

# Environmental justice and care: critical emancipatory contributions to sustainability discourse

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**Abstract** Sustainability has become a powerful discourse, guiding the efforts of various stakeholders to find strategies for dealing with current and future social-ecological crises. To overcome the latter, we argue that sustainability discourse needs to be based on a critical-emancipatory conceptualization. Therefore, we engage two such approaches—environmental justice approaches informed by a plural understanding of justice and feminist political economy ones focusing on care—and their analytical potential for productive critique of normative assumptions in the dominant sustainability discourse. Both of these approaches highlight aspects of sustainability that are particularly relevant today. First, although sustainable development was conceptualized from the outset based upon a twofold notion of justice (intra- and intergenerational), the integration of justice in the dominant sustainability discourse and praxis often manifests merely as a normative aspiration. Meanwhile, the environmental justice and care approaches offer conceptualizations of justice that can act as a powerful lever and as transformation-strategy. Second, the dominant sustainability discourse largely remains within a neoliberal economic framework that continues to promote economic growth as the means to reach prosperity while neglecting the bases of every economy: care work and

nature. Its focus lies solely on paid work and the market economy. By integrating (a) social and ecological ‘reproductivity’ (unpaid care and subsistence work as well as nature) and (b) democratic processes for just distribution of environmental burdens and benefits, as well as participatory equity in relevant decision making, feminist political economy and environmental justice approaches offer substantial strategies towards building humane, just and caring societies.

**Keywords** Environmental justice · Feminist economics · Sustainability to come

## Abbreviations

DAWN	Development Alternatives for Women for a New Era
CSA	Community supported agriculture
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development
UN Rio+20	United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development
UCCCRJ	United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice

## Introduction and background

Since its inception about thirty years ago, sustainable development has emerged as a guiding framework for attempts to change politics, economy, and society towards enabling more sustainable ways of living. However, questions regarding how “The Future We Want”<sup>1</sup> should

<sup>1</sup> This is the title of the main policy document of the UN Rio+20 conference (General Assembly 2012).

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look, what sustainability actually means, and how sustainable development can be achieved and for whom, are situated in a highly contested field of meanings where some strands of discourse are marginalized while others gain dominance, often along the lines of already established power relations. We propose that this situation necessitates ongoing critical reflection with regard to the effects of the dominant sustainability discourse, its opportunities as well as its limitations, with the goal of increasing its democratic and transformative potential.

We refer to the dominant sustainability discourse as the discursive formation constituted through the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) and the subsequent series of world conferences on sustainability since the UN conference on environment and development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro 1992. Critiques of the dominant sustainability discourse have been put forward by many authors (e.g. Wiltshire 1992; Agyeman 2005; Redclift 2005) and movements, both as part of UN conference processes and parallel to them, including critical development, indigenous, environmental justice, and feminist movements. We argue that such critical contributions are today more important than ever, as the dominant sustainability discourse is gaining greater prominence, with consequences on multiple levels:

- (a) Sustainability is constituted as a field and a science, predominantly in Global North<sup>2</sup> centers of knowledge production. These knowledges of sustainability shape public perception as well as political decisions, influencing who can participate in discursive developments and whose knowledges and modes of knowledge production become influential (Langer and Bellina 2017). Environmental justice movements have developed participatory methods of community-based knowledge production and argue for the relevance of local and cultural knowledges and their recognition in decision-making processes (Bryant 2011).
- (b) Governance for sustainability is often reduced to mere environmental governance, emphasizing above all technological, efficiency and regulatory strategies (Dingler 2003); this is not surprising, as the dominant sustainability discourse draws strongly on Global North environmentalisms, which are generally focused on environmental protection. Environmentalisms from the Global South, on the other hand, strongly link poverty reduction through sustainable livelihoods to environmental quality (Guha 1997), and environmental justice proposes social justice and participatory democracy as strategies towards sustainability.
- (c) The dominant economic system is not only influenced by but is also appropriating sustainability discourse and, in turn, shaping it. The EU Commission, for instance, made a powerful attempt to conceptualize sustainability as ‘sustainable growth’ (2012). A further discursive reframing of sustainable development as ‘green economy’ took place in the process leading up to the UN Rio+20 conference, which again “preserves the economic structure” that “produces its [...] growth by continually destroying the living bases of every economy: care<sup>3</sup> and nature” (Biesecker et al. 2014: 2). Feminist economic critique has been voicing such concerns about what the dominant sustainability discourse leaves out since the 1990s.

These multiple strands—from dominant neoliberal influences through those proposing radically transformative solutions—are interwoven within sustainability discourse, but their differences and struggles for recognition have become less obvious, as terms such as ‘sustainable development’ become mainstreamed. Therefore, it is important to understand sustainability discourse as a possible site for questioning the un-just structures and un-caring rationalities of the dominant political and economic system, with enormous potential to contribute critical-emancipatory alternatives.

How then can sustainability, its aims, and the methods to achieve it, be constantly re-thought and practiced in new ways, while offering an open invitation to new participants, and as a process that may allow new problem understandings and solution strategies to emerge? Gottschlich (2013) has approached this question with the concept of “sustainability to come”, a term coined by taking a cue from Jacques Derrida’s (2005, 2010) concept of “democracy to come”. This analogy seeks to capture the inconclusive nature of an open-ended societal search process, which is never free of conflicts or power struggles: “The ‘to come’ in Derrida’s formulation [...] points to a transformative and disruptive potential at the heart of democracy, it points to a promise of change in the here and now” (Matthews 2013). Like democracy to come, the concept of sustainability to come represents an ongoing questioning of current power relations and their influence on different

<sup>2</sup> We use the terms “Global South/North” to refer to historically produced areas in today still inequitable relations of power, resource flows, and (access to/recognition in) knowledge production.

