of the discursive power of business and the lack of theoretically based empirical 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 business\(^4\), so that there is a lack of empirical studies in this field” (Fuchs, 2007, p. 140).

At the same time, there is an apparent need to analyze and assess the discursive use of development concepts by businesses, as definition and application of these concepts are “of crucial importance in terms of global problem solving and associated with highly political implications” (Fuchs & Engelkamp, 2008, p. 6). Each concept spotlights “certain aspects of development, while others remain in the shadow” (Fuchs & Engelkamp, 2008, p. 1) and the

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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 (Simonis, 2003, p. 224), the term *ecological norms* deals a priori with rules, customs, traditions and conventions, which influence the behavior of actors and the interaction between them (Simonis, 2003, p. 143).

\(^3\) On the other side, scholars identify the limits of transnational private governance (Graz & Nölke, 2008).

\(^4\) Fuchs (2005; 2007) distinguishes instrumental, structural and discursive dimensions of business power in global governance.
use of development concepts influences how policies are formulated and how actors understand their concerns with respect to growth and development.

The point of departure for this paper is the acknowledgement that we need to better understand how and why business is argumentatively shaping discourses. This paper 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. It is not intended to answer the question as to whether companies should integrate sustainable development-strategies into their activities. However, transnational corporations, just like other non-governmental and governmental actors, take part in the discourse on sustainable development. Understanding how and why business is shaping the discourse on sustainable development in global governance therefore requires a closer look at the discursive power of these actors.

In the past, research on 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). Thus, there is still a lack of empirical studies which analyze the new role of business and implement constructivist approaches (Kollman, 2008). This paper eschews the traditional paradigms of realism and liberalism in favor of a post-positivist constructivist approach. Constructivism underlines the role of ideas, norms, identities and transnational forces and thus fits in well with the objective of highlighting the discourse of business on sustainable development. Moreover, this paper implements the qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2003) in combination with some discourse analytical elements in order to allow new insights into the role of business for sustainable development.

A particular focus of this paper is to analyze the role of the determinants of sustainable development and growth in the discourse of the members of econsense. Econsense is a typical example of a business network of transnationally organized corporations. 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. Furthermore, scholars observe that the discursive power of business significantly depends on the dominance of neoliberal norms (Tooze, 2000). At the same time the neoliberal system favors multinational companies from North America and the European Union:

“Neoliberalism as an economic program is not equally benevolent to all parts of the business community. It generally favours big, transnationally mobile companies, in particular capital investors. The same can be stated for transnational private governance. One overriding concern of many of our contributions is that such governance particularly favours large and well-established multinational companies, in particular those from North America and the EU” (Graz & Nölke, 2008, p. 239).

The business network deals exclusively with business and sustainable development. It pursues shaping the discourse on sustainable development by providing dialogues between representatives of corporations, politicians, academics, and other stakeholders. This paper also aims at questioning the image cultivation by analyzing the way in which econsense members shape discourse and by implementing theoretically based methodological instruments in order to analyze the development of norms, ideas and identities. A definite assumption of this study is that the relationship between sustainable development and growth must be understood from

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5 The 25 members of econsense are Allianz, BASF, Bayer, BMW Group, Bosch, DaimlerChrysler, Deutsche Bahn, Deutsche Bank, Deutsche Telekom, EnBW, E.ON, Evonik, Evonik Degussa, HeidelbergCement, Linde, Lufthansa, RAG, RWE, SAP, Siemens, Tetra Pak, ThyssenKrupp, TUI, VCI and Volkswagen.
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 to concentrate 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 perceptions of sustainable development exist in different corporations? Why do the corporations try to influence the discourse on sustainable development?

In order to give answers to these questions, this paper is divided into four sections. First, the research questions and some background information are presented. Second, methodological and theoretical approaches are pointed out which are apt to give answers to the research questions. It is argued that a combination of both the qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2003) and elements of the discourse analysis can be useful for analyzing the empirical material. Moreover, a theoretical orientation based on a constructivist approach will be exemplified. Third, information about econsense is given. Fourth, results of an empirical investigation performed by the author are presented. Application of the terms ‘sustainable development’ and ‘growth’ by business representatives is pointed out and the concept of ‘discourse-coalition’ is demonstrated. Finally, major arguments are summarized and some prospects for further research are outlined.

2 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS, QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

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, p. 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). 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, p. 8).

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 is also a contextual examination about which meaning is given to reality and which interpretation or understanding of sustainable development is enforced.

