

8. The United Kingdom: a merging climate and sustainability agenda

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, the UK was a pioneer in promoting sustainable development. The country initiated several administrative processes and tools that supported sustainable development, and was the first European Union (EU) member state to publish a national sustainable development strategy in 1994. While this strategy focused on ecological systems, a revised 1999 strategy combined all three dimensions of sustainable development: the ecological, economic and social dimensions. In contrast, today's government seems remarkably quiet when it comes to sustainable development. However, the UK launched its first voluntary national review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals in June 2019, which summarizes UK achievements and the challenges ahead.

What characterizes the sustainable development process in the UK during these three decades? Is this a linear process towards decreased attention given to sustainable development or have there been important turning points? We elaborate on these questions by tracing the political process of sustainable development from 1994 to 2020. More specifically, we explore how central political and social actors in the UK address how to make the environment and welfare state arrangements sustainable and how they work to achieve such aims. Our key focus is on how administrative processes and tools that support sustainable development have been established and/or dissolved over time. This includes analyses of how sustainable development is conceptualized, what kind of government institutions and arrangements exist, the independent audit function (i.e. a watchdog role), the indicators used to measure sustainable development and the reporting on achievements. These analyses combine a conceptual basis with the institutional structure and institutional operational content of ways to integrate environmental changes in welfare state policies.

In line with sustainable welfare theory (Gough, 2017; Koch et al., 2016; Schoyen and Hvinden, 2017), we distinguish between the environmental, eco-

conomic and social dimensions of sustainable development and analyse how they are interlinked. Our point of departure is that these three dimensions of sustainability are traditionally linked with different policy domains (Gough, 2017) and associated with different government departments. Within the emerging sustainable welfare theory, we concentrate on the implications of environmental challenges for economic and social welfare state arrangements (Gough, 2017; Schoyen and Hvinden, 2017). One implication might be changes in how the environmental, economic and social dimensions are interlinked, both conceptually and in practice. Recognizing that traditional specialization and sector organization cannot handle the complex challenges European countries are facing, different approaches to coordination across policy sectors and levels of governments have emerged (Peters, 2015). It is a response to the fact that new complex issues frequently require interconnected administrative reactions (Lægreid and Rykkja, 2014).

With the UK's tradition of residual welfare state and a liberal market economy approach we assume that the UK will place a greater emphasis on the environmental dimension and less on the social dimension (see Chapter 1). We expect this because of the Anglophone welfare model with low levels of cross-class solidarity and a preference for targeted welfare benefits and private welfare spending (Gough, 2017: 122). In contrast, we expect to find more weight on the environmental dimension as much climate policy fits well with the liberal or market-oriented approach: climate targets can be achieved by buying emission reductions from other countries (e.g. via the EU Emission Trading System). The UK is well known for its efforts to meet ambitious carbon emission reduction goals (Rayner, Leiren and Inderberg, 2021). Within climate policy, the UK government has a long-standing preference for market mechanisms rather than taxes and regulatory measures, and its support for the EU Emission Trading System originates from its preferences for market-based instruments (Dupont and Moore, 2019). Gough (2017: 124) suggested the 'advanced industrialization in the UK means there are few business or trade union interests very strongly opposed to carbon mitigation'. Rather than being a question of for or against climate mitigation, it has been a question of how to finance new climate initiatives and who should be the beneficiaries of such policies (Leiren, Inderberg and Rayner, 2020).

We present our methodology below. The third, fourth and fifth sections elaborate on the political process of sustainable development in the UK, which we have divided into three periods: a pioneer in promoting sustainable development (1994–2009); mainstreaming sustainable development and dissolving several administrative tools (2010–14); and the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals in the shadow of Brexit (2015–20). The final section summarizes and concludes.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on document analyses and semi-structured interviews. In addition to drawing on secondary literature, we have examined relevant debates and policy documents linked to the development of the sustainable development agenda in the UK, including the sustainable development strategies and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Documents include laws, official reports, departmental websites, the national sustainable development strategy, the voluntary national review of progress towards the SDGs, national action plans and strategies, inquiries and news articles, particularly in *ENDS Report*. We have also performed systematic content analyses of party programmes and relevant statements from the largest political parties to see how they conceptualize sustainable development: Conservative, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Similarly, we have performed content analyses of social partners' documents. As most British unions are members of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), we studied its 2019–20 campaign plan. We also studied the 2019 Annual Reports and Accounts of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), one of Britain's biggest business lobby groups. Moreover, we have carried out analysis of written evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee's inquiries in September and November 2016 from five multi-stakeholder networks (Just Fair, UKSSD, FDSO, CUSP and BOND) representing several civil society organizations.