<sup>3</sup> The term care describes tasks that are essential not only for individuals but also for the functioning of society, such as providing childcare, support for the elderly and sick (both paid and unpaid), and social engagement, in institutions and in private relationships. At times, care is used synonymously with the term reproduction or reproductive labor. In a broad understanding of care (Tronto 1993: 103), as used here, the term also includes care (work) for future generations, as well as for nature, animals and plants.

views of sustainability, while also examining the effects of such views on different communities, both human and non-human. It is intended to function both as a tool for critical analysis and as visionary target knowledge for the transformation of unsustainable human–human–nature relations.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, we propose that such a conceptualization of sustainability to come depends on including existing critical approaches, and that the conceptualization itself is never completed but is, rather, a work in progress. Therefore, our motivation in this paper is to contribute a next step towards developing this conceptual work further. To do so, we review two fields—environmental justice, as including multiple forms of justice conceptually and in movement practices, and feminist political economy approaches, focusing on care—that can contribute to such a critical-emancipatory conceptualization. Based on literature review and discourse analysis, we intend to show that connecting the concepts and analyses and visions for socio-ecological transformation of emancipatory approaches in these two fields can help to bridge the gap between the reality of environmental injustices and destruction of livelihoods, and sustainability’s hopeful rhetorical commitment to a humane, equitable and caring society.<sup>5</sup> The goal of this paper is to explore possibilities that linking a plural understanding of justice to the feminist ethic of care offers for bringing out the emancipatory potential of sustainability discourse, and towards developing sustainability to come as its transformative praxis.<sup>6</sup>

## Concepts and analyses

Environmental justice approaches and feminist approaches highlight different important aspects of sustainability. They offer analytical potential for productive critique of normative assumptions in the dominant sustainability discourse, where those may reproduce existing issues rather than support transformation.

<sup>4</sup> This term recognizes the environmental-justice analysis that inequitable human–human relations are in fact greatly affecting human-nature relations.

<sup>5</sup> The second paragraph of the Johannesburg Declaration, adopted at the World Summit for Sustainable Development 2002, states: “We commit ourselves to building a humane, equitable, and caring global society, cognizant of the need for human dignity for all” (United Nations 2002).

<sup>6</sup> The term „praxis” refers to the inevitable interconnectedness between theory and practice, it therefore implies that academic work is always also political.

## Environmental justice approaches

Environmental justice is an umbrella term for a long tradition of anti-oppression critique of human–human–nature relations: Instead of only the general ‘human’ in human–nature relations, it also takes into account how structural privilege and oppression mediate the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits, as well as participation in relevant decision making. It is comprised of a great variety of grassroots movements across the world, with different emphases in their conceptualizations of justice, that share the concern of how human–human–nature relations can be restructured in such a way that there is “better quality of life *for all*, now and into the future, *in a just and equitable manner*, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems” (Agyeman et al., cited in Agyeman 2005: 6; our emphasis).

Environmental justice approaches have emerged in response to unjust socio-ecological conditions and continue to develop as those conditions take new forms. During colonial expansion, the colonizers’ appropriation and exploitation of land, resources, and people re-allocated environmental benefits to the colonizers, while producing loss of those benefits and new environmental burdens for the colonized. Industrialization, with its steep rise in the production of environmental burdens, such as pollution, increased this unequal distribution along the lines of race/ethnicity, class, and other socially constructed categories of inequality (Bullard 2005). Development politics has produced a new set of issues, such as massive displacement of peasants, indigenous peoples and other non-dominant groups through, for example, mega-dam projects and industrialized agriculture (Escobar 2011). Today, neoliberal globalization policies are fueling a new wave of resource appropriation in the Global South, producing “geographies of exploitation” (Madhuresh, cited in del Bene 2014) wherein people lose land and livelihoods—often in conjunction with government-supported resource extractivism or mono-cropping in the name of development.

Today’s environmental injustices are shaped by histories of place. To highlight just a few examples, in India, lower-caste peoples suffer disproportionately from environmental burdens and lack of opportunities for political participation. Consequently, environmental justice movements there are tied to struggles for rights and recognition for lower castes, farmers, women, and the urban poor and are shaped by decolonial emancipatory and liberation traditions (Rajan 2014; Agarwal 1992). In South America, movements like the landless workers’ movement fight for land reforms to return the colonially set up large landholding (latifundias) to poor peasants. In Africa, the struggle of the Ogoni people of Nigeria against big oil companies exemplifies the

enmeshment of corporate power, corrupt political regimes, and local cultural marginalization (Stephenson and Schweitzer 2011).

Environmental justice issues are not new and are present worldwide. Yet the term only became part of an internationally recognized debate in the 1980s, when the African-American civil rights movement and the environmental movement in the USA overlapped in struggles that gained significant media attention in an internationally dominant country and language. They also initiated scientific studies on the distribution of environmental burdens in relation to race (UCCCRJ 1987) that revealed that ‘environmental racism’ was indeed a factor. Class is a second major determinant in environmental injustice, as working-class people, including poor white people, also tend to be more subjected to environmental burdens than those in the middle or upper classes (Bullard 1999). This is also the main structural factor of environmental injustices in Europe.

