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Toward the sustainability state? Conceptualizing national sustainability institutions and their impact on policy-making

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Abstract

The achievement of global sustainability and climate objectives rests on their incorporation into policy-making at the level of nation-states. Against this background, governments around the world have created various specialized sustainability institutions—councils, committees, ombudspersons, among others—in order to promote these agendas and their implementation. However, sustainability institutions have remained undertheorized and their impact on policy-making is empirically unclear. In this paper, we develop a conceptual framework for sustainability institutions and systematically explore their potential impact on more sustainable policy-making. We define sustainability institutions as public, trans-departmental and permanent national bodies with an integrated understanding of sustainability that considers socio-ecological well-being, global contexts and a future-orientation. Drawing on literature on sustainability and long-term governance as well as on illustrative case examples, we propose conducive conditions and pathways through which sustainability institutions may influence policy-making. As conducive, we assume sustainability institutions' embodiment of sustainability governance principles as well as their authority, a strong legal basis, resources, and autonomy. Further, we outline how sustainability institutions can influence policy-making based on their roles in the public policy process. We conclude that the increasing prevalence of national sustainability institutions indicates an ongoing shift from the *environmental state* toward a more comprehensive *sustainability state*. However, sustainability institutions can only be one building block of the sustainability state out of many, and their potential to reorient political decision-making effectively toward the socio-ecological transformation hinges upon individual design features such as their mandate, resources and authority, as well as on the specific governance context.

KEYWORDS

environmental state, future generations, long-term governance, sustainability institutions, sustainability state, sustainable development

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Achieving global sustainability objectives as stipulated in the Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development or under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change hinges on ambitious policies at the national level. Hence, national political processes are key to understanding how global sustainability goals are to be attained. We focus on the role of councils, committees, commissions or ombudspersons as polity phenomena that were deliberately set up as key parts of national sustainability governance systems. An increasing number of governments around the world have installed such specialized bodies, often in response to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 or the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (Boyer, 2000; Breuer et al., 2019; EEAC Network, 2019; GN-NCS, 2019; Göll & Thio, 2008; UNDESA, 2019; Vries, 2015; Wurster et al., 2015). These sustainability institutions carry a variety of thematic foci, as for example the Council for Sustainable Development in Burkina Faso, the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development in Canada, the Council of Ministers for Sustainability in Chile, or the Guardian of Future Generations in Malta.

As sustainability institutions are usually implemented as permanent components of national governance systems, we view them in the context of an emerging debate on the transformation of the environmental state (Duit et al., 2016; Eckersley, 2004; Sommerer & Lim, 2016) toward a sustainability state (Hausknost & Hammond, 2020; Heinrichs & Laws, 2014). In taking this perspective, we acknowledge that there is no “withering away of the state” given the crucial role of governments in view of the comprehensive challenge to implement ecologically sustainable development (Jänicke & Weidner, 1995, p. 21). While the environmental state has been accredited to have improved domestic environmental performance (Bernauer & Koubi, 2009; Death & Tobin, 2018; Fiorino, 2011; Jahn, 2016), it has also been criticized for its failure to incorporate a comprehensive socio-ecological system perspective (Biermann, 2021) and for its tendency to externalize national environmental footprints to other world regions (Hausknost & Hammond, 2020). Political responses to global warming are a case in point. Climate change was initially framed as an environmental problem but was gradually acknowledged as a central multi-dimensional challenge in the broader context of sustainable development (Bauer et al., 2021; Parry, 2009), and, hence, beyond the competence and capacity of the environmental state.

Against this background, the emerging concept of a sustainability state offers a more comprehensive perspective to deal with complex sustainability challenges. Normatively, it rests on “enabling and managing a deep socio-ecological transformation of society in line with the requirements of rapid decarbonisation and keeping within crucial biophysical limits” (Hausknost & Hammond, 2020, p. 5). Consequentially, any new paradigm for the state along these lines also requires “new institutions, structures and policies, beyond the traditional environmental policy institutions” (Biermann, 2021, p. 73).

We thus place our research on sustainability institutions under the overarching question of whether these specialized institutions can be considered heralds of an ongoing transition of states' self-understanding toward providers of sustainability. The role of sustainability institutions

in that context could range from being mainly cosmetic additions to the existing political-administrative structures, which are in fact upholding the status quo, that is, sustaining the unsustainable (Blühdorn, 2007), and thereby reflecting a continuation of the environmental state. Alternatively, sustainability institutions could prove to be drivers of reform that indeed challenge existing structures and are themselves indicators of a changing role of the state toward a sustainability state.

For the time being, the notion of a sustainability state still remains conceptually vague on the basis that “sustainability needs to be integrated into decision-making in politics and administration at all levels” (Heinrichs & Laws, 2014, p. 2623). Yet, moving beyond the environmental state would require a shift in the self-understanding of the state toward providing, facilitating, and institutionalizing a regulative framework for a comprehensive socio-ecological transformation toward sustainability (Hausknost & Hammond, 2020). Empirically, the sustainability state remains understudied, with the notable exception of Heinrichs and Laws' (2014) study on sustainability institutions in Germany as part of a yet insufficient “sustainability state in the making.” With this article, we aim to contribute to this line of scholarship by operationalizing national sustainability institutions as building blocks and potential indicators of an emergent paradigm shift toward sustainability states.