To complement these written sources, we have conducted 11 semi-structured interviews in two rounds. In November 2016, we interviewed five experts representing the civil society organizations. In this first round, we also contacted civil servants, but discovered government departments would not give interviews. In February and June 2018, we made a new attempt to speak with civil servants in addition to politicians and other experts. See Interviews section for a list of sources.

A PIONEER IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (1994–2009)

The UK has had a history of policy coordination to integrate sustainable development into policy processes since the early 1990s (Russel, 2007; Whitehead, 2007). This started with the publication of the Environment White Paper 'This Common Inheritance' in 1990. The publication represents a milestone in UK politics, as it started a process of educating government and Whitehall about the key long-term challenges such as global warming and came up with various proposals for solving them (Morris, 1990). The White Paper also paved the way for several coordination mechanisms, including an Environment Cabinet

Committee and a cross-departmental committee of Green Ministers. This aimed to better integrate the environment into the activities of central government departments. Two years later the UK committed to implementing Agenda 21 at the UN-sponsored 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

The UK became the first EU member to publish a sustainable development strategy in 1994 (Russel, 2007). This happened under a Conservative government and focused on ecological systems. Environmental protection had become a guiding principle for the Conservative Party providing it did not hinder economic growth (Ross, 2012). This followed from Margaret Thatcher's important UK and international impact on the environmental debate when she warned against environmental changes and damage in several speeches in the 1980s (Ross, 2012).

In contrast, the new 1997 Labour government incorporated stronger economic and social pillars alongside environmental resources in the 1999 sustainable development strategy (Whitehead, 2007). It created a cross-governmental sustainable development unit to promote best practice and report on governmental department progress (Russel, 2007). Implementation was difficult because of the devolution of power to the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland governments (Jones, 2006).¹ While the former strategy had been UK-wide, the 1999 strategy was only applicable to England.

Devolution enabled the national governments to develop their own approaches to sustainability (Interview no. 10). In 1990s Wales there was an active base of organizations and individuals who were passionate about sustainable development, including key Labour politicians and non-governmental organizations such as World Wildlife Fund and other active environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They succeeded in getting the principles of sustainable development incorporated as a requirement into the Government of Wales Act (Interview no. 10). In 1998, Wales was one of the first nations to put sustainable development into its founding legislation (HM Government, 2019a). Consequently, the Welsh government had to report annually to the National Assembly on progress on how it was promoting sustainable development in all policies and programmes. The concept of sustainable development has been reviewed and strengthened in Wales ever since.

The Sustainable Development Commission

There was an observable change in the efforts to promote sustainable development in the 2000s. At the beginning of the century the development looked promising. In 2000 the Labour government set up a non-departmental public body, the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC), which had three functions: policy advice, cross-departmental capacity-building and a watchdog function (HC EAC, 2008). Sources argue this agency was 'very important' as

it helped government understand what sustainable development really meant (Interview nos. 8 and 9). It took about three years from the SDC's establishment before it started having an effect, meaning that government changed the way it conceptualized sustainable development and understood it had to change practices (Interview no. 8). Government started to gather data that it had not previously gathered to follow up on requests from the SDC (although the SDC did not have legal powers to require the data). Government also had to be willing for the data to be analysed by the SDC and then tolerate critical reports (Interview no. 8; HC EAC, 2008). This learning effect is noticeable from the fact that the early 'Sustainable Development in Government' reports that the SDC put together (SDC, 2005a, 2007) are more critical than the later ones (SDC, 2008).

After its first critical report, the government set up an infrastructure where each department had its own sustainable development ministers (i.e. sustainable development teams). People within different departments were responsible for gathering data and sharing it with the sustainable development teams and the SDC (HC EAC, 2011: 20). The SDC chaired workshops with these sustainable development teams, where they worked out how to develop policy from the perspective of sustainable development (Interview no. 8). In this capacity-building function, the SDC explained what sustainable development really meant 'because people didn't have a common understanding and often they struggled with how it referred – or how it was relevant to their policy' (Interview no. 8).

The SDC also supported government in writing a comprehensive sustainable development strategy based on a jointly agreed UK-wide overarching sustainable development framework (i.e. agreed between the UK government and the devolved administrations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) (HM Government, 2005). The strategy, which was decided on in 2005,² looked at how to ensure all government decisions considered economic, social and environmental factors rather than pitting them against one other (HM Government, 2005). This strategy, which Prime Minister Tony Blair launched, was considered across government as being of central importance and something the government had to deliver (Interview no. 8). This was in line with how Labour, after being elected into government in 1997, introduced sustainable development as a principle to influence policies in many areas (e.g. urban renewal, energy, employment) (Whitehead, 2007: 45).