Although the issues, movements, and debates take different forms, environmental justice is always concerned with critical analysis of how relations of power—as they are shaped by specific histories, cultures, politics, and geographies—mediate socio-environmental decision making, practices, and their effects on particular social groups. Based on this critical premise, movements develop alternative visions for more socially and ecologically just processes and practices.

Environmental justice makes three particularly important conceptual contributions to sustainability discourse: First, it redefines ‘environment’ as “where we live, work, play, worship, and go to school” (Alston 1991), in distinction from the predominantly white middle-class environmental movement’s definition of environment as non-human nature. This extends the notion of ‘environment’ to the built environment, making visible that effects of unsustainable practices also include for instance the exposure of low-wage workers to unhealthy working conditions, or air- and water-quality problems concentrated in poor neighborhoods. Second, it links ecological sustainability to the human rights framework, which shows that effects of unsustainable practices not only threaten ‘nature’, and thereby ‘humans’ in general, but specific groups much more than others. Third, it expands the understanding of justice to being plural and context-specific—as we will explore in greater detail in the following—and offers a justice-based approach to socio-ecological transformation towards sustainability.

### Expanding the notion of justice

While issues of *distributive justice* as conceptualized by Rawls (1971) have been prominent in environmental

justice, its concepts of justice go far beyond a single theory. Young (1990: 48ff.) examined the particular social contexts in which unjust distribution exists and found that institutionalized relations of social subordination play a major role. Social groups inscribed into categories such as race and class are produced through daily societal processes, ranging from being ignored to being subjected to open disrespect up to institutionalized exclusion from rights. Any social group forced to live under such conditions will find it difficult to be considered as entitled to fair distribution or equal participation. Fraser (2000) argues, therefore, that without explicit attention to *recognition* as a particular form of justice, fair distribution is not possible. This is also the precondition for a third concept of justice: *participatory* or *procedural justice*. Even where democratic participation is legally possible, socially oppressive social conditions, such as misrecognition, marginalization, exploitation, cultural imperialism, and violence, can substantially impede non-dominant groups from exercising their rights. Frazer and Young thus argue that understandings of justice must directly address oppression.

In this context, movements for social justice have put into question the notion of the individual as the sole unit of justice. The international indigenism<sup>7</sup> movement has convincingly argued that justice cannot only mean equality of individuals within the nation state but also needs to recognize cultural groups with rights to the resources needed to maintain particular forms of livelihoods (UN 2008).

Such livelihoods are related to a fourth concept of justice, *capabilities*. Nussbaum (2000) and Sen (1999) propose that justice is not simply about the distribution of goods but rather about their purpose: creating a good life. The notion of what a good life consists of is, of course, not the same for everyone, but everyone should be enabled to develop the capabilities necessary to create such a life. Sen critiques Rawls’ attempt at deriving a universally applicable theory of justice from an abstract ideal, pointing out that the multiple perspectives of the marginalized and poor need to be heard, because they contribute important ideas about the specific effects of theories and practices of justice (Brown 2010).

Environmental justice includes all of the above concepts in its analysis of socio-ecological inequity in relation to existing structural privileges and oppression, making visible relations of power as they play out in human–human–nature relations. This set of concepts enables us to move from a generalized ‘we/humanity’ as addressee of sustainability transformation to a more differentiated

<sup>7</sup> In the context of such struggles, indigeneity is a strategic, not ‘essentialized’, identity used to gain recognition and participation rights in decision-making processes (at the UN, nation state, or regional levels) that affect the cultural survival of many peoples.

excavation of leverage points tied to locations of responsibility (and power). Environmental justice consequently emphasizes *equity*. In contrast to the liberal notion of justice, in which equality implies ‘the same for every individual’, equity refers to a redistributive justice that needs to take into account and rectify existing inequalities (Shrader-Frechette 2002). The historicity of these inequities shows that intergenerational justice cannot only be interpreted as justice for future generations but must also take into account and compensate for the present effects of past injustices, as the concept of “ecological debt”<sup>8</sup> (Salleh 2009) exemplifies.

The notions of justice described above are present in movements both in the US and globally (Schlosberg 2007). Their existence does not, however, imply an integrated or uniform concept of justice; rather, the various concepts are used in combination, according to the particular stakeholders, the issues at hand, and the specific place. In fact, a plural understanding of justice may be necessary to address the wide range of injustices (*ibid*: 165ff.).

This may be the most fundamental challenge to dominant understandings of justice yet: justice is not neutral—its conceptualization, its practices and practitioners, are culturally and historically specific. Challenging this, social movements have expanded our understanding of justice: from its being extended mostly to European white, Christian males to including all persons. Universal human rights and theories of justice need to continue to be measured against their effects, especially on the lives of the poorest and most disadvantaged. This requires a continuous open invitation to the (maybe still unknown) ‘Other’/‘foreigner’ to participate in ‘doing justice’ (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000). Although justice is not neutral, it is not defined in a nihilistic way either: Derrida clarifies justice as an ongoing social responsibility to the ‘Other’. As democracy, justice is still ‘to come’, is infinite in its ongoing process of deconstructing the patterns of oppression. At the same time, justice “must not wait” and cannot be postponed (Derrida, cited in Weber 2005: 179).

### Feminist approaches

Feminist approaches to sustainability stand in a long tradition of feminist critique of development policies. The discourse on gender and sustainability has grown from the women’s, environment, development, and peace debates in

the 1970s and 1980s, which questioned the impacts of development on poor people, especially women, in light of global social-ecological, political, and economic crises, and raised the need for alternative development processes (Sen and Grown 1987; Agarwal 1992). Feminist perspectives contribute to sustainability as a concept of justice by making explicit the importance of gender justice (e.g. Braidotti et al. 1994; Harcourt 1994; Hofmeister et al. 2013). They provide an analysis of the gendered structural roots of poverty, inequities, and ecological destruction, interdependent with other categories of oppression. They also offer alternative visions, including the commitment to gender equity and the participation of women, and place ‘care’, both as a necessary prerequisite for achieving sustainable development and as an ethical and political principle, in the middle of transformation processes.

