

## Outlook for environmental policy: Approaches to dealing with new challenges

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The substantive challenges for environmental policy have changed in recent years: While some environmental problems have been successfully tackled, others have shifted geographically and some have become more acute (EEA 2015; Jacob und Wolff 2019; UNEP 2019). In addition to substantive challenges, societal challenges for environmental policy continue to arise: climate change deniers cast doubt on the knowledge base of environmental policy; societal and political attention to environmental issues is dictated by economic cycles; certain societal guiding principles promote environmental policy progress while others currently block it, and so on.

In this context, the research project titled “Environmental policy in the 21st century” (FKZ 3715 11 102 0),<sup>6</sup> commissioned by the Federal Environment Agency, considered selected **challenges** and starting points for environmental policy. Specifically, the following questions were examined:

- ▶ **The dynamics of environmental policy:** How can we better learn from past successes and obstacles for environmental policy in the future?
- ▶ **Narratives and discourses in environmental policy:** How can narratives and discourses strategically advance environmental policy? Where are the limits here?
- ▶ **The economisation of the environment:** Which chances and risks come with practices such as the monetarisation of ecosystem services or tradable certificates? Can the risks be lessened through intelligent instrument design?

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<sup>6</sup> This project was carried out from August 2015 to May 2019 by Oeko-Institut, the Environmental Policy Research Centre (FFU) at the Free University of Berlin, the Professor for Sustainability Governance at the University of Freiburg, the International Centre for Ethics in the Sciences and Humanities (IZEW) University of Tuebingen, the German Institute for Development Policy (DIE) and IFOK GmbH.

- ▶ **Consumption and responsibility:** How can environmental policy address the (apparent) contradiction between sustainable development and individual (consumer) freedom?
- ▶ **Environmental policy in the context of development policy:** How can environmental policy be designed to contribute to sustainable development also in countries of the Global South (in accordance with the Agenda 2030)?

The aim was to examine these questions in greater depth and assess strategic options for action. Three analytical perspectives (“lenses”) were used in the project. They related to:

- ▶ the role of **actors and institutions** in the design and success of environmental policy;
- ▶ the role of **discourses** in the conception, expression and feasibility of problems and solutions in environmental policy;
- ▶ the role of **ethics** in the legitimisation of environmental policy.

**The main results and recommendations of the project are summarised below.** The respective individual reports referred to below as well as the synthesis report (Wolff et al. 2019) of the project “Environmental Policy in the 21st Century” are available for download on the website of the Federal Environment Agency.

#### **I. The dynamics of environmental policy**

Our study shows that German environmental policy has led to numerous environmental policy innovations in recent decades (Jacob et al. 2016). These innovations have been promoted by political conflicts and competition over environmental policy between the state and civil society, between parties, between political and administrative levels, and between different policy fields. In addition, actual or perceived crises and catastrophes (as windows of opportunity) have encouraged the further development of environmental policy as well as social and technical innovations.

Environmental policy has successfully addressed and dealt with some problems (e.g. nuclear energy, waste issues, air and water quality, energy and resource efficiency). However, other issues have so far not been addressed in environmental policy terms, or only with limited success, although science and civil society point to their importance for sustainable development. These include in particular:

- ▶ effective interventions in consumption and lifestyles in order to make them more ecological and internationally just;
- ▶ increased prices and reduced volumes of environmental consumption along the value chain;
- ▶ dealing with economic growth and free trade;
- ▶ the regulation of vested rights, established structures and assets (e.g. old facilities, existing structures, products on the market);
- ▶ an institutional prioritisation of environmental policy.

There are many reasons why these issues have not been addressed or not addressed effectively enough. They range from cultural factors and the distribution of political competencies to the distribution of power between social interests (Jacob et al. 2016).

**Environmental policy thus needs to be strengthened** in order to successfully address the challenges for environmental policy and fields of action that have not yet been addressed effectively enough.

## **II. Narratives und discourses in environmental policy**

What significance do narratives<sup>7</sup> and discourses<sup>8</sup> have for environmental policy? How can they be approached and actively instrumentalised for environmental policy issues? The starting point of our examination (Espinosa et al. 2017) is that environmental problems cannot be regarded as “objectively” given phenomena that can be effectively solved with rationally selected instruments. Rather, issues such as climate change or biodiversity loss are characterised by conflicting perspectives and interpretations, in which local contexts and power relations also play a role. The respective interpretations influence how environmental problems are socially understood and politically addressed.