In this paper, we use the term *sustainability institutions* to subsume the diffuse universe of institutionalized bodies for sustainability both in the legislative and executive polity sphere. To date, individual forms of sustainability institutions have been studied, such as national councils for sustainable development (SD) (UNDESA & Li, 2012), multi-stakeholder councils (Maurer, 1999; Niestroy, 2007), parliamentary committees (Kinski & Whiteside, 2022; Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020), SDG implementation bodies (Breuer et al., 2019), or institutions for future generations (Dirth, 2016; Rose, 2018; Smith, 2020). We argue that all of these institutionalized bodies define attempts to incorporate sustainability into political decision-making at the national level. We therefore contend that viewing them all under the label of “sustainability institutions” will facilitate (comparative) research. To date, only vague attempts have been made to provide generalizable principles or characteristics linking these different institutions as sub-types of an overarching phenomenon (Göll & Thio, 2008; Niestroy, 2007). We contribute to these efforts by introducing—in Section 2—a concept of sustainability institutions that integrates different sub-types under one common term to facilitate comparative research on a subject with increasing worldwide prevalence.

In contrast to a broad scholarship on the effectiveness of the environmental state, the functions and impacts of sustainability institutions have rarely been assessed. The few comparative studies in this field found sustainability institutions to have a limited impact, but the scope of these studies is still narrow (Dirth, 2016; Heinrichs & Laws, 2014; Maurer, 1999; Rose, 2018). To lay the conceptual foundation for systematic research on the impact of sustainability institutions, we therefore present—in Section 3—a comprehensive analytical framework that identifies conducive conditions as well as pathways for sustainability institutions' influence on policy-making. We illustrate all conceptual steps with empirical examples of sustainability institutions. In Section 4, we summarize the contribution of this paper and outline avenues for the further study of sustainability institutions' political impact.

2 | CONCEPTUALIZING SUSTAINABILITY INSTITUTIONS

2.1 | Starting points in previous work

The literature currently lacks a rigorous conceptualization of sustainability institutions. Previous attempts vaguely characterize sustainability institutions, for example, as “primary promoters and ‘power centres’ to give orientation, resources and political support for a sustainable development” (Göll & Thio, 2008, p. 85). They were also described with respect to their functions in the policy-making process, such as facilitating decision-making, supporting sustainability goals, or implementing respective political decisions (Spangenberg et al., 2002). Even authors analyzing National Councils for Sustainable Development (in our view a subset of sustainability institutions) usually do not provide clear definitions (Connor & Dovers, 2004; Niestroy, 2005; Osborn et al., 2014). However, some propose ideal characteristics, among them a focus on long-term and integrative ecological, social and economic development, a membership representing different government and societal sectors, a legal mandate, the capacity for policy development, and strong inter-institutional linkages (Connor & Dovers, 2004, p. 133). Other definitions of sustainability institutions draw on their functions in the wake of international agreements following from the 1992 Earth Summit, requiring sustainability institutions to balance ecological, economic and social concerns, adopt integrated planning, consider the interests of future generations, involve stakeholders in decision-making, improve access to information and justice, and provide relevant knowledge—while acknowledging that sustainability institutions may have different foci and cannot equally fulfill all requirements (UNDESA & Li, 2012).

While much of the mentioned literature at least implicitly considers the concerns of future generations, the literature on governance for the long-term future is more explicit on this key dimension of SD. For instance, Boston subsumes councils or ombudspersons for the future, as well as SD commissions under “institutions with mandates to protect, and/or advocate on behalf of, the interests of future generations or exercise long-term guardianship roles” (2017, p. 175). Similar understandings of institutions for future generations can be found, inter alia, with González-Ricoy and Gosseries (2016a) and Rose (2016), who both refer to government-initiated councils and guardians as well as to parliamentary committees, commissioners and ombudspersons.

Building on these reviewed aspects, we propose a globally applicable concept of sustainability institutions, defined by their sustainability-orientation and their institutionalization as public bodies, which we detail below (see also Figure 1). In defining national sustainability institutions, we deliberately include only those criteria that we consider to be universally relevant, independent of political context or regime type.

2.2 | Sustainability: The substantial dimension

“Sustainability” is a notoriously ambiguous concept “with many different meanings” (Lipschutz, 2009, p. 136) that is “susceptible to inflationary tendencies” (Bimbacher & Thorseth, 2015, p. 2). As we will