During the last 30 years, feminist approaches to sustainability discourse—whether they focus on the situation in the Global South or in the Global North—have consistently placed systemic issues at the center of their analyses. One main focal point has been the critique of the unsustainability of the principles of capitalist economies—the common basis for the approaches discussed in this paper. Feminist scholars have highlighted the centrality of reproduction for the functioning of any society as well as ecological sustainability. They analyze the mechanisms of the crisis of reproduction—by privatizing, feminizing, and naturalizing care (work)—and emphasize the need for alternative labor models.

In doing so, they not only extend the understanding of relevant and rights-deserving actors from individuals to social groups and ecological systems but also stress the necessity of promoting a “culture of care” (Dankelmann, cited in Biesecker et al. 2014: 6), which would help to place caring at the center of democracy (Tronto 2013). Such a vision requires radical change. Participation in paid work limits the amount of time that is available for unpaid care work for humans and non-humans, in the private and public spheres. Although several ideas exist concerning how to integrate all forms of labor so that everybody can participate in all fields, the resistance against work-time reduction—a prerequisite for a new model of labor and a caring democracy—is growing rather than diminishing. Until now, the sustainability discourse has failed to address the structural significance of (unpaid) care work, not only for the economic system but also for the reproduction of society as a whole. Understanding and conceptualizing care as a political issue can contribute towards transforming economies and to society and politics becoming intrinsically caring. Our focus on the feminist claim that profound changes are necessary in economy and economic rationality is based on the work of two feminist networks: Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era

<sup>8</sup> In terms of climate justice, for example, industrialized nations have incurred an enormous CO<sub>2</sub> debt during their “development” that is responsible for climate change today, while less industrialized nations have not, or have just recently begun adding to the problem. How can this debt be “repaid” to those nations less responsible, who need modes of sustainable development to grant a decent standard of living to their citizens?

(DAWN), a network from the Global South,<sup>9</sup> and *Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften*, a network from the Global North.<sup>10</sup> The two differ in size and range and have different origins: as a worldwide network, DAWN offers a South feminist critique of three decades of development and questions its impact on poor people, especially women, while *Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften* was specifically founded as a reaction to the gender-blind ideas regarding sustainability in German-speaking countries. However, they share the same economic critique.

Both approaches highlight the necessity of a new understanding of economics based on a broad understanding of economy and work: economy encompasses the care *and* market economies; work includes subsistence and care work *and* paid labor. The feminist critique of hierarchical and dualistic structures of modern capitalist economies—in which only market transactions and paid labor are considered ‘productive’, whereas subsistence and care work, mostly performed by women and girls in households and communities, are excluded as only ‘reproductive’—is often symbolized as an iceberg. While the market economy is visible as the peak above water, the (one and a half times) greater part of subsistence and unpaid care economy is submerged and invisible. Furthermore, following Rosa Luxemburg’s thesis that the accumulation of capital needs the exploitation of non-capitalist areas, such feminists draw a parallel between the exploitation of care activities, colonies, and nature. In the image of the iceberg, the regenerative capacity of nature is also ‘underwater’ and, as an object of capitalist exploitation, externalized and degraded (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1997).

From the very beginning of sustainability discourse, feminist scholars from the Global South and North have challenged this hegemonic neoclassical economic thinking and criticized the ways it has been transferred into the discourse on sustainability without having been fundamentally questioned (DAWN 1995a; Biesecker et al. 2014). However, if the dominant discourse on sustainability continues to neglect “the crisis of the ‘reproductive’” (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010: 1709) and the

interconnectedness between the spheres of reproduction and production, it will fail to create and shape sustainable economics and economies keyed towards preserving and improving the capabilities of people—including future generations—to live a good life (Nussbaum 2000).

Therefore, making economic activity more sustainable requires the rethinking and reconceptualizing of economic theory and a reshaping of economic praxis. Biesecker and Hofmeister, representatives of the *Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften* approach, developed “a processual, preservation- and regeneration-oriented concept of productivity” (2010: 1709). Their conception of productivity includes reproductive (care) activities which ensure livelihoods as well as the regenerative forces of the animate world, thus recognizing what has been marginalized in capitalist economics as the ‘reproductive’ as the central productivity of sustainable societies. They coined the term “(re)productivity” to express that productive processes cannot be separated from reproductive processes. Then, a sustainable mode of economic activity “would be a multiplicity of balanced and coordinated productive processes whose qualitative-material and value dimensions are determined on the basis of negotiating processes at all levels of social (re)production” (ibid; see also Burandt and Mölders in this issue).