The strategy was important as it represented 'an encouragingly ambitious attempt by UK governments to get the practice of sustainable development embedded in every aspect of the public sector': it was clear about priorities and gave the SDC more teeth with its new role as a watchdog (SDC, 2005b). Climate policy started to dominate UK political debate from around 2007,

when political parties presented themselves as the greenest party to win votes (Carter and Jacobs, 2014).

While sustainability remained in the background for climate policy, the dominance of climate policy also contributed to raise important sustainability thinking (see Gough, 2011). Discourse on sustainability was generally lacking in the UK, but two climate policy developments were important for promoting such thinking: the UK adopted its pioneering Climate Change Act in 2008, which reached remarkable levels of cross-party support (Lockwood, 2013; Lorenzoni and Benson, 2014). This Act was the first climate change Act in the world and set ambitious binding targets. It also established the Climate Change Committee – an independent body similar to the SDC – to advise government on carbon budget targets and achievements. Its two guiding objectives show the Act refers not only to the environmental dimension of sustainability, but also the social and economic. First, domestic climate change commitments should be reached at the lowest possible net cost to UK taxpayers, consumers and businesses; and second, the social and economic benefits for the UK from this transition should be maximized. The other key measure was the 2009 Low Carbon Transition Plan, a national strategy for climate and energy, which provided a plan for cutting emissions, while at the same time maintaining secure energy supplies, maximizing economic opportunities and protecting the most vulnerable (HM Government, 2009).

Summary

In this period from 1994 to 2009, both the Conservatives and Labour showed political leadership concerning sustainable development, but in different ways. While the Conservative Party had a history of paying attention to environmental issues from the late 1980s, it later lost interest in sustainability. In contrast, Labour under Blair saw an opportunity to renew the party by drawing on sustainable development. The aim was to balance economic policy with a concern for social and environmental justice by introducing tools to help realize this balance. The government established the SDC to get help with integrating the sustainability dimensions into different sectoral policies. However, climate policy became high politics and dominated the political debate around 2007, paying less attention to sustainable development as such. Yet, as there was hardly any sustainability discourse in the UK, the 2008 Climate Change Act and the 2009 Low Carbon Transition Plan represented important steps in the direction of sustainability thinking. Moreover, at devolved national level, in Wales, principles of sustainable development were hardwired into the governance structure of devolution and the government had a duty to report annually on how it was applying sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION OF MAINSTREAMING AND DISSOLUTION OF ADMINISTRATIVE TOOLS (2010–14)

The change in government from Labour to a coalition of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in 2010 witnessed a change in attitude towards sustainable development. The new government responded to the recession with a stringent austerity programme in 2010 to substantially reduce public expenditure. The new government published a policy paper ‘Mainstreaming sustainable development’ in 2011, where it presented measures on how to mainstream sustainable development. It broadly consisted of providing ministerial leadership and oversight, leading by example, embedding sustainable development into policy, and transparent and independent scrutiny (DEFRA, 2011). However, the government also abolished coordination mechanisms. For example, it cut the sustainable development teams and moved people to other positions (Interview no. 8). The government also dissolved the SDC as part of a review process and a wider government closure of non-elected public bodies (the ‘bonfire of the quangos’; BBC, 2012).

One source suggests the SDC, established under Labour Prime Minister Blair, was shut down because: ‘they didn’t really understand why it might be a good idea to have that kind of advice function’ (Interview no. 9). Others argue the mainstreaming approach was correct as it implies sustainability issues should not be treated separately, but be considered in every policy area. However, the SDC’s closure created a vacuum due to lost expertise and a lack of questioning of what the different policy areas are doing to take sustainability forward (Interview no. 11).

This decision had consequences for the attention to sustainable development in the UK, particularly because sustainable development requires a change in culture and learning over time (Interview nos. 4, 8, 9, 11). The sources argue mainstreaming was ineffective, people are still working in silos and the implied learning process of sustainable development had not continued long enough (Interview nos. 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11). While the SDC had experienced some success, its practices and ways of thinking had not been mainstreamed enough to shut it down (Interview no. 9). One source calls it a ‘political whitewash’: ‘In practice, I think all it meant was that each department, again silo-driven, ... had to demonstrate how they were incorporating sustainable development into their programmes at work. But it was a very, very weak process’ (Interview no. 10).

One of the coalition government’s arguments concerning SDC closure was that many of its activities could be undertaken by the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) as it has the power to call in ministers and ask difficult questions (Interview nos. 7 and 9). Indeed, the EAC’s parliamentary actions

reflect the SDC's previous activities. However, while EAC's remit extends to all sustainable development, in practice it has tended to focus on environmental aspects (Interview nos. 6 and 7). Another key difference is that it is a parliamentary committee, not an independent agency, and has limited staff and funding.