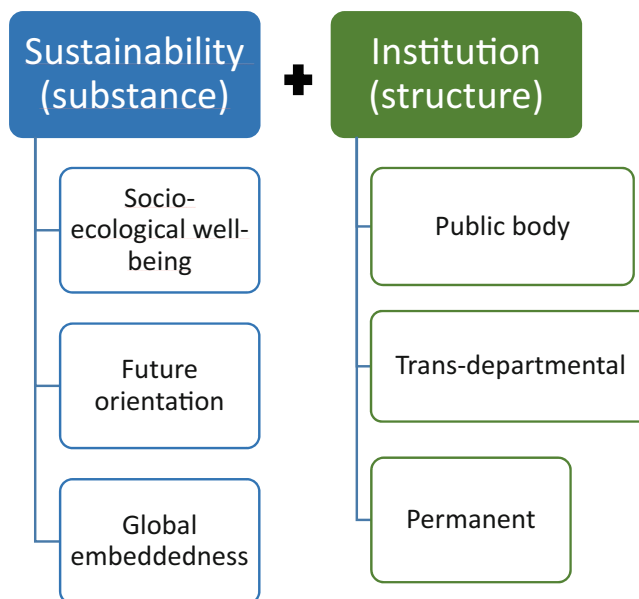


FIGURE 1 Concept of sustainability institutions

explicate below, we understand sustainability as a three-fold guiding ideal in terms of *socio-ecological well-being for current and future beings from the local to the global level*. This understanding is informed by academic concepts of sustainability as well as by the widely used definition of SD in the Brundtland Commission's report to the UN (WCED, 1987).¹ First, from a socio-ecological perspective, we acknowledge that ecological and social well-being are inherently interlinked and form the basis for economic activities (Dryzek & Pickering, 2019; Griggs et al., 2013; Raworth, 2018). Second, thriving for sustainability in any given context requires an orientation toward the global common good that accounts for the interdependencies between local, national and global well-being (e.g., Messner & Scholz, 2018). And third, sustainability is an inter-temporal concept (Caney, 2019), considering as well the lives and needs of future generations.

We propose that sustainability institutions need to meet all of the three sustainability-related elements outlined above—integration of a socio-ecological perspective; global embeddedness; future orientation (see Figure 1). A case in point is the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Sustainable Development (German acronym: PBNE) in the German Bundestag. The PBNE's institutional mandate relies on the principle “Do not live today at the expense of tomorrow” (*own translation*) and explicitly refers to future generations as per the Brundtland Commission's definition of SD (Deutscher Bundestag, 2018, pp. 6–7). Further, it states that “sustainability is not limited to environmental protection and nature conservation, but also deals with the topics of ecology, economy and social issues” (*own translation*) (Deutscher Bundestag, 2018, p. 7), thus addressing the interconnectedness between ecological and social issues. Finally, the PBNE's understanding of sustainability considers the global context by declaring that sustainability “does not stop at national borders, but also unfolds in international cooperation” (*own translation*) (Deutscher Bundestag, 2018, p. 7). We acknowledge that not all sustainability institutions may explicitly address all three substantial criteria in their



mandates. As a proxy to meeting the sustainability criteria, we thus consider institutions' clear embeddedness into the UN SD agenda.

The main rationale of sustainability institutions is thus to promote and work toward sustainability at the national political level. Within this overarching rationale, we expect heterogeneity in the specific goals of national sustainability institutions, especially between different types. For example, an advisory body to the executive is likely to have different goals than a parliamentary body that may be directly involved in policy decisions.

2.3 | Institution: The structural dimension

In structural terms, we focus on public bodies with a direct relationship to either government or parliament. We conceive of specialized sustainability institutions as a type of “better ‘infrastructure’ for action” in the area of sustainability, as was already called for by Jänicke and Weidner in the context of environmental policies (1995, p. 22). By using the term “institutions,” we aim to avoid confusion with non-governmental and for-profit “organizations” and underscore the fact that they embody a degree of institutionalization of sustainability in national polities. Thereby, we also follow the use of this terminology in the field (Boston, 2017; Dirth, 2016; Dovers, 2001; Göll & Thio, 2008; González-Ricoy & Gosseries, 2016b; Rose, 2016; UNGA, 2013; Wong & van der Heijden, 2021), even though this understanding differs from the mainstream social sciences notion of “institutions” as referring to rules, norms and practices (North, 1990; Young et al., 2008).

From their classification as public bodies it follows that sustainability institutions must have a public mandate, meaning that a mandate was issued by government or parliament, ideally in the form of legal founding documents such as laws or acts, but we also consider accounts of sustainability institutions in government reports (such as the Voluntary National Reviews) as well as on official websites. For example, the PBNE is based on a parliamentary resolution (19/1837 from 2018) while the National Council for Sustainable Development (CNDD) in Burkina Faso was created by Presidential decree (decree N° 2017/0459 PRES/PM/MEEVCC).

Two further structural criteria result from our above definition of sustainability. First, we focus on sustainability institutions that structurally facilitate the integration of social and ecological well-being by means of a trans-departmental set-up. This means that sustainability institutions go beyond a sectoral assignment, such as to the Ministry of the Environment, and instead formally involve either the center of government, any other high-level sector-overarching political institution, and/or representatives of different political sectors. They may also have an explicit mandate to connect policy areas and departments. The PBNE in the German Bundestag, for example, is a cross-partisan body mandated to accompany “the sustainability policy of the Federal Government *across factions and ministries*” (*own translation and emphasis*) (Deutscher Bundestag, 2018). On the other hand, the CNDD in Burkina Faso is chaired by the prime minister, which gives it a trans-departmental spirit, too, although it is administratively located in the Ministry of the Environment.

Second, the future-orientation of sustainability suggests that sustainability institutions exist permanently in order to enable long-term political commitment, establish viable working relationships and provide continuity beyond election cycles (OECD, 2016; Wong & van der Heijden, 2021). We operationalize permanence by an *open-ended mandate* or the *repeated appointment* because these criteria hint to a long-term mission or an accepted practice, respectively. The PBNE in Germany, for example rests on a mandate that is periodically renewed at the beginning of each legislative term since 2004. The CNDD also reflects a degree of continuity as it mutated in 2017 out of the National Council on Environment and Sustainable Development (CONEDD) from 2002. Crucially, the criterion of permanence serves to distinguish sustainability institutions from temporary (e.g., project-based) or case-specific political committees on sustainability issues such as the German *Kohlekommission* (commission on phasing out coal) in 2018 and 2019, or the *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (citizens' assembly on climate) in France in 2020.