This understanding is complemented by DAWN’s reconceptualization of productivity: productivity should not only be measured in terms of accumulation of wealth but also in terms of meeting social and individual needs (1995b; 2002). Thus, DAWN calls for a notion of productivity that reframes the ‘reproductive’ as ‘productive’, and simultaneously challenges (and devalues!) the destructive aspects of the seemingly ‘productive’: for example the production of arms, chemicals, nuclear energy, resource extractivism and monoculture agribusiness, to name some of the sectors DAWN has analyzed in detail (Sen and Grown 1987) that have usually been considered to be ‘productive’ but are actually harmful to livelihoods. Yet, “[s]ustainable livelihoods must be the foundation of sustainable development” (Wiltshire 1992: 2). According to DAWN, an economic system should serve such livelihoods by promoting human development, meeting human needs and focusing on a good life, rather than focusing on generating monetary profit and economic growth. Although representatives of DAWN like Nayar (2011) stress that economic growth does not necessarily equate with well-being (Wilkinson and Pickert 2009), the question of what kind of economic development can best promote human development does not automatically exclude growth. As DAWN puts it, growth “*is* important given the extreme material deprivation of large numbers of people in the world and particularly in the South” (1995a: 24; emphasis in original). However, some feminist scholars from the Global South and Global North who have produced a

<sup>9</sup> Since the middle of the 1980 s, the DAWN network, which today covers Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific, has been one of the strongest voices in the discourse on gender and (sustainable) development. It has influenced the discourse by offering holistic analyses and advancing alternatives from a Global South feminist perspective that is both grounded in women’s experience and inspired by women’s collective strategies and visions (DAWN 2015).

<sup>10</sup> The *Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften* network has grown in the context of the German-speaking sustainability discourse. The work on this approach started in 1992, when feminists posed the question of what “sustainable economy from a female perspective” would look like and, thus, initiated a process that continues to this day, namely to identify the prerequisites for a caring economy (Jochimsen and Knobloch 2000: 15).

common conceptual paper on this issue agree that “growth is not an end in itself, but a means for a ‘good life’ for all human beings and for the preservation of nature’s regenerative capabilities” (Biesecker et al. 2014: 4). Investing in public, affordable and high-quality care services, for instance, could be a strategy for inclusive and non-destructive growth. However, this strategy has to recognize the paradoxes of the commodification of care work (like those to be found in global care chains). Therefore, some redistribution of care work from households to the state is needed but not necessarily to the market with its profit-driven rationality.

A vision of a sustainable economy contributing to a humane, just and caring society entails more than mere reform; it requires redistribution of unpaid care work on various levels and forms (from women to men, from households to the state) and redistribution of time and resources among social groups, particularly to poor households (ibid: 10f.). Furthermore, it requires a radical transformation of the prevailing principles of the market economy by insisting on an ethics of care.

## Principles for socio-ecological transformation

Social-ecological transformation cannot be reached with (only) old categories and principles of thinking and action—it requires new ones. Environmental justice and care offer such new categories and powerful principles for transformations towards sustainability.

### Environmental justice as principle for socio-ecological transformation

The two problematic trends in sustainability discourse we began this paper with, the economization of sustainability and its narrow emphasis on environmental governance, have also had an impact on the understanding of justice as part of sustainability. At present, the ability to avoid ‘environmental bads’ and have access to ‘environmental goods’ is mediated through economic status, which in turn defines environmental quality as a good to be purchased. In self-identified equal-rights and -opportunity societies (such as the US), economic status is interpreted through notions of individual merit (Young 1990). Not having access to a ‘good neighborhood’ or safe work environments is, consequently, not necessarily perceived as an injustice but rather as a failure to achieve sufficient economic success. In fact, social justice is increasingly framed as a matter of enabling economic participation. Ironically, the targeting of working-class and communities of color by polluting industries is thereby framed as an economic (growth) opportunity and, therefore, as beneficial for such

communities (Field 1998). However, these are ongoing intra- and trans-national externalization processes: When production is increasingly moved from industrialized to less-industrialized economies or ‘economic free zones’ that have significantly fewer environmental regulations and workers’ rights and protections, the environmental burdens and social costs of production are disproportionately externalized, while the benefits (profits and cheap products) remain internal to the ‘developed’ countries and/or transnational corporations (Carmin and Agyeman 2011).

We argue that, while sustainability transformation strategies such as efficiency, technological innovation, and environmental regulation are certainly important, they primarily tend to benefit the already privileged, that is, countries that can afford such technologies and have regulations and social groups that can demand their enforcement; they do not, however, address externalization to those who cannot. Therefore, what needs to change are the oppressive processes that create economic destitution and enable such exploitation. At present, however, the continued violation of human rights in the production and distribution of environmental burdens is a key prerequisite for the economic system to function as it does.

Consequently, by linking human rights to environmental issues, environmental justice reframes access to a healthy and safe environment as a substantive right that every person, group, or nation is entitled to (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2002). Taking human rights seriously, and truly extending them equally rather than as mediated by structural inequality, would require a fundamental economic shift: unsustainable production decisions of capital would no longer be an option, because there would literally be no one and nowhere to move their effects to (Field 1998). Therefore, through its differentiated analysis of structural inequality, with its function of enabling un-sustainable production, environmental justice provides a powerful economic critique that addresses the very preconditions of production.

By linking an expanded understanding of justice to environmental issues, environmental justice points to democratization as an important element of sustainable development: when equity in recognition and participation are understood as central to politics and public life, those most affected would gain significant influence over production decisions. In combination with capabilities as part of the normative vision of sustainability, governance—understood as the sum of processes through which a society steers itself—becomes much more radically transformative than mere environmental governance.

Understanding that (social-environmental) injustice is not simply an effect but a cause and precondition for un-sustainability means that justice is also one of the most profound leverage points for transformation. Environmental justice provides a well thought out approach to moving

this lever. Agyeman proposes that, “[i]f sustainability is to become a process with the power to transform, as opposed to its current environmental, stewardship, or reform focus, justice and equity issues need to be incorporated into its very core” (Agyeman 2005: 6), going on to coin the term “Just Sustainability” for this fusion of environmental justice and sustainability discourses and their transformative potential (ibid: 92).