The introduction of mainstreaming removed many of the resources the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) had. This further weakened DEFRA, already a lightweight department. However, the establishment of the Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC; since 2016: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy) in 2008 had increased the attention to sustainable development, being engaged in a programme to increase overall sustainability, for example with the introduction of the small-scale feed-in tariff (Rayner, Leiren and Inderberg, 2021). One of DEFRA's contributions to mainstreaming is to lead on sustainability indicators, publishing a revised set of 35 indicators in 2013 (DEFRA, 2013). Since 2014, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been responsible for updating and publishing these sustainable development indicators, but DEFRA still has the policy lead (ONS, 2015).

The Welsh government continued to learn from experience with the sustainable development duty. In 2011 the Welsh Labour Party manifesto proposed a sustainable development act that included a stronger legislative framework for sustainable development (Interview no. 10). There was resistance in Wales against the government's closure of the SDC (Interview no. 9). The Welsh government perceived a need for this agency and therefore continued to have a commissioner, who received support from a civil movement established to help promote sustainable development, *Cynnal Cymru* (i.e. 'sustained Wales').

Summary

UK attention to sustainable development dropped after 2010. The concept had always been difficult to understand and the balance between the environment, social welfare and economics was easily politicized (Bernstein, 2017: 228). In general the concept was poorly understood. The government's 2010 closure of the key institution, the SDC, which spent a lot of time clarifying the concept and contributing with capacity-building, was unhelpful. Despite an important watchdog role, the EAC lacks the power or capacity to do what the SDC did. Moreover, evidence suggests UK departments continue to work in silos. Mainstreaming did not fulfil its stated intention and the lead department on sustainability, DEFRA, lost resources to follow-up on the issue. However, the Welsh government retained a commissioner to promote sustainable development.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND BREXIT (2015–20)

World leaders officially adopted a new set of SDGs in 2015, which followed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (see Chapter 2). While the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, played a leading role in shaping the goals (Department for International Development, 2015), the UK government was less keen on the scope of them. It argued 17 goals would make the sustainable development agenda too cumbersome to implement or sell to the public and preferred something narrower (Ford, 2015). The underlying reason might have been ‘to get rid of some of the more uncomfortable goals, such as those relating to the environment’ (Servaes, 2017: 17). Publicly, the Prime Minister pronounced his preference for ten goals with a maximum of 12, but it is unclear which goals the government wanted to remove (Servaes, 2017). However, the general consensus in the United Nations (UN) preferred 17 goals, including targets on women’s empowerment, good governance, and peace and security.

When implementing the SDGs, the UK did not treat them as a continuation of its national sustainable development strategy (unlike Germany and Norway), but as a continuation of the MDGs. The Department for International Development (DFID) governed the UK’s implementation of the MDGs in developing countries and continued this work under the SDGs and was also made responsible for coordinating the domestic response to the SDGs. The national sustainable development strategy remained in DEFRA’s hands. Consequently, the responsibility for the sustainability strategy and the SDGs ended up in different departments. Moreover, placing the responsibility of the domestic response in DFID reflected that ‘this is not a central policy issue for our government to worry about ... That was a big shift actually ... I think DEFRA struggled with it because they had a lot of responsibility, they had a lot of people working on it and it was all taken away’ (Interview no. 8). In 2020, DFID merged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). There are concerns that this merger will jeopardize UK commitments to the SDGs, marginalizing humanitarian aid at the expense of political and security objectives (Gulrajani et al., 2020).

Implementation of the SDGs

While the national sustainable strategy was no longer on the UK political agenda and no longer mentioned in public debate or elsewhere, there has been an ongoing political debate in some UK parliamentary committees since 2015 on the domestic implementation of the SDGs (Interview nos. 2, 3, 4, 5). Government has received considerable criticism for its lack of effort in making

headway against the dominance of traditional economic concerns (Interview no. 4). The International Development Committee (IDC) and the EAC have been particularly active in trying to push government to act on sustainability issues, acting as SDG ‘watchdogs’. They have been clear in their conclusions that the government’s efforts have been insufficient – a criticism that several NGOs that focus on sustainable development agree with (Interview nos. 1–5).

The IDC announced an inquiry on 13 July 2015 on how the SDGs should be implemented. In its 2016 report, it criticizes the government for being slow to work out how to achieve the goals and makes a number of recommendations including: assigning departments specific responsibilities for making progress on the SDGs; the Cabinet Office should lead on this work and ‘urgently’ produce a substantive internal communications strategy on the SDGs; the government should identify a coordination mechanism for relevant secretaries of state or responsible ministers to meet regularly to discuss SDG implementation (HC IDC, 2016a). The government disagreed that the Cabinet Office should lead the work and argued there were already several coordination mechanisms in place (HC IDC, 2016b: appendix).