3 | CONDITIONS AND PATHWAYS TO POLICY IMPACT

In the following, we introduce an analytical framework outlining conducive conditions as well as pathways through which sustainability institutions may impact policy-making to the benefit of sustainability. Only if it is plausible that sustainability institutions can influence political decisions, they might indeed indicate the emergence of a sustainability state. For this, we draw on a range of different characteristics of sustainability institutions. We start out by analyzing conducive conditions and discuss how these may increase sustainability institutions' impact on policy-making. First, we describe how sustainability institutions can implement certain governance principles that are expected to facilitate integrated policy-making for SD. Second, we analyze their capacity to impact policy-making via their authority according to available political instruments, their legal basis, and supportive resources. Third, we consider the relevance of sustainability institutions' political autonomy for their impact. Lastly, we sketch out pathways how sustainability institutions may impact policy-making based on their roles in the stages of the public policy process.

Note that the dimensions of this analytical framework are not disjunctive nor necessarily independent from each other. Instead, they provide different perspectives on sustainability institutions and their potential impact. Different sustainability institutions may prioritize certain characteristics or pathways to policy impact, hence the framework does not serve as a blueprint for institutional design.

All dimensions and criteria of the analytical framework are summarized in Table 1.

3.1 | Governance principles for sustainable development

By analyzing global sustainability objectives and agreements (Agenda 21 and the 2030 Agenda in particular) and preconditions of their successful implementation, drawing, inter alia, on the literature on policy

TABLE 1 Conducive conditions and pathways for sustainability institution's impact on policy-making

Analytical dimension	Description
Conducive conditions for sustainability institutions' policy impact	
Implementation of governance principles for sustainable development	
<i>Horizontal integration</i>	Coordination between different policy areas (e.g., ministries), policy integration, office holders with different cross-sectoral backgrounds and expertise
<i>Vertical integration</i>	Coordination of different tiers and jurisdictions of government aiming at policy integration, global to local level
<i>Societal integration and participation</i>	Representation (membership and other stakeholders), communication and information (with public and stakeholders), power delegation (to stakeholders)
<i>Integration of a long-term perspective</i>	Claiming interests of future generations, engaging in political foresight, long-term impact assessments, relation to the electoral cycle
<i>Knowledge integration & reflexivity</i>	Integrated consideration of different fields and types of knowledge, provision of critical perspectives, deliberation
Capacity	
<i>Political authority</i>	Hard power instruments (e.g., suspensive veto right, binding recommendations) or soft power instruments (e.g., issuing opinions, non-binding sustainability impact assessments)
<i>Strength of legal basis</i>	Strong legal basis (i.e., modification only with qualified majority, for example, constitutional entrenchment) or weak legal basis (easy to revoke, e.g., presidential decree)
<i>Resources</i>	Staff members, secretariat, budget
Autonomy	
<i>Relationship to government or parliament</i>	Degree of embeddedness (independence vs. dependence)
<i>Independence of members</i>	Recruiting rules regarding party affiliation or other political offices of members to avoid conflicts of interests
Pathways to impact in the public policy process	
<i>Agenda-setting</i>	Shaping the political discourse regarding problem-formulation, keeping sustainability issues on the political agenda
<i>Policy formulation</i>	For example, formulating policy proposals, initiating legislation
<i>Policy adoption</i>	For example, right to comment on legislative proposals before adoption (de facto suspensive veto)
<i>Policy implementation</i>	For example, suspension of administrative decisions in case of threat to environmental conditions
<i>Evaluation</i>	Monitoring and evaluation of policies or specific policy documents (e.g., sustainability strategies)

integration, scholars have developed a range of governance principles that are supposed to be conducive for SD (Breuer et al., 2019; Dryzek & Pickering, 2019; Glass & Newig, 2019; Heinrichs & Laws, 2014; Jacob et al., 2013; Jänicke, 2006; Niestroy et al., 2019; OECD, 2018; Persson & Runhaar, 2018; Steurer, 2010; Wurster et al., 2015). These principles are remarkably homogeneous among the literature, which allows us to condense them into five clusters: (1) horizontal integration across policy areas and departments, (2) vertical integration of different political levels (from international to local), (3) societal integration and participation of stakeholders from various sectors, (4) monitoring, reflexivity, and knowledge integration, and (5) a distinct long-term perspective on political decisions that counteracts the short-term orientation of prevalent governance institutions and policies.

The implementation of these governance principles has been assumed to strengthen states' capabilities to transpose the complex challenge of sustainable development into adequate, comprehensive policies (Heinrichs & Laws, 2014; OECD, 2018). Consequently, they are also used as assessment criteria for SDG implementation mechanisms (including sustainability institutions) (Breuer et al., 2019; Niestroy et al., 2019), national sustainability strategies (Jacob et al., 2013), and as

design principles for the establishment or reform of specific sustainability institutions (Göll & Thio, 2008). We thus assume that the realization of these general governance principles in the design of sustainability institutions are key building blocks for their prospective impact. At the same time, we acknowledge that individual sustainability institutions may emphasize different principles according to their overarching focus: For example, a commission for future generations likely prioritizes a long-term orientation, while an SDG implementation body may primarily seek to coordinate different political actors.