However, it is important to note, that this paper does neither pursue a structuralist analysis nor does it adopt a discourse theoretical perspective. It rather implements some elements of the discourse analysis which build up on Foucault (e.g. 1971; 1983) and integrates a social constructivist approach. Thus, discourse is not considered to be structural in nature. 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.
In the last years, business has particularly tried to exert discursive power with respect to sustainable development.

“In the environmental arena, business has participated in, supported, and shaped discourses such as ‘greening of industry’, ‘green and competitive’, ‘ecological modernization’, or ‘corporate environmental responsibility’. These perspectives have by now been expanded to the notion of ‘corporate citizenship’ in general, thus combining social and environmental aspects. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, for instance, has established a Corporate Citizenship Centre that hosts conferences and conducts information and public relations campaigns. In addition, business increasingly has sought coalitions with NGOs as a source of legitimacy. The support of civil society is especially important, since public opinion can play a determinative role in politics” (Fuchs, 2005, p. 151).

Most scholars in the area of global governance pursue functionalist analyses in order to search for new problem-solving strategies in an increasingly globalized world (Falkner, forthcoming; Fuchs & Lederer, 2007, p. 1).

“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, forthcoming).

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. However, it is assumed that business actors just like other actors take part in the discourse on sustainable development. 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. Moreover, the mutual influence of structure and agency can be analyzed.

The empirical research of this paper is based on twenty semi-standardized interviews with econsense members and on the analysis of relevant documents. 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, dealing with the corporations’ sustainable development strategies.

Discourse analysis is mainly build on the ideas of Foucault (1971; 1983). It takes a hermeneutical, qualitative perspective and focuses on the empirical inspection of language usage. Material resources like money, knowledge, economic, and social and cultural capital play an important role in understanding the diffusion of discourses and the interplay between the actors involved (Keller, 2004, p.70). It must be recognized that discourse analysis as well as qualitative content analysis are not to be understood as empirical methods that can be implemented according to strict rules. These methods do not only allow but also promote combining them with other instruments in order to facilitate controlled investigations. In contrast to other hermeneutic approaches, the formulation of categories within qualitative
content analysis is systematically executed and pursues explicit rules (Mayring, 2003, p.12). This allows increasing validity and reliability. Furthermore, the empirical analysis is assisted by the computer program ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti, 2004; Kuckartz, Grunenberg & Lauterbach, 2004).

Empirical analysis has to be led by theory. However, the mainstream theories of International Relations (idealism, realism, neorealism, and liberalism) cannot sufficiently explain the role of discourses and norms in global governance. They largely rely on a methodological nationalism and almost ignore transnationally organized actors, transnational processes of legitimization and the role of norms and ideas. Consequently, the power of non-state actors continues to be poorly analyzed 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, p. 13).

Nevertheless, these coefficients are of significant importance for analyzing the discursive power of business. A constructivist concept of the discipline of International Relations assumes that actors and structures cannot be treated separately but that they have a reciprocal constitutive influence on each other (Kratochwil, 1989; Onuf, 1989; Wendt, 1999). Rules and norms act as decisive links. Thereby, the term ‘actor’ refers to both individuals and collectivities (Kratochwil, 1989, p. 10). Constructivist analyses also assume that the social world, and how we perceive it, is not given but socially constructed. The central concern of constructivist approaches is to explain change in international politics (Ulbert, 2005, p. 15).

People act on the basis of the meaning that things have for them. Moreover, meanings are developed in interaction. Thus, the social world is not given but construed by action. Action is guided by authentic interpretations of actors, whereas common structures are reproduced and changed by intersubjective practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This is the notion that ideas, and correspondingly knowledge, cannot be isolated from the social contexts in which they are formed, discussed, and acted upon. Social norms and structures influence action, the actors’ self-conceptions and define identities and interests. Their action cannot be understood without referring to social structures in which they are embedded.

However, it has to be noticed, that constructivism is not a homogeneous entity. There rather exist big differences between its individual theorists. This paper does not present the most important constructivist theorists, nor is there enough space to explicitly adopt the perspective of one of them. However, the paper focuses attention on “discourse as the power-suffused result on many people speaking to each other” (Onuf, 2007, p. xv).