The EAC launched an inquiry into the government’s approach to sustainable development on 21 July 2015 (UK Parliament, 2015a). Prior to this, the Conservative Chancellor, George Osborne, had ordered two important departments for sustainability issues (DEFRA and DECC) to cut their spending by a total of £150 million in 2015 (McGlone, 2015). These cuts raised concerns about resources. Similarly, investors were worried about government signals that renewables should expect more subsidy cuts (McGlone, 2015). The government also announced it would scrap two key measures aimed at making new homes zero carbon (McGlone, 2015). These examples show reversals of climate policy in the post-2015 UK (Carter, 2015; Gough, 2017: 127). With many key policies coming to an end and due for renewal or replacement, the EAC argued the following five-year period (2015–20) would ‘be crucial for ensuring the Government continues to promote sustainable development’ (UK Parliament, 2015b). The EAC therefore focused its inquiry on the impact of the government’s fiscal and legislative agenda on sustainable development.

The government’s response said it ‘either has or will put in place the fiscal and legislative agenda needed to deliver its priorities for improving the health of our economy, environment and communities, which cut across all departmental policies’ (Cabinet Office, 2015: point 18). The government will also communicate key areas through Single Departmental Plans (Cabinet Office, 2015: point 18), which create the basis for the government’s planning and performance framework and describe the objectives of the departments and how they will achieve them.

The EAC launched a second inquiry on 25 July 2016, this time into the domestic implementation of the SDGs (UK Parliament, 2016b). The EAC

wanted to ensure the SDGs would lead to changes within the UK and secure measurements that would facilitate evaluation of the government's performance against the SDGs. The 'Sustainable Development Goals in the UK' report, released in April 2017, found the UK government had no clear plan for delivering on the SDGs; and there was a lack of effort to implement the goals domestically (HC EAC, 2017). The report asserts the government views the SDGs as something for the UK to help other countries achieve, thereby 'going against the spirit of the goals' (HC EAC, 2017), as the global dimension of the SDGs marks a change from the MDGs, which focused on poverty and human development.

However, the SDGs have been embedded in the Single Departmental Plans, which also means the SDGs are considered when each government department reviews its activities for the Government Annual Reports and Accounts (HM Government, 2019a: 213). Moreover, the Voluntary National Review 2019 focuses on domestic work, thereby responding to some of the criticisms raised against the government. The UK has also performed well compared to other countries on the SDGs in terms of measuring and monitoring policies and assessing success: the UK has one of the world's highest proportions (74 per cent) of reporting on the SDG's Global Indicators to the UN (HM Government, 2019a: 19).

Brexit

Concerns with lack of attention and capacity have raised questions on whether the UK will be left behind on sustainable development; for example, Burns et al. (2019) argue that disengagement and policy stagnation are more likely environmental outcomes of Brexit. Brexit has created new challenges regarding whether it can be used as an opportunity to rebuild the civil service for the 21st century or whether it is simply overload for the civil service at a critical time, given climate change, population ageing and global economic turbulence. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has argued that Brexit is a historic opportunity to review the UK's environmental policies: 'In this unfrozen moment new possibilities occur' (Gove, 2017) and in 2018 the government set out a plan – the 25 Year Environment Plan – on how to improve the environment, when leaving the EU (HM Government, 2018). Moreover, the EAC has suggested Brexit increases the importance of the SDGs and should be used as an opportunity to create cross-party agreement (McGlone, 2017). Similarly, environmental groups argue the UK's heavy reliance on the EU for its environmental legislation makes global deals, such as the Paris Agreement, more important (McGlone, 2017). One source is positive about the SDGs' future in the UK, arguing it will matter as a future replacement to the EU framework (Interview no. 7).

Brexit negotiations have made the government focus on Brexit themes, while postponing other plans due to lack of capacity (Interview nos. 1–6) – it consumes a lot of departments’ time that would otherwise be focusing on sustainable development issues (Interview no. 6). Considering the three sustainability dimensions (environment, economy and welfare), environmental issues and social issues are not high on the agenda and are struggling to progress against the dominance of economic concerns. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has admitted the laws and regulations to deliver environmental product and labour standards will ‘potentially diverge from those of the EU’ (Roberts, 2019). Divergence is expected to mean lower environmental standards to gain competitiveness (Pickstone, 2019). Similarly, Farstad, Carter and Burns (2018) argue Brexit threatens the long-term viability of the Climate Change Act, which was already in jeopardy before the EU referendum.