3.1.1 | Horizontal integration

Given that the concept of sustainability cuts across policy areas seeking to address ecological and social considerations coherently, the horizontal integration of policy fields beyond traditional sectoral divisions is a key task in sustainability governance. Against the background of synergies as well as trade-offs between certain sustainability goals, it is inevitable that actors from different policy fields, first of all ministries, coordinate with one another in order to pull into the same direction,



and to avoid negative external effects of sectoral policies on the objectives of SD (Steurer, 2010). Sustainability institutions can thus be drawn up as institutional hubs of horizontal policy integration, or at least as facilitators for the coordination of actors from different sectors as a stepping stone to policy integration. For example, the State Secretary Committee for Sustainable Development in Germany has been tasked with the provision of an institutionalized exchange between different line ministries (Bundesregierung, 2021). Additionally, the crosscutting orientation of sustainability institutions may be facilitated by certain internal design features such as office-holders and staff members with varying professional backgrounds, from different policy areas or constitutional organs. Further, leaders of government or parliament or their representatives may be formally involved, for example, as a chair, to signal its crosscutting character and political priority (integrative high-level political leadership) (Breuer et al., 2019; Heinrichs & Laws, 2014; Wong & van der Heijden, 2021). This is the case for Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, which is chaired by the Prime Minister (Prime Minister's Office Finland, 2020, p. 21).

3.1.2 | Vertical integration

In the spirit of policy coherence for SD, actors, objectives, and strategies for SD need not only to be coordinated and integrated horizontally, but also vertically between different tiers and jurisdictions of government (Breuer et al., 2019; OECD, 2020; Steurer, 2010). Nationally, the harmonization of different tiers of government toward common goals facilitates their successful implementation. Equally important, the integration of national and international governance levels helps on the one hand to align goals and on the other hand to consider global effects of national activities. Sustainability institutions are in many instances entrusted with the development, implementation or monitoring of national sustainable development strategies as a means to translate global goals into national policies. They can also contribute to vertical integration by fostering institutionalized exchange with and between local, regional, supra-national and international governance levels. For example, the PBNE is explicitly tasked to connect the German with the European and the UN governance levels, as well as to keep contact with institutions at the subnational level (i.e., the German *Länder*). Another case in point is the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) that is connected to four regional network offices for sustainability throughout Germany. Internally, sustainability institutions might even include representatives of subnational levels as members, as the Belgian Federal Council for Sustainable Development shows, where the Belgian Regions are directly represented.

3.1.3 | Societal integration and participation

Another important principle in governing the transformation to sustainability is the integration and mobilization of the broader society in order to benefit from local knowledge, and to create legitimacy and a sense of ownership for sustainable policies (Böhmelet et al., 2016;

Glass & Newig, 2019; Göll & Thio, 2008). Thus, participation is widely regarded as key to attain a major sustainability transformation (Dietz & Stern, 2008; Sachs et al., 2019; UN Environment, 2019).

Following Fung (2006) and Newig et al. (2018), we distinguish different dimensions of participation in sustainability institutions, depending on who participates, through which means of communication, and the extent to which participants are granted decision-making power. First, we consider who is represented in sustainability institutions concerning both the membership composition and other stakeholders involved (see also Niestroy, 2007). It has been argued that a diverse set of participants may improve decision-making due to the integration of different kinds of (local) knowledge and sustainability-related concerns (Newig et al., 2018). Regarding membership composition, for example, Osborn et al. (2014) distinguish whether national councils for SD are made up either exclusively of members from within government, entirely from outside the government, or mixed. Regarding stakeholder involvement, the National Coordination Team on the SDGs in Indonesia is an example for broad representation: "Members of Implementing Team and Working Groups are representatives of government, philanthropy and business society, civil society organizations, academics and experts to ensure inclusiveness and no one left behind principles" (Government of Indonesia, 2017, p. 3).

Second, we consider the means of communication between sustainability institutions and society. This concerns the information flow like, for example, public awareness raising, the forms of interaction with stakeholders such as consultations or collaborations, as well as the frequency of participation. For example, the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) regularly organizes open access dialogs in the context of updating the national sustainability strategy, as well as annual conferences with participation from experts as well as civil society. In general, more interactive and deliberative forms of exchange are expected to produce more creative and sustainability-oriented outcomes (Dryzek & Pickering, 2019, chap. 7; Newig et al., 2018).

Third, many of the assumed benefits of participation on sustainability outcomes depend on the extent to which the involved participants are granted the power to actually shape decisions, because otherwise participation may remain symbolic and ineffective (Beierle & Cayford, 2002; Fung, 2006; Newig et al., 2018). To our knowledge, however, power delegation to participants often remains limited in the practice of sustainability institutions.

Overall, the societal integration of sustainability institutions may not only substantially improve their work, for example, by considering local knowledge and raising awareness. Societal integration and participation may also boost the standing of sustainability institutions vis-à-vis other political actors by increasing their own legitimacy, ultimately benefitting their political impact as has been suggested, for example, in the context of offices for future generations (Smith, 2020).

3.1.4 | Integration of long-term perspectives

Given that the long-term perspective is an essential dimension of sustainability and politics are often characterized by rather short

time horizons (Boston, 2017; MacKenzie, 2016), we discuss how sustainability institutions contribute to extending the political horizon into the long-term future. This would increase the probability for truly sustainable policies that tackle long-term problems like climate change. While a general orientation toward the future is an integral part of our concept of sustainability institutions, here we consider their concrete roles in providing long-term visions, objectives and strategies, in political foresight, as well as in the assessment of long-term policy impacts. Further, we take into account whether (and how) sustainability institutions specifically claim the interests of future generations. In terms of their institutional set-up, we consider the relation of the institutional or membership mandate to the electoral cycle as an indicator for the relative independence from short-term pressures and for political continuity (see also Dovers, 2001; MacKenzie, 2016; Niestroy, 2007). The Finnish Committee for the Future, for example, engages in future studies, is responsible for the technological impact assessment, answers the governments future report, recommends specific measures and monitors their implementation. As a parliamentary committee, it is bound to the electoral cycle, but both its (self-described) function as a parliamentary think-tank and its limited role in the actual legislative process seem to strengthen the long-term orientation of its members (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020).