Against this background, the role of language and discourses has in recent decades been increasingly included in the assessment of environmental problem areas. Our report (Espinosa et al. 2017) clarifies key concepts used in language-sensitive theories and empirical studies on environmental discourses. Our analysis fundamentally assumes that discourses and narratives can be influenced to a certain degree by political actors. However, discourses are also dependent on situational and structural factors that elude active control.

Narratives fulfil important functions in the political process: they create reference points by which social actors can orient themselves, among other things with regard to what is perceived as a recognised problem in environmental policy and how this problem should be solved. They can support value systems, but also contribute to their change, and they form the basis of strategic legitimacy. In principle, narratives enable communication and thus ultimately joint action and the formation of political alliances.

We present six hypotheses on the conditions for successful environmental narratives and illustrate them with examples. Our findings include: A narrative can be successful if it is communicated by actors who are seen as legitimate and credible by the public; if it is similar and can be connected to the ideas, concepts and categorisations of a dominant discourse (‘discursive affinity’); if it is sufficiently openly to provide points of contact for different positions and interests; if it establishes references to phrases and expressions that embed it in historical events or situational circumstances; if it makes problems communicable through coherent narrative structures; if it uses comprehensible language, avoids technical-abstract jargon and thus connects well with the everyday understanding of the audience.

The results thus offer practical impulses for the reflection and development of political strategies for successful environmental communication.

## **III. The economisation of the environment**

The increasing use of economic approaches represents a significant but also controversial trend in recent environmental policy. Does the so-called “economisation” of the environment and of environmental policy promote or inhibit sustainable development?

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<sup>7</sup> “Narratives” are concrete linguistic sequences and argumentation patterns that serve to represent or depict events, relationships, processes and phenomena, and that create plausible and coherent stories on complex phenomena.

<sup>8</sup> By “discourse” we mean broader collective orders of knowledge and meaning or “ensembles of ideas, concepts and categories that give meaning to a phenomenon and are produced by a defined set of practices” (Hajer (1995), S. 44).

Our analysis (Wolff und Gsell 2018) first seeks to define economisation. We identify eight concrete practices of economisation that can be significant for environmental policy: 1. the allocation of monetary values to environmental goods or services that are not yet traded on markets (monetisation); 2. the use of economic tools to support decision-making in policy and planning; 3. the use of economic incentives (environmental subsidies, levies, etc.); 4. the allocation of property rights; 5. the creation of markets for environmental goods or services; 6. the introduction of market principles in governmental processes; 7. deregulation and 8. privatisation.

Building on this, we examine how different approaches of economic theory assess the respective practices. We scrutinise the positions of neoclassical economics, environmental and resource economics, economic institutionalism, ecological economics and other branches of plural economics such as care economy, commons economy and post-growth approaches.

The creation of environmental markets through tradable rights (practice no. 5 above) is one of the more controversial economisation practices, especially in the management of natural resources. With regard to its implementation, we explore the practical experiences that have been gained with this instrument so far. A deeper empirical analysis examines three case studies: conservation banking in the USA, nitrogen certificate trading in New Zealand (Lake Taupo) and tradable fishing quotas in Iceland.

We identify the opportunities, risks and design options that are associated with economising environmental policy. From both a theoretical and an empirical perspective, the findings on practices are very heterogeneous. Economisation practices are very diverse and their concrete design, implementation and context largely determine their sustainability impact. Thus, these practices cannot be assessed conclusively as a whole. The report therefore uses an analysis grid to conduct a differentiated assessment.

#### **IV. Consumption and responsibility**

How can environmental policy deal with the environmental impact of consumption, given the perceived tension between responsibility, sustainability and freedom? Many cases of environmental degradation can be attributed to private consumption. However, destructive effects are often the result of numerous consumer decisions that are hardly harmful on their own – such as air travel or the consumption of resource-intensive food. These develop into environmental problems when such goods are consumed on an ever-increasing scale (e.g. due to population growth, but also the drastic increase in the individual consumption in certain social classes). This problem is discussed in the report (Meisch et al. 2018) under the title of the *quantity problem*.

Our initial question is whether, with a view to (environmental) justice between the global North and South and between generations, environmental policy is needed to regulate private consumption more strongly – and to what extent these interventions are compatible with the liberal concept of freedom. To answer this question, we revisit the background assumptions contained in the concept of “the quantity problem”. They are critically discussed with a view to ethical concepts of justice, freedom and responsibility.

Building on this, we ask whether *nudging* could offer a solution to this perceived dilemma. Nudging can be seen as a set of policy instruments to influence private consumption without explicit regulation. Experiences with these instruments are presented and their legitimacy discussed. Nudging is criticised by some as being manipulative. However it should be noted here that consumption is always influenced by different “*decision architectures*” (such as inherent in nudging). Yet in most cases this takes place within the framework of product marketing, i.e. not democratically legitimised and geared more toward sales than sustainable development.