Hence, social constructivists turn away from the rationalist paradigm, according to which the actors’ interests precede structures and they try to enforce these rationally. They particularly challenge the rationalist notion of an inalterable reality of international relations (Zehfuss, 2002, p. 4). Constructivism therefore focuses on the interaction between agency and structure and the way in which interaction transforms the rules of domination. Thus, a constructivist position is able to conceptualize the material structure of ideas, thereby overcoming the separation between ideas and material structure. Actors base their decisions and actions on an understanding of reality which rests upon a specific world view. This does not mean that there is no reality beyond constructs. In contrast, the constructivist approach pursued in this paper claims that concepts like ‘sustainable development’ or ‘growth’ can achieve distinct meanings and that meaning exercises influence. Nevertheless, constructivism is criticized because it
“accepts as given a ‘reality’ from which enquiry must start, a ‘reality’ which reasonable people would presumably be able to recognise. This is both bewildering in the face of the lack of agreement on what this reality is, either in constructivist scholarship or political debate, and problematic as positing such a ‘reality’ naturalises what is made” (Zehfuss, 2002, p. 254).

In contrast to this criticism, this paper claims that a constructivist approach does not implicitly accept as given a reality, but helps us to analyze how different perceptions of reality are constructed and which role specific actors play within this process. Because pretending to know exactly what reality is and which political decisions must necessarily be taken has enormous discursive power.

However, constructivism still did not pay enough attention to the question of how to empirically operationalize the theoretical approach. In order to allow a theoretically based empirical analysis, this paper introduces a constructivist approach and implements the qualitative content analysis as well as elements of the discourse analysis. With regard to sustainable development, discursive power is exercised in different ways by a variety of actors. To demonstrate the discursive power of business, the following chapters analyze the discourse of econsense and its members and draw particular attention to its conceptions of sustainable development and growth.

3 ECONSENSE

To better understand how business is exercising discursive power, the discourse of representatives of econsense serves as an example. Econsense is a typical case of a pan-sectoral business network of transnationally organized corporations with the aim to shape the discourse on sustainable development. The network was established in 2000 by the Federation of German Industry (BDI). It understands itself as “a dialogue platform and think tank for sustainable development and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (...). Sustainability and CSR are being adopted around the world as ambitious models and guiding principles. The members of econsense have pledged to move forward the implementation of these approaches through an open discussion process. This course was chosen in the knowledge that business and its innovation and investment strength has a special responsibility for seeing that sustainable development succeeds” (Econsense, 2008).

Econsense is a non-profit association and is financed by contributions of its members. The network can be regarded as a promoter that helps to change the operations of corporations in favor of sustainable development. On the other hand it can be seen as an organization which engages in significant efforts of greenwashing or political greenwashing6 and allows businesses to adopt the image of a promoter of sustainable development. The business network adopts a proactive strategy and 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

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.
and to provide them with recommendations. Thus, a proactive strategy is seen as an effective means to increase influence by falling back on discursive power.

It has to be taken into account that econsense is a platform of companies with a main 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) and, at the European level, with CSR Europe. Consequently, the discourse of econsense and its members on sustainable development provides a useful and typical example for this study.

4 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

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, p. 13). Interpretations of the concept are heterogeneous and ambivalent (Martin, Benn & Dunphy, 2007, p. 95). But both its conceptual openness and its highly persuasive power resulted in an increasing adaptation of the concept by state (Vornholz, 1993, p. 125) and non-state actors which filled it with different meanings. 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, 2008).

This illustrates that ‘sustainable development’ is a very open concept which allows various interpretations and operationalizations. With regard to the implementation of the principles of sustainable development in the 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, 2008).

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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 strategy.
Business representatives have widely differing perceptions of what sustainable development is about. Thus, the understanding of sustainable development cannot be analyzed as a value-free and linear process of convincing others. It is more a result of social interaction and a struggle between a complex set of actors who participate in the debate in which the terms of the sustainable development discourse are set. As for “ecological modernization” (Hajer, 1995), the challenge for sustainable development

“lies much more in finding new institutional arrangements in which different discourses (and concerns) can be meaningfully and productively related to one another, in finding ways to correct the prevailing bias towards economization and scientification, and in intersubjective development of trust, acceptability, and credibility” (Hajer, 1995, p. 281).

Econsense companies 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 Group⁹ 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, p. 2).

This understanding implies that sustainable development is not related to social and/or environmental aims but to the company’s development and especially its economic growth. The German telecommunication company ‘Deutsche Telekom’¹⁰ 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, p. 2).

In the end, 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. The interviews with the business representatives showed that each of these concepts does not have a clear definition. 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 paper uses the term ‘sustainability report’ as a unifying set of all concepts.