### Care as a political principle for social-ecological transformation

Feminist approaches have introduced care as a category, relevant to both the individual and (global) society in general, into sustainability discourse. Feminist approaches seek to describe the special quality of care (work), which is expressed in shouldering responsibility for others and making a conscious commitment to other people. Care focuses on the needs of people, it recognizes that they are vulnerable and interdependent. At the same time, it urges people to beware of asymmetrical relations (Jochimsen 2003). Feminist approaches consider care to be a basic principle not only of individual ethics but also of social ethics. They take the rationale of care as a normative guideline that offers opportunities for dealing with numerous socio-ecological crises which are often caused through the rationale of maximizing short-term economic benefits and politically partial interests that have a detrimental impact on the preservation of nature, destroying the livelihoods of populations. Such a caring economy must be guided by reversibility, acting thoughtfully, slowly, and transparently in terms of time and space and anticipating the long-term consequences of action (Biesecker et al. 2000).

New at present is the extension of care as a structuring principle to politics, initiated through the work of Tronto (2013). She argues for placing care, not economics, at the center of democratic political life, because care is of integral importance for society to keep it functioning. Tronto’s overall point is “that political life is ultimately about the allocation of caring responsibilities, and that all of those relationships and the people engaged in them need to be part of the ongoing political discourse” (2013: xiii). Thus, the question of care becomes a question of transforming democracy itself into a “caring democracy”, guided by the principle of “caring with” as a fundamental new democratic ideal. Unlike “caring for” (children, elderly and the sick), the idea of “caring with” is not (only) about asymmetrical relationships but is also conceptualized as a political, public practice: it means to care as a citizen about citizens and democracy itself. In this sense, “‘caring with’ is [...] comparable with Hannah Arendt’s notion of ‘collective power’—the kind of power which is not destructive,

but creative, and which describes the efforts of free individuals collaborating in the political sphere for the common good” (Gottschlich et al. 2014: 16). Such a caring democracy “requires that citizens care enough about caring—both in their own lives and in the lives of their fellow citizens—to accept that they bear the political burden of caring for the future. That future is not only about economic production but also about caring for the values of freedom, equality, and justice. [...] That future requires that we think honestly about the past and accept some burdens and responsibilities that have been deflected or ignored, realizing that if all such responsibilities are reconsidered, democracy will function more justly” (Tronto 2013: xii).

A caring democracy is one that is explicitly extended beyond humans to “the natural world” (ibid), although Tronto has not gone into detail and discussed the potential impacts of this idea yet.

### Discussion: integrating justice and care as ethical principles of economics and governance for sustainable development

The combination of feminist and environmental justice approaches, as modes of critical analysis and as visionary target knowledge, offers possibilities towards bringing out the emancipatory potential of sustainability discourse. In the following, we think through the implications of understanding care and a plural concept of justice as ethical principles of economics and governance and of positioning them as central to societies on their ways to sustainability.

#### Economic critique and vision

We have been arguing that a continued neoliberal approach to economics will not provide the kind of transformation needed to achieve sustainable development. In the context of the 2015 UN deliberations on its Sustainable Development Goals for the next decade, ecological sustainability is now being recognized as a fulcrum of all human activity, and greater emphasis is also being placed on eradicating inequalities (Kothari and Lovera 2015). But the success of these intentions is questionable, as long as systemic issues are once again not placed on the agenda: “Despite all the rhetoric about transformation, few delegates (and neither of the discussion papers) called attention to the trade and investment environment that ‘enables’ achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. It’s hard to talk about health care, poverty, education, employment, women’s rights [...] when systems with such a heavy influence on them are invisible” (Adams and Luchsinger 2015: 2). To get at the structural roots of inequities and ecological



destruction, scholars and activists are calling for a different kind of analysis: one that considers the ambivalence of the role of the state—both the problematics of the influence of economic elites over public governance and the “marketization of governance” (Taylor 2000) and its regulatory function towards a caring and just society—and the critique of capitalism in its various forms.

Environmental justice and feminist approaches bring complementary economic analyses and visions to sustainability discourse. Environmental justice reveals social injustices to be integral to unsustainable modes of production and concludes that, if human rights are truly taken seriously and applied equally to all, environmentally harmful forms of resource extraction, land use, and production would be less possible and more democratically regulated. In this way, environmental justice provides a profound critique of market-driven, de-regulated capitalist production and its detrimental effects on non-human nature and humans. Meanwhile, feminist scholars extend this economic critique to all spheres of productive activity. They have shown that sustainability needs social and ecological ‘reproductive’ activities to function: social reproduction of society as a whole, from child rearing to political activities, as well as nature’s productivity in the reproduction of resources and ecosystem services.

Combined, environmental justice and feminist economic analyses can help to avoid shortcomings in dominant streams of thought regarding sustainability. For instance, rethinking and restructuring the economy does not mean the mere insertion of care work into existing economic structures, as is being done at present. Making caring more just requires looking not only at how gender but other categories of structural inequality such as race and class misallocate caring responsibilities in relation to market forces. Where, for example, more middle-class women enter the ‘productive’ workforce, ‘reproductive’ care work is outsourced to working class, poor, and often racially or ethnically marginalized women: Eastern European women immigrate to Germany, Mexican women to the US to carry out paid care work and send remittances home to pay for their families to attain a higher standard of living, though still at a level below their employers (Kontos 2010). Care work at home, then, is increasingly taken over by other women, giving rise to global care chains (Hochschild 2001) and complex relationships between Global North and Global South. Since countries in the Global North are once again appropriating resources from the Global South—in this case poorly compensated social and emotional resources—in order to compensate for a growing need for care labor, Kontos (2010) refers to this situation as having colonial-like relations.