As a result, the quantity problem can be reformulated from a seemingly individual question of consumption into a societal question of *lifestyles and -forms*. It concerns the political debate over “good living” and the liberal concept of freedom, which in its unabridged form also includes responsibility. We argue that consumption is always also a public matter. It makes sense not to address the quantity problem primarily or even exclusively at the consumer level at the end of the value chain (and thus to “privatise” it). Rather, it should be embedded in the social discussion over a sufficiency policy (“What do we really need for a good life?”). It can be ethically justified to consider consumption, as a part of living, as an environmental policy issue in order to be able to address the quantity problem.

## **V. Environmental policy in the context of development policy**

Global environmental problems as well as the global economic and power balance have changed considerably over the last ten to twenty years. Particularly in the case of global environmental problems such as climate change, we see causes and impacts often diverging geographically: industrialised countries bear a significant historical responsibility, even though emerging and developing countries are increasingly aggravating global environmental problems. At the same time, the countries of the global South continue to be more strongly affected by the negative effects of the problems. With the “Agenda 2030” and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the international community has agreed on a new programme to address these interrelationships. What are the implications for environmental policy in the context of development policy?

Our study (Richerzhagen et al. 2019) first examines which discourses and strategies support a transformation towards sustainable development paths in developing, emerging and industrialised countries. Discourses that have had a strong influence on both development and environmental policy since the end of the Second World War are classified historically and discussed critically. The examination shows that today’s discourses on development policy increasingly reflect resource- and environment-related aspects of human development. The chronological examination of the corresponding discourses shows how the concept of “development” that was originally closely focused on economic growth has gradually changed over time into a more differentiated understanding of sustainable development. Since the beginning of the 1990s, sustainable development has established itself as the decisive paradigm for interlinking international socio-economic and ecological development goals, and has guided action in the multilateral system and international cooperation.

From the analysis of discourses, we derive options for state action on environmental policy: environmental and development policy is to be better coordinated and interlinked institutionally. “Sensitising” environmental policy for development concerns can strengthen the legitimacy of environmental policy objectives in politics, business and society. It can further help to shape environmental policy in such a way as to reduce social inequalities in Germany and the EU, as well as internationally, and to facilitate better communication of successes.

In a further step, we look at the implementation of different sustainable development strategies in Ecuador (“Buen Vivir”), Vietnam (“Green Growth”) and Kenya (“Agenda 2030”), which are based on the different discourses discussed. This is a reality check of how the discussed environmental and development discourses are put into practice. The case studies show that the political significance of the concept of sustainable development in southern countries is further strengthened by Agenda 2030 and the SDGs both nationally and internationally. It also becomes clear, however, that despite their different sustainability strategies, the welfare models of the countries generally remain tied to a growth-oriented, resource-intensive capitalist economic model, which also shapes the wealthy nations of the global North. Environmental policy and international environmental cooperation should strengthen the social dimension of

international environmental policy (in a “development sensitive” way). However, industrialised countries should still ambitiously pursue their own environmental policy interests and objectives and not water them down, in order to maintain or strengthen their credibility.

**Conclusion**

The challenges and starting points for future environmental policy examined here differ in many respects. However, it can be concluded that:

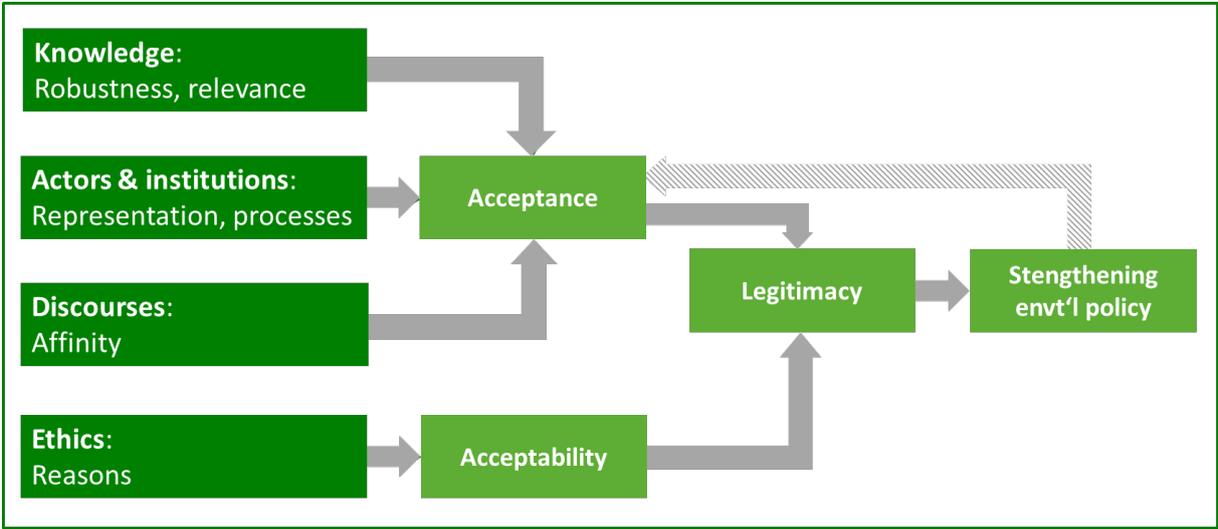
- ▶ in the future, environmental policy should address a number of issues that have not yet been addressed or have not yet been effectively addressed, including stringent regulations for intergenerationally equitable consumption and lifestyles, control of prices and quantities of environmental consumption, an approach to economic growth and free trade, the regulation of vested rights and an institutional prioritisation of environmental policy;
- ▶ agenda-setting for these new policy areas would benefit from effective narratives and ethical argumentation;
- ▶ economic incentives (taxes and levies, subsidies, liability regulations, etc.), among others, can be used to deal effectively with the issues, but that the use of more contentious economisation practices must be evaluated carefully and hedged against the associated risks though smart design; and that
- ▶ impacts on development must always be considered when designing environmental policy.

Even more fundamentally, it is necessary to strengthen environmental policy in order to master its challenges and successfully shape the issues to be addressed in the future. Sustainable environmental policy must be able to define as well as implement ambitious goals.

**Outlook: six starting points for sustainable environmental policy**

Because strong environmental policy purportedly intervenes more in the interests and preferences of citizens and businesses, it must always legitimise its foundations anew (in some cases facing opposition). It is therefore important to strengthen the *legitimacy* of environmental policy (SRU 2019).

**Figure 1: Starting points for increasing the acceptance and acceptability of environmental policy**



Source: own illustration (Oeko-Institut, Free University of Berlin, University of Freiburg, University of Tübingen, German Development Institute).

Legitimacy is a complex concept. A distinction is often made in the literature between a normative and an empirical understanding: “While the empirical understanding of the term refers to the actual acceptance of social rules or structures, in the case of normatively understood legitimacy it is about acceptability, i.e. the question of under which conditions there are good reasons to accept social rules and structures as justified” (Dingwerth 2004, S. 80–81; own translation). The model depicted in Figure 1 draws on a third, strategic reading. From this rather instrumental perspective, legitimacy is seen as a “resource” that political actors can use specifically to achieve their goals (Suchman 1995; Hogg et al. 2012). This strategic perspective stops short of assuming that the legitimacy of actors can be arbitrarily controlled, but it does see starting points for active interventions (Black 2008).

The model in Figure 1 provides two starting points for strengthening the legitimacy of environmental policy, namely *acceptance and acceptability*. “Acceptance” means actual, explicit or implicit consent to something. “Acceptability”, on the other hand, refers to ethical justifiability. In environmental policy, acceptance and acceptability can refer, for example, to a given or expected future state of the environment, to ecological risks or to measures. Acceptance can be influenced by a variety of factors, starting with the political process and its procedures (input) or its results (output). The figure above depicts central factors identified in the project which can have an impact on acceptance and acceptability – albeit with simplified causal relationships.

Against the background of the outlined interrelationships, the following six approaches (in green boxes) can help to increase the acceptance and acceptability of environmental policy and indirectly strengthen it. Conversely, the success of a strong environmental policy can also strengthen its own acceptance. The approaches to action relate to the overarching areas of knowledge, actors and institutions, discourses and ethics.

#### A. Knowledge

Understanding the causes and consequences of environmental problems is an essential prerequisite for the effective protection of nature and the environment; the knowledge base of environmental policy is one of the strongest sources of its acceptance and legitimacy.

**Approach 1: Acceptance for environmental policy can be strengthened by establishing a politically relevant and socially robust knowledge base.**

The proof of positive impacts of an ambitious environmental policy – through an impact assessment before its implementation or an evaluation of its subsequent impact – is essential for increasing the acceptance of corresponding measures. An important step in this direction is the creation and communication of a *politically relevant but also socially robust knowledge base*. In concrete terms, several objectives should be pursued or *principles* taken into account. On the one hand, political decisions should be based on well-founded information (evidence-based policy-making). On the other hand, scientific input into political processes should be as policy- and decision-oriented as possible. And finally, processes of (scientific) policy advice should also meet normative criteria of transparency and participation.