However, the government has decided to establish a new watchdog, the Office for Environmental Protection, to ensure attention to the environmental dimension of sustainable development after Brexit (DEFRA, 2019). This has come about following considerable pressure from environmental NGOs and environmental activists arguing there would be a gap in governance and enforcement of environmental law after Brexit. This should be remedied through establishing a body to advise the Westminster government (Interview nos. 6 and 9). It will be a new independent regulator to hold the government to account, including through the courts if necessary.

Key Coordination Mechanisms

The UK has other measures in place that aim at ensuring attention to sustainability, although they are outside the coordinating department, DEFRA. These measures include, for example, the Green Book, which has been updated by the Treasury to include among others natural capital, and the Clean Growth Strategy, which was promoted as a green growth measure by the Treasury, the 25 Year Environment Plan and the net-zero climate decision.

The Green Book provides Treasury guidance to help officials perform transparent, objective, evidence-based evaluation of proposals to inform decision making (HM Treasury, 2018). Although ‘sustainability’ is only mentioned in relation to environmental appraisal, sustainable development has a place in impact assessments, where economists assess how a policy impacts different dimensions of sustainable development.

The Clean Growth Strategy is the government’s most significant sustainable development strategy (HM Government, 2017). It aims to grow national income and ensure affordable energy supplies for businesses and consumers while simultaneously cutting greenhouse gas emissions. It is in the hands of the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, refers to the legal

requirements under the Climate Change Act and implies the UK should aim to foster low carbon technologies, processes and systems that are as cheap as possible. The focus on climate change and economic growth are stronger than welfare in the strategy, but it aims to create jobs and boost earning power. However, it has been met with mixed reactions as it fails to meet the legal requirement of proposing policies that will reach the reduction target (Farstad, 2017).

The 25 Year Environment Plan sets out how the UK will improve the environment over a generation by creating richer habitats for wildlife, improving air and water quality and curbing the scourge of plastic in the world's oceans (HM Government, 2018). It is an ambitious plan, which integrates several social elements like connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing. DEFRA has a team working on how to implement this plan across different departments.

In June 2019, the UK adopted a net-zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions target for 2050, signalling that strong climate action is a UK priority (HM Government, 2019b). This decision was based on a Climate Change Committee recommendation (2019) which expects extensive industrial opportunities and co-benefits (e.g. benefits to human health from better air quality, less noise, more active travel and a shift to healthier diets, improved water quality, benefits for biodiversity, resilience and recreational benefits) to potentially offset costs.

This target receives support among others from one of the biggest social partners in the UK, the Confederation of British Industry, which highlights helping build political consensus on the net-zero emissions target as one of its most important campaigns (CBI, 2019). The Trades Union Congress does not have the same focus but its campaign plan mentions 'efforts to tackle the climate emergency and ensure a just transition for workers' (TUC, 2019). The TUC raised concerns about the Climate Growth Strategy, arguing the government's definition of industrial strategy is too narrow, as 'It doesn't say how workers will get support to retrain if their job is under threat from the move to a low carbon economy. And it doesn't set out how the government will work in social partnership with trade unions and business' (TUC, 2017; see also The Economics Foundation, 2017). The TUC is primarily interested in well-paid 'sustainable jobs' across the UK and promotes an industrial strategy that tackles regional inequalities. The CBI points out the National Living Wage needs to be at a sustainable level for business (CBI, 2019: 11). The CBI also refers to its commitment for 'responsible capitalism and good business practices throughout the UK business community' across areas such as real living wage, environmental responsibility, fairer hours and contracts. The CBI has also established an employee-led Sustainability Working Group

to examine how the CBI can reduce emissions from its buildings, events and transport usage (CBI, 2019).

There are also important innovations at regional level in the UK. Particularly innovative is the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015 in Wales, which emerged from activities promoting sustainable development there. It is one of the first laws in the world which enshrines a duty to safeguard the wellbeing of future generations and gives all Welsh public bodies a common purpose. The Act led to the establishment of the Office of the Future Generation Commissioner (Future Generation Commissioner for Wales, 2018). The Commissioner convenes regularly with stakeholders and develops voluntary partnerships and coalitions. She gives advice and assistance, but also has strong powers to review the extent to which a public body is safeguarding the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Concession 20 Review). Public bodies must take reasonable steps to follow recommendations.

In Scotland, the National Performance Framework is the main mechanism for implementing the SDGs (HM Government, 2019a). It is underpinned by law and is intended to inform discussion, collaboration and planning of policies and services across Scotland. SDG Network Scotland, an open coalition of over 300 people and organizations across Scotland, was formed in 2017 to assist with the development of a Scotland-wide response to the SDGs challenge. Also Scotland's Climate Assembly is important as it brings together people from across Scotland to discuss how Scotland should change to tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way.