Similarly, the insertion of nature as monetarized value into existing, proprietary economic structures is not a

viable path. The Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement, for example, has led to appropriation of traditional cultural knowledge- and resource-commons, such as seeds, by corporations. Even where economic interest in natural resources protects them to some extent, there is little valuing of nature’s (re)productivity per se or equitable involvement of the people traditionally owning or having cultivated the resources (Shiva 1999). The post/neo-colonial power geometries are stabilized through ongoing “imperial ways of living” and their attractiveness (Brand and Wissen 2011: 79) in the Global North, with their increased emulation in urban centers of the Global South, which then also externalize social and ecological costs within the Global South. Therefore, instead of simply inserting care, nature, and knowledges into existing economic structures in the name of development, the conceptualization of the economy itself needs to be the focus of critical discourse. Combined, feminist and environmental justice critiques can contribute to a fundamental shift in conceptualization of the economy: employing the notions of (re)productivities and human- and ecological-rights based modes of production would lead to an economy that enables a good life for present and future generations. Movements and initiatives for certified textiles, fair and organic trade, community-based agriculture, food sovereignty, share-economy activities (like open software), upcycling, and repair cafés are only some examples of alternative modes of economy. Additionally, with justice and care as ethical principles, economic decision making could no longer be based solely on market considerations; it would, rather, require democratic deliberation regarding what kinds of economic activities enhance social-ecological qualities, at present and in the long-term, and which kinds do not and should therefore not be pursued, regardless of how profitable they may be. Furthermore, it would require a new labor model, in which all types of labor (paid and unpaid) that are necessary to shape and sustain both social and ecological qualities are united. This type of re-envisioned ‘green economy’ would, then, also need to become more equitable: unpaid work would need to be distributed equally across genders, green collar jobs need to be made accessible to the working poor and communities of color, and green products made available beyond niche-markets for the rich (Jones 2008). Based on common but differentiated sets of responsibilities for countries in the Global North and South, manifesting this vision would take plural economic strategies: a democratizing of markets, localization of economies as a counterbalance to globalization, and, mainly, degrowth<sup>11</sup> in

<sup>11</sup> The contested idea of degrowth is advocated by the degrowth movement, which has shown that economic growth could be considered rather a threat than a condition for intragenerational and

states of the Global North and the right to sustainable development in the Global South to increase livelihood security.

### Political critique and vision

We have argued that, when sustainable development is mainly understood as merely a form of environmental governance, the potential for implementing a human rights-based transformation strategy falls short, as does the potential of deliberative, direct democracy for innovation and transformation. It is also important to note that the concept of care deployed here is not used as an ethical principle solely related to the private sphere. As the feminists discussed above have argued, care responsibilities belong at the center of democratic political life, making the restructuring of the economic system a question of democracy (Tronto 2013). Similarly important, environmental justice proponents have argued that environmental justice is not a ‘minority issue’ but should be understood an ethical principle of intra- and intergenerational equity. By widening the focus of justice from the individual to the community or (social) groups, environmental justice enables a more precise analysis of what groups environmental burdens are being externalized onto, revealing that they in fact constitute the majority of humanity. This makes clear that the systemic structural inequalities that produce such an ‘othering’ of burdens have to change. Furthermore, “just sustainability implies a paradigm shift that requires sustainability to take on a redistributive function” (Agyeman 2005: 6).

By applying plural concepts of justice, the environmental justice perspective also enables a more precise analysis of where current forms of governance and democratic process fail to recognize, provide full participation to, or enable the full development of the capabilities of particular social groups. Such analysis prevents a societal ‘we’ from being abstractly used in relation to sustainability challenges in ways that gloss over the reality of unequal responsibility for and degrees of being affected by unsustainable practices. Consequently, it can also provide specific points of leverage in the democratic process: more equitable democratic participation in the pursuit of environmental justice could provide governance for sustainability that is much more transformative than only the pursuit of environmental governance.

Footnote 11 continued

intergenerational justice, eroding the natural and social bases for a high quality of life for all. Therefore degrowth advocates call for the downscaling of production and consumption, following the argument that overconsumption lies at the root of long-term environmental issues and social inequalities. For a representative of the degrowth view, see Muraca (2012).

To change existing democratic models accordingly, we need non-externalizing democracies that abstain from externalizing social-ecological costs of production and consumption patterns, either spatially (regionally or globally) or temporally (to future generations) (Massarrat 2006). Participatory democratic strategies would give more decision-making power to those who currently are the ‘recipients’ of externalized burdens, enabling self-determination with regard to social-ecological effects. How much of a driver for change such democratic models could be is easily understood by looking at the example of climate change, where the nations with the highest ecological debts in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have held glaringly disproportionate decision-making power over solution strategies, while the most affected nations argue for radical policy change but have not had enough decision-making power to effect such change.