Along these principles, more concrete options for action can be derived, such as:

- ▶ *Establishing a broad, multidisciplinary knowledge base through integrated assessments* of the environmental situation. These are potentially less susceptible to leveraging by narrow sectoral interests.
- ▶ *Increasing the transparency of regulatory impact assessments*, particularly of sustainability impact assessments: Which methods and data were used, who was consulted when and regarding which questions, which studies were commissioned and used?

- ▶ *Maintaining openness in dealing with scientific uncertainties.* The communication of alleged truths can easily be exploited by opponents (e.g. climate change deniers) in the event of a “crisis”.
- ▶ *Involving relevant actors, including citizens,* in the development of questions and the assessment of policy-relevant knowledge (“co-design” or “co-production” of knowledge, e.g. in the form of field tests). Formats such as policy labs, in which policy innovations are jointly developed and tested should also be used in interministerial cooperation.
- ▶ *Identifying “co-benefits” and emphasising them more strongly:* Environmental policy has numerous so-called co-benefits (i.e. positive social effects in addition to environmental protection), for example for rural development, health, employment and innovation. Moreover, environmental policy can prevent future losses in value (e.g. from climate change and damage to health). Political actors should identify such co-benefits more systematically and refer to them more often. On this basis, broader and more assertive coalitions of actors can be developed and environmental policy integration can be strengthened.

## B. Actors und institutions

**Approach 2: The acceptance of environmental policy can be promoted by strengthening it in political competition.**

Environmental policy can be strengthened by intensifying political competition for it rather than making it the subject of a non-partisan (and supposed) consensus. Politicisation aims to develop new ideas for stronger environmental policy and to seek acceptance for them. Concrete options for action include:

- ▶ *Reinforcing federalism in environmental policy:* The possibility of deviating environmental legislation under German federalism is rarely used by the Bundesländer. A competition of ideas and policies between the federal states could stimulate the discussion. One possible starting point could be peer reviews of the Bundesländer.
- ▶ *Analysing election programmes* for their environmental impacts, for example by means of a scientific advisory body (similar to the Netherlands): this would stimulate public discussion on environmental policy.
- ▶ *Establishing a funding programme for social innovation:* Innovative social practices, e.g. sharing platforms, sufficiency-based business models, etc. should receive support for development and market introduction (analogous to technical innovations). An example could be an (initially) “1,000 Spaces Programme” to promote accessible public spaces where experiments can be carried out on resource- and climate-friendly practices.
- ▶ *Responding promptly to windows of opportunity* created by crises and catastrophes. Ideas (blueprints) for strategies or legislative projects can also be developed in advance and quickly introduced into the policy process when a window of opportunity presents itself. This requires appropriate competencies and freedom in the administration.
- ▶ *Systematically building stakeholder relationships,* for example by strategically building up and promoting support groups for the most important environmental policy fields (e.g. climate, biodiversity, resource conservation, agriculture and mobility). The focus should be on setting collective objectives (“1.5° Club”), not on instruments (e.g. environmental taxes). New actor alliances should be formed, e.g. with health insurance providers and doctors on air pollutants/diesel, strengthening civil environmental actors in the policy process. A second approach is to establish new actors with a self-interest in ambitious environmental

policy (e.g. as happened with the emergence of suppliers of renewable energies through the electricity market deregulation) or those with a mandate for corresponding activities (e.g. “Agora Verkehrswende”). Their intervention and mediating functions can shape the discourse or the market. Finally, civil environmental actors should be promoted in policy processes (financially, institutionally, through improved access to policy development). This increases the visibility of environmental policy concerns and arguments and can contribute to their acceptance.

- ▶ *Enabling “deep” forms of participation:* In order for participation to actually strengthen the legitimacy of environmental policy, formats are important in which an intensive discussion of ecological issues can take place and in which contributions from citizens are taken seriously and are taken up (e.g. Irish Constitutional Convention 2012 – 2014, or inclusion of citizens in model projects in which environmental policy measures are tested and evaluated in areas limited in time and space).

**Approach 3: The acceptance of environmental policy can be strengthened by institutionalising achievements.**

Strengthening environmental policy also means institutionally strengthening what has been achieved so far. Possible starting points include:

- ▶ *Renewing and strengthening the precautionary principle:* Particularly in the current discussion on perceived obstacles to innovation resulting from the precautionary principle, it