Northern Ireland has incorporated the three dimensions of sustainable development into the Northern Ireland Civil Service strategic plans (HM Government, 2019a). Consequently, the principles of sustainable development are embedded in the Northern Ireland Executive's highest-level strategy, the draft Programme for Government, and civil service departments are responsible for taking appropriate actions. These interesting sustainable development innovations at regional level have not resulted in policy diffusion upwards to the UK national government.

Conceptualization by Political Parties

There is considerable variation in how political parties conceptualize sustainability. The 2019 Conservative Manifesto does not mention SDGs, sustainability or sustainable development. Interview sources suggested politicians often struggle to understand what sustainable development is and this might explain why the Conservatives do not use this concept (Interview no. 8). However, although 'sustainability' is not in its manifesto, there are sustainability policies that cut across all three dimensions of economic policy, social welfare and

environmental concerns, primarily related to housing, energy, transport, skills and environmental policies.

The Labour Party does not mention SDGs in its 2019 Manifesto but uses ‘sustainability’ or ‘sustainable’ 19 times. Labour pays attention to all three dimensions of sustainability in the policy areas of housing, energy, transport, skills and environmental policies; additionally, addressing these three dimensions for the National Health Service and social care, defence policy and aid policy. The aim to balance economic policy with a concern for social and environmental justice is prevalent in the 2019 Labour Manifesto where the party highlights wanting to kick-start a ‘green industrial revolution’ which will create one million well-paid new jobs in the UK, while tackling the climate challenge by shifting to renewable energy, investing in rail and electric cars, and making housing energy efficient to reduce fuel poverty and excess winter deaths. ‘We will put people and planet before profit by bringing our energy and water systems into democratic public owners’ and ‘make UK industry the greenest in the world’.

The Liberal Democrats are also concerned with sustainability in their 2019 Manifesto. The party mentions SDGs and states it will promote these goals both in the UK and abroad (Lib Dems, 2019: 92). It mentions ‘sustainability’ four times and relates the concept to all three sustainability dimensions. It is the only party which mentions structural reform related to sustainability: it wants to appoint a Cabinet-level Chief Secretary for Sustainability in the Treasury to coordinate government-wide action to make the economy sustainable, resource-efficient and zero-carbon (Lib Dems, 2019: 43). Like the other two parties it focuses on the sustainability dimensions in the policy areas of housing, energy, skills, transport, nature, but also business and aid policy. The Liberal Democrats also want to support green industry, green jobs, green products and address the circular economy.

Summary

From 2015 to 2020, the UK government received considerable criticism for its implementation of the SDGs and Brexit helped draw the focus away from the sustainability agenda. These two factors signalled a change, but with uneven impacts. Brexit negotiations have had a large negative effect whereby the UK practically ignored SDGs. The dispersal of sustainability responsibilities between two rather weak departments, DEFRA and DFID, and not primarily located in the Cabinet also weakened the sustainability agenda. The DFID and FCO merger has created concerns that the UK will undermine humanitarian values in its development policy. However, there are also important processes that ensure sustainability still has some focus. Crucially, all departments are expected to integrate the SDGs into their Single Departmental Plan and guid-

ance via the Green Book is in the hands of a strong department, the Treasury. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland also have different and interesting ways of grappling with sustainable development issues: the Welsh Wellbeing of Future Generations Act is unique. Moreover, the Voluntary National Review 2019 of the SDGs has increased the attention to sustainability and has helped government to reconsider its domestic approach (HM Government, 2019a). The Review focuses on domestic work, although covers both domestic and international work on all 17 SDGs. These new developments signal a change in government thinking, expecting it to contribute towards increasing the attention to sustainability.

We find that climate policy still stands strong on the domestic policy agenda, but sustainability has started to merge with it. Although sustainability is not always used as a concept, several policies (e.g. climate policies) do include the three sustainability dimensions. However, our study of the parties' manifestos suggests it makes a difference which party is in government – although parties make promises that are not kept and manifestos include actions that are never realized. While the Conservatives do not mention 'sustainability' in their manifesto, Labour uses it several times, and the Liberal Democrats also use the concept. Historically, the Conservatives were important in developing new policies for ecological modernization but have tended to value economic policies more. However, neither sustainability nor SDGs have had purchase in UK political debate, except in some parliamentary committees.