3.1.5 | Knowledge integration and reflexivity

Finally, the provision and integration of knowledge(s) has been identified as a crucial governance principle to adequately address SD as a “wicked issue” (e.g., Steurer, 2010). This implies, for example, to consider different knowledge fields (such as legal, environmental, or social perspectives) as well as types of knowledge (such as scientific or lay) in an integrated way, thereby accounting for the complexity and uncertainty of SD. Sustainability institutions may provide this kind of knowledge via the professional backgrounds of their members, through participatory processes (see above), by conducting or commissioning research, and by monitoring and evaluation, which form the basis of policy advice. Further, sustainability institutions may explicitly be marked for providing critical perspectives in the sense of reflexivity. This means they could function as agents of or provide spaces for the recognition of socio-ecological conditions and changes, for reflection upon them, and for questioning goals and practices and adapting them according to new insights and values (see e.g., Dryzek & Pickering, 2019). For example, the PBNE can be considered reflexive in the way that it provides a parliamentary forum for SD-related discussions and has a watchdog function, that is, it may provide critical perspectives. Further, as a consensus-based body, recommendations are based on deliberation among the members (Kinski & Whiteside, 2022). Although members of the PBNE typically do not bring in professional sustainability-related expertise, the council regularly invites experts for hearings on specific sustainability topics, thus broadening their knowledge as a basis for monitoring and policy recommendations.

3.2 | Capacity

In the following, we analyze sustainability institutions' capacity to influence policy-making related to three conducive design conditions: the political authority they are given on paper according to the available political instruments; the strength of their legal basis; and the availability of supportive resources like secretariats and budget.

3.2.1 | Political authority

We assume that the choice and availability of political instruments shapes the political authority of sustainability institutions to influence decision-making processes (Boston, 2017). Drawing on Rose (2018), we distinguish political instruments with different kinds of political authority. If a sustainability institution is provided with hard power instruments, it “can force the actors directly involved in the political decision-making process to actively take [sustainability considerations] into account in the deliberation process and not merely take note of them or ignore them. This means that the relevant actors must demonstrably address the [sustainability issues in question]” (Rose, 2018, p. 143) (*own translation and adaptations*). Coercive instruments like suspensive veto rights or legal rights of action classify as hard power instruments. On the other hand, there are *soft power* instruments such as policy recommendations, issuing opinions and statements, right of access to undisclosed information, right of investigation, and sustainability impact assessments of draft legislation. These instruments are usually associated with a more subtle political authority. However, some of these instruments may turn into hard power under the condition that addressees have to respond or justify themselves in a formal way, which has been found to increase the influence of, for example, advisory councils (Osborn et al., 2014).

Prime examples of sustainability institutions with hard power instruments are the former Parliamentary Commissioners for Future Generations in Israel (2001–2006) and in Hungary (2008–2011), which had a suspensive veto power, and the right to judicial appeal, respectively. However, in case of the former, members of the Israeli Knesset stated exactly the provision with hard power instruments as a reason for the abolition because they felt that “the Commission received too much authority to interfere in their work” (Teschner, 2013, p. 3). The Hungarian Commissioner's competences and independence were cut back after a constitutional reform by Orbán's right-wing coalition, limiting the institution to a Deputy Commissioner for Future Generations within the office of the new Commissioner for Fundamental Rights. In the context of institutions for future generations, Dirth generalizes that “those with less power to disrupt tend to have longer lifespans” while those with “more authority and influence tend to either be disbanded or reduced with a change of government” (2016, p. 41). While hard power instruments are generally expected to increase the impact of sustainability institutions, these observations point to trade-offs between the kind of political authority and, ultimately, longevity of sustainability institutions (Boston, 2017). Against this background, soft power may be more purposeful in some contexts than hard power, but



comes with the risk of being ignored by other political actors as the example of the PBNE illustrates, which cannot force other committees or the government to engage with its recommendations (Kinski & Whiteside, 2022; PBnE, 2020).

3.2.2 | Strength of legal basis

Apart from the political instruments with which sustainability institutions are endowed by design, the strength of their legal basis shapes their political capacity, too. Legal bases that require some kind of a qualified majority (e.g., absolute majority, constitutional entrenchment, or two chambers that have to agree), reflect a high degree of political commitment by the actors who establish the sustainability institution (usually the government or parliament) (Rose, 2018, pp. 178–179). Such strong legal bases are rather hard to change, which protects sustainability institutions from being easily disbanded or having its powers curtailed. This allows them to act more boldly and independently. For example, the Canadian Commissioner for Environment and Sustainable Development is legally established in Canada's Auditor General Act that can only be changed by a qualified majority (both House of Commons and Senate have to agree) (Rose, 2018, p. 290). Many sustainability institutions, however, are based on a weak legal basis that is easy to change or revoke (Rose, 2018, p. 398 f.). Examples are the CNDD that is based on a presidential decree, or the PBNE that needs a renewed parliamentary resolution every new term.