The fundamental shift that feminist and environmental justice approaches call for seeks to base both economic and political structures on particular values—human rights, maintenance of nature’s productivity, direct and equitable democracy and collaboration—rather than on market dynamics, which foster practices very different from those values: competition, short-term maximization of profit, inequality and low participation (Biesecker et al. 2014: 6). These considerations apply on different scales, from local to national to international relations. In thinking through global governance for sustainability, the principle of “caring with” (Tronto 2013) can be applied not only within societies but also between societies (Gottschlich 2013). Care as a political practice is based on an understanding of social cohesion and interdependence. This is reflected in the concept of the human family articulated in the Brundtland Report<sup>12</sup>: “Whether the progress of humanity is lasting or not mainly depends on our understanding of being *neighbours* living on a small and vulnerable planet, having a *duty to care for each other and showing mutual commitment*” (Hauff 1987: XVII; our translation and added emphasis). Addressing states as ‘families’ or ‘neighbours’ goes beyond international diplomacy and strategic partnerships: it emphasizes taking responsibility for each other. Formulating such a universal concern can be seen as an indication of the human capacity for mutual care. While the ‘we’ of humanity serves as a powerful vision(ary) framework within sustainability discourse, it is also problematic, as we have argued above. This does not, however, undermine our argument for the importance of care as an ethical principle for international relations and global democracy. Rather, it illustrates that

<sup>12</sup> We note that such a notion of the human family is also evident in almost all other UN documents concerning sustainability too, including the Rio +20 Declaration (General Assembly 2012).

the perspectives of care and justice must be brought together, because a solely care-oriented argument runs the risk of erasing asymmetries in power politics via abstraction, unless it is substantiated by a comprehensive analysis of oppression in relation to all (re)productive activities and their effects on society and nature. This can bridge the gap between the reality of historically produced and ongoing structural inequalities on a global level that enable unsustainable (and un-democratic) economies to continue and the overarching normative aspiration towards a ‘caring human family’.

## Conclusion

Transformation of the dominant political and economic system towards a humane, just and caring (world-)society is an ongoing project. Sustainability is currently one of the most important normative frameworks for guiding and shaping such a transformation—in relation to this journal, sustainable agriculture as a strong conceptual frame for change efforts is an obvious example that we will continue to engage in this conclusion. We have argued that it is therefore highly relevant to examine how sustainability discourse itself is conceptualized and on what kinds of rationalities it is based. One of the leading rationalities currently shaping the dominant sustainability discourse is that of ‘greening’ the capitalist economy, which we have taken as one starting point of our critique. Feminist and environmental justice approaches show the social-ecological irrationality of the logic of profit maximization and growth, which is based on the externalization of (re)productive resources (care/subsistence work and nature) and the externalization of social and environmental burdens and costs of production (spatially, intra- and intergenerationally). It is also based on the continued violation and exploitation of particular social groups and their labor, both in reproduction and production. Food Justice is a concept that has emerged at precisely this intersection. By extending the principles of environmental justice to food systems, it argues for justice for all involved along the entire path from seed to table: “ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly” (Gottlieb and Joshi 2013: 6). Food Justice offers an analysis of historically produced imbalances in regards to food systems along lines of race, class, gender, nation, North/South, etc. This reveals that simply increasing ‘organic’ or ‘sustainable’ production within the same agricultural system doesn’t necessarily stop externalizing hunger and unjust working conditions (Bellina 2016). Rather, as long as the power to influence food systems remains largely with vested economic interests—

for instance transnational agribusiness corporations in conjunction with multilateral organizations like the World Bank—inequities in the food system and major issues such as hunger are systematically reproduced (Holt-Giménez 2011). This makes necessary a profound re-visioning of food systems, a regime change towards multiple, diverse, and democratic food systems, rather than only ‘greening’ agriculture while it remains in existing capitalist modes of production and consumption (Alkon and Agyeman 2011).

Here, feminist and environmental justice approaches provide strategies for a fundamental transformation of these structures that would enable societal transformation towards more sustainable ways of life. Both approaches strive towards a change of values and their political implementation, situating the responsibility for care and environmental justice in the middle of political affairs. The ethics of care and the plurality of justice as target knowledges make visible that transformation to a sustainable society has to be based on a paradigm shift, a change in the pre-analytical assumptions that problem analysis and solution generation are based on, towards rationalities that enable realizing a humane, just and caring society.

A vibrant example for the effects of such a shift in rationalities was presented in this journal in 2001, when Betty C. Wells and Shelly Gradwell identified community supported agriculture (CSA) not only as a system of marketing but also as a system of resource management characterized by caring. They concluded that the CSA growers are overcoming some damaging aspects of conventional agriculture by infusing their agricultural practices with care (both as a value and a practice). Caring agriculture is about building soil, reducing or even eliminating the use of chemicals, and encouraging beneficial insects and wildlife. Equally important is that the CSA growers and members “reveal the primacy of relationship as they speak of closing the gap between grower and eater, and between people and nature; of land, plants, and animals as community members, not commodities; and of moving from control of nature to partnership and respect” (Wells and Gradwell 2001: 117; see also Curry 2002). ‘Care’ then also applies to the growers, who in such relationships are more likely to earn sustainable livelihoods through less alienated labor. We propose that understanding and practicing agriculture through a lens of care fundamentally changes how it embodies human–human–nature relations: towards more ecologically and socially just food systems.

When justice and care are both considered to be socio-ethical categories central to the functioning of sustainable societies, then these concepts can indeed become guidelines for governance and possibilities for practices that would produce a more equitable and caring global society. Linking feminist and environmental justice approaches and their individual contributions towards undertaking relevant

critique and offering visionary target knowledge offers possibilities towards bringing out the emancipatory potential of sustainability discourse and praxis. Therefore, we argue that since discursive development also takes place in relations of power, then it too needs democratization, in order to include and make effective valuable non-dominant contributions. We call such an open-ended democratic process—aimed at integrating questions of justice, care, and critique of power relations into sustainability discourse—“sustainability to come” (Gottschlich 2013).

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