CONCLUSIONS

Work related to UK sustainable development has not been a linear process, but rather one illustrated by two key turning points. The UK has a history of environmental policy coordination and, from the early 1990s, it has been a promoter of sustainable development targets. The country started as a sustainable development forerunner with the publication of its first national development strategy in 1994, but the UK's attention to sustainable development later decreased. Since 2019 we have seen steps towards bringing sustainability back again via its strong climate agenda.

The first crucial change happened in 2010, when the Conservative government dissolved several administrative tools, most importantly, the Sustainable Development Commission. The SDC closure followed a change of government. The Labour Party was at that time more concerned with environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development than the incoming Conservatives. Mainstreaming of sustainable development, introduced as a principle while other tools were abolished, did not have the effect it was communicated to have.

The introduction of the SDGs at international level in 2015 did not substantially increase attention to sustainable development in the UK. In the discussions that followed related to how to implement the SDGs in the UK, two parliamentary committees (watchdogs) and NGOs widely criticized the government's lack of clear plans to implement the SDGs domestically, treating the goals as a 'developing world issue'. The UK did not treat the SDGs as a continuation of the national sustainable development strategy, but as a continuation of the MDGs. Like the MDGs, the SDGs are in the hands of the Department for International Development (DFID; since 2020: Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office). In contrast, the national sustainable development strategy continues to be in the hands of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), but this strategy is no longer active. However, the arrival of the SDGs led to a division of responsibility between these two departments.

Development since 2010 shows political backing for sustainable development has not been maintained and committed at UK national level. In contrast, there has been cross-party agreement about the importance of sustainable development principles in Wales, which also developed its ground-breaking Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015, which puts sustainable development on a significantly stronger footing in the legislative and policy landscape than in the other countries of the UK. However, this has not contributed to much learning at the UK national level. While a sustainable development discourse has been advanced among NGOs and committed experts, it has been lacking in the public and political agendas at the national level. As a concept, sustainable development has, in the UK, been criticized for being flawed and has struggled to make headway against the dominance of traditional economic concerns. This is also an important insight in the light of the introduction of mainstreaming. Empirical evidence of how mainstreaming works in practice is scant (Brouwer, Rayner and Huitema, 2013: 135).

The second turning point occurred around 2019. While struggling with being overloaded with Brexit and still postponing other plans, new developments signalled a change in government thinking towards increasing the attention to sustainability. A decade earlier, climate policy had pushed the focus on sustainable development into the background, and contributed to sustainability thinking by mentioning maximizing economic opportunities and protecting the vulnerable in the 2008 Climate Change Act and the 2009 Low Carbon Transition Plan. While climate policy remains high on the domestic agenda, new coordination mechanisms such as the Clean Growth Strategy and the net-zero GHG emissions target for 2050 have started to merge the climate and sustainability agendas. Another indication of increased attention to sustainability is the 2019 Voluntary National Review, which shows there has been some progress from the initial years of the SDGs until making up status a few

years later. In this Review the government has also tried to answer some of the criticisms it received related to the implementation of the SDGs. The party programmes show that several policies include the three sustainability dimensions – although not always using sustainability as a concept. Labour and the Liberal Democrats show high awareness of sustainability in their manifestos. The Conservatives seem to find the concept less useful and do not use it.

Overall, we find the discussions and policies addressing sustainable development in the UK have a stronger focus on environmental and economic issues than on social welfare. We find climate policy remains high on the domestic policy agenda. Although sustainability is not always used as a concept, several policies (e.g. climate policies) do include the three sustainability dimensions. We also see that it matters for the focus on sustainable development how responsibilities are organized in the state apparatus and this has shifted over time.

INTERVIEWS

1. NGO representative, Just Fair, 23 November 2016, London
2. NGO representative, UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD), 24 November 2016, London
3. NGO representative, The Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development (FDSD), 24 November 2016, London
4. NGO representative, The Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP), 24 November 2016, London
5. NGO representative, BOND, 25 November 2016, London
6. Labour politician/parliamentary researcher, 1 June 2018, telephone
7. Clerk, Environmental Audit Committee, 26 February 2018, telephone
8. Civil servant in Defra for nine years (today consultant), 22 February 2018, telephone
9. Key person in the Sustainable Development Commission (today independent researcher, works closely with politicians), 2 February 2018, telephone
10. Key person in the Sustainable Development Commission, Wales, 2 February 2018, telephone
11. Representative of the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner in Wales, 6 February 2018, telephone

NOTES

1. The Northern Ireland Assembly was established in 1998 and the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Parliament in 1999.

2. This was five years after the adoption of the Millennium Declaration and the same year as the world leaders met at the United Nations in New York to assess how far their pledges to the Millennium Development Goals had been fulfilled, and to decide on what further steps are needed to achieve them (UN, 2005; see Chapter 2).

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