3.2.3 | Resources

Finally, the capacity and effectiveness of sustainability institutions also differ in the availability of resources such as staff members, a secretariat, and their budget (Kropiwnicki-Gruber & Alsaedi, 2021, pp. 90–91). For example, the Committee for the Future in Finland is endowed with four clerks, a secretary general, a permanent science advisor, and an annual research budget (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020). By contrast, the Sustainable Development Commission in the UK (2000–2011) employed around 60 staff members (Rose, 2018, p. 338).

3.3 | Autonomy

The autonomy of sustainability institutions may be both conducive and detrimental for political impact. On the one hand, a high degree of autonomy may be a precondition to exercise watchdog and advocacy functions in the policy process (Dirth, 2016; Dovers, 2001; Göpel & Arhelger, 2011). Boston assumes that institutions that are “relatively independent (i.e., non-partisan) with an arm's-length relationship to elected officials, (...) are thus at the liberty to challenge existing policy arrangements and/or governmental intentions” (2017, p. 319). For example, the Canadian Commissioner for Environment and Sustainable Development—depending only on the Auditor General, not directly on the government and parliament—proved to be

highly critical of the government's (in)activities regarding sustainable development (Rose, 2018, pp. 290–291). On the other hand, being too detached from the government or elected officials may also decrease the impact of such bodies. The Finnish Committee for the Future, for example, is a relative autonomous body inside the Parliament. However, Koskimaa and Raunio observe that “[w]hile independence enhances its potential to raise future-sensitive issues, outsider status limits [its] policy impact” (2020, p. 166).

At the same time, too little autonomy—for example, due to strong political leadership or embeddedness within key political organs as is the case for the State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development in Germany—may also limit the impact of sustainability institutions. While closeness to government facilitates access to the political power center (Niestroy, 2007, p. 17), which is in principle a promising condition for impact, such a close relationship may also narrow the political leeway or reduce sustainability institutions to a rather technical role of coordination, to the detriment of a more critical position.

In comparison, the Sustainable Development Commission in the UK, an executive non-departmental public body founded as a company limited by guarantee, enjoyed a medium degree independence. The commission (10–16 commissioners, board, and staff) was owned by the UK, Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Irish Governments and reported to the UK Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. This allowed the Commission to fulfill its advisory, advocacy, capacity-building, watchdog and scrutiny functions (Rose, 2018, pp. 337–343).

In addition to the autonomy of the institution as a whole, the political independence of the members of sustainability institutions with respect to other political offices or party affiliations is yet another issue, and can be assessed by looking at internal regulations regarding recruiting rules and potential conflicts of interests. For example, the Commissioners for Future Generations in both Hungary and Israel were subject to particularly detailed rules as to who is allowed to take the respective position (Rose, 2018). Similar to the dilemmas above, a “double role” of members of sustainability institutions, for example, as members of government or parliament, might on the one hand undermine their independence and credibility and lead to role conflicts, eventually decreasing impact. On the other hand, members can bring their newly gained knowledge and recommendations on sustainability into their other political offices and thereby increase impact and acceptance. “Infiltration” therefore works both ways (Rose, 2018, pp. 177–178).

3.4 | Pathways to impact in the public policy process

In order to grasp how and through which pathways sustainability institutions may formally influence policy-making, we draw on the heuristic of the public policy cycle and its stages (see e.g., Knill & Tosun, 2008).

The stylized process starts with identifying a societal problem and setting the issue on the *agenda*. Here, sustainability institutions can plausibly contribute to shaping the political discourse about (un-)sustainability issues. In the context of councils for SD, Maurer found that

they “played an important role in translating and communicating the relevance of sustainable development to key national audiences” (1999, p. 7). Niestroy highlights the function of SD advisory councils to “keep the overall issue on the agenda and fill it with seriousness” and “to address neglected issues” (2007, p. 4). A proactive as opposed to a reactive role (which would be limited to only responding to requests from government or parliament) crucially shapes sustainability institutions’ capacity to effectively set the political agenda (Dirth, 2016; EEAC Network, 2019; Niestroy, 2007). For example, the Belgian Federal Council for Sustainable Development can issue recommendations on sustainability measures both upon request and on its own initiative. If the government deviates from the recommendations, it has to justify the deviations to the Council (Rose, 2018, pp. 274–275).

In the stages of *policy formulation* and *policy adoption*, parliamentary sustainability institutions may have an advantageous position in being particularly close to the policy process. The Israeli Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations, for example, initiated 166 bills in the 5 years of its existence (Lavi, 2014). As regards policy adoption, he had the right to comment on most legislative proposals within an undefined time frame, and could thereby suspend decision almost like a suspensive veto (Rose, 2018; Shoham & Lamay, 2006). Similarly, the Hungarian Commissioner for Future Generations had the ability to initiate and to review certain draft legislation (Ambrusné, 2011; Rose, 2018). The commissioners are outstanding examples regarding their competencies to intervene in policy adoption by means of an obligation to being consulted prior to decisions—at least for certain bills.

Apart from monitoring (see next paragraph), sustainability institutions hardly have anything to do with the *implementation* phase as this task is usually reserved for authorities of the executive power branch. Notably, though, the Hungarian Ombudsman for Future Generations was able to suspend certain administrative decisions that were already being implemented in cases where this implementation threatened environmental conditions (Rose, 2018, pp. 233–242).