Ambivalences

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⁹ The Allianz Group is a global services provider in insurance, banking and asset management.
¹⁰ Deutsche Telekom is one of the world's biggest telecommunications companies.
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 ambivalence inherent in the concept of sustainable development. It further implies that the economic, ecologic and social components do not have 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 automobile or aviation industry are presently not sustainable in terms of environmental demands but are indispensable in economic and social aspects (transport, working places), taking into account the highly mobile Western lifestyle.

This discourse shows that the concept of sustainable development contains ambivalence between development and conservation, between the demands of the present and more or less probable demands of future generations. 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. The inherent ambivalence and the uncertainty of prediction along with the plenitude of aims fostered by several agents forms the platform for ongoing political negotiations and opens 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, businesses 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. On the other hand, economic objectives would be missed on the side of the corporation. Furthermore, the Deutsche Bahn staff gets high 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. While some argue that market economy has a strong impact on efficiency, others are of the opinion that there are services which should not be commercial. This forms place for an even more fundamental political discourse including liberal and corporatist viewpoints. Thus, in that sense sustainability is interpreted according to the normative starting position.

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11 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 increasing interests of business and massive support by governments the future of this industry is currently left in question.
Difference between sustainable development and growth

Sustainability reports put forward sustainable development and economic growth as necessary and mutually supportive goals. 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.

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.

Thus, the concepts of sustainable development and growth tend to suffer from conceptual underpinnings and there is no unity with respect to their definition, implementation and operationalization. In consequence, the discursive uses of the concepts by different actors differ widely and can have significant political implications. As the following chapter will show, the discourse on sustainable development can also be understood as a typical example for a discourse-coalition. It draws on story-lines, reduces the discursive complexity and plays an important role in reproducing and transforming the discursive order.

5 DISCOURSE-COALITION

The business discourse on sustainable development can also be described as a discourse-coalition. The ‘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, p. 65).
Hajer relates this concept to the discourse on ecological modernization, but the discourse on sustainable development can also be seen as a typical example. The discourse of the members of econsense on sustainable development is based on some story-lines: 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 it is argued that ecological and social objectives have to be part of a successful business strategy and that the concept of sustainable development combines these 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. Consequently, it is concluded that there is no sustainability without growth and that there is no growth without sustainability. It is argued that economic growth is even a contribution to sustainable development since it creates new jobs and promotes innovation and efficiency. This demonstrates that story-lines reduce the discursive complexity and play an important role in reproducing and transforming a discursive order (Hajer, 1995, p. 66).

6 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper has shown that in the context of globalization and growing expectations of social stakeholder groups, transnational business networks have evolved in order to shape the discourse on sustainable development. It was argued that the specific social constructions of the concepts of sustainable development and growth demonstrate ambivalences that the corporations have to deal with. The discourse of econsense and of its members has provided a useful and typical example. At the same time the pan-sectoral members in this network show distinct understandings of the terms of sustainable development and growth, as they are confronted with dissimilar expectations, problems and own interests. They commonly prefer to use sustainable development instead of growth to describe their own business strategy. A main finding of the empirical analysis of the documents and the 20 semi-standardized interviews is that the concept of sustainable development is open enough for corporations to fill it with business interests. Thus, the concept also serves as a new business strategy which improves the reputation of the companies but allows at the same time pursuing business’s widely differing strategies.

It was demonstrated that sustainable development as an open concept allows various interpretations and forms of operationalizations. The different interpretations and operationalizations of the concept of sustainable development are a part of social interaction. Thus, 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. 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.

This paper has argued that the process of understanding the discursive power of business through the lenses of constructivism and by implementing qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis helps to uncover information that cannot be detected by other theoretical or empirical processes. Recognizing that social and ideal forces matter and
considering the interplay between agents and structure allows to gain a greater understanding of how and why ecological and social norms have emerged in the discourse of the relevant actors. Yet, constructivist approaches did not sufficiently analyze transnational movements and networks, the role of private actors, their influence on political discourses and processes of transnational legitimization. To outline some prospects, future research could build on the insights of old approaches and form a new framework which allows us to better understand the shaping of discourses and the interplay between non-state actors and structures over time. Furthermore, constructivism did not pay enough attention to questions of empirical operationalization. Further research on possibilities of combining the theoretical approach with empirical investigations could be of great use for International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE).

Empirically, research on International Relations has for a long time neglected intensive studies of 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 lack of scientific studies that concentrate on the discursive use of concepts by different 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 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 over time? And if so, how does it change? Answers to these questions would be useful for improving the understanding of the interplay between the norms of sustainable development and growth, the structures and the different actors over time. Thus, future developments of the discursive use of such concepts like sustainable development and growth and the discursive power of business are especially interesting to observe.

7 REFERENCES