Lastly, sustainability institutions can be involved in *evaluating and monitoring* the impacts of policies (EEAC Network, 2019; Osborn et al., 2014). However, their fields of actions may be limited to, for example, the monitoring and further development of national SD strategies (Niestroy, 2007), as is the case for the CNDD. The Canadian Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, as a high-ranking member of the Court of Auditors, reviews the (non-) implementation of the Canadian environmental and sustainability policy, with a special—but not exclusive—focus on the national SD strategy (Rose, 2018, p. 285 f.).

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

National sustainability institutions have mushroomed all over the world in the context of the UN SD paradigm, showing a broad variety of institutional design and political dovetailing. In order to better grasp sustainability institutions, we introduced an overarching concept, describing sustainability institutions as permanent, trans-departmental

public bodies aligned with socio-ecological well-being in a global and long-term perspective.

To explore whether sustainability institutions are indicators of a shift toward the sustainability state, we need to understand how they can contribute to mainstreaming SD into policy-making. Therefore, we proposed an analytical framework that systematizes conducive characteristics and pathways through which sustainability institutions may influence policy-making; illustrating potentials as well as limits. The framework embraces, (1) sustainability institutions’ contributions to the implementation of governance principles for SD, that is, horizontal, vertical and societal integration, as well as the integration of different knowledges and a long-term perspectives; (2) their capacity based on the availability of political instruments and resulting authority, the strength of their legal basis, and their supporting structures like a secretariat, staff and budget; (3) their autonomy vis-à-vis central political actors like government or parliament; and (4) their pathways to impact decision-making via their roles in the public policy process from agenda-setting to evaluation.

While some conditions like cutting across policy areas or a strong legal basis generally seem to be conducive for the potential impact of sustainability institutions, the effects of other characteristics appear more ambiguous: Linking sustainability institutions closely with governments and parliaments may leverage their access to policy-makers, but can also limit institutional autonomy, thus undermining a critical stance toward the status quo. Further, sustainability institutions face a dilemma between different kinds of authority: Whereas authority based on hard power instruments allows them to effectively intervene in the policy process, this capacity may also weaken their political acceptance and thus threaten institutional longevity (Boston, 2017; Dirth, 2016). Sustainability institutions with authority based on soft power instruments like issuing non-binding recommendations are more likely to be accepted and stable, but they risk being ignored by other political actors (Kinski & Whiteside, 2022). The conducive conditions identified in this article form the basis for working hypotheses on the impact of sustainability institutions, which can be tested in further empirical research.

By nature of being usually add-ons to the political system, it may be a lot to ask from sustainability institutions alone to transform decision-making essentially in favor of sustainability. They can thus form but one building block of a prospective sustainability state next to other possible elements like, inter alia, a constitutional commitment to sustainability, a set of laws aligned with sustainability goals, and respective checks for the national budget. However, we also acknowledge that, from the perspectives of symbolic politics and organizational neo-institutionalism (Blühdorn, 2007; Brunsson, 2002; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), sustainability institutions might even serve as formal substitutes for a substantial reorientation of policy-making toward SD, reflecting only a “symbolic commitment from the highest level of leadership” (Wong & van der Heijden, 2021, p. 4). Still, a number of examples we provided suggest that sustainability institutions have the potential to reorient policy-making toward sustainability objectives, which would qualify them as constitutive elements in their respective polity. We thus conclude that under certain conditions sustainability



institutions can be considered to herald a transformation toward sustainability states. To what extent individual institutions live up to this general claim remains an open question for comprehensive empirical research.

4.1 | Further research avenues

The concept and analytical framework introduced in this paper facilitate further research in the following ways: First, our conceptualization helps to recognize and categorize empirical sustainability institutions. Second, the analytical framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of sustainability institutions' characteristics and their impact on political decision-making. As a third contribution, the framework enables the systematic comparison of different sustainability institutions. This is not confined to cross-country comparisons, but can also offer within-country insights as to whether and how different kinds of sustainability institutions in a given political system complement and strengthen each other as building blocks of a sustainability state, possibly using different pathways to impact.

While our definition of national sustainability institutions is universally applicable, we expect a high degree of variance with regard to the criteria in the analytical framework, for example, related to political regime type. It is thus conceivable that sustainability institutions in authoritarian contexts generally provide no or very limited possibilities for civil society to participate. Weak state capacity may condition the formation of sustainability institutions (see e.g., Wurster et al., 2015), and is likely to alter their impact, too.

The study of sustainability institutions in the Global South raises particular challenges: In some countries, international organizations and development partners are formally represented in SDG implementation bodies (Breuer et al., n.d.). As an extreme case, the SDGs Executive Committee of Afghanistan was co-chaired by UNDP (Government of Afghanistan, 2021). The involvement of international actors in new or reformed political institutions generally raises questions about their impact on national politics (Buntaine et al., 2017; Moss et al., 2011). Against this background, our analytical framework provides a heuristic tool that should be useful to detect such patterns in future empirical comparative research on national sustainability institutions within and especially across countries and that can be applied around the world.

To sum up, sustainability institutions show considerable potential to orient national policy-making toward the achievement of global sustainability and climate agendas. Whether and to what extent they are expedient to advance swift and radical socio-ecological transformations and, indeed, to shape sustainability states, needs to be explored further in empirical research.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTE

¹ The authors of the Brundtland report to the UN define sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). While we acknowledge conceptual differences between “sustainable development” and “sustainability” (see e.g., Lélé, 1991), we use these terms interchangeably in this article because the distinction is usually not upheld in the political discourse or the operational work of sustainability institutions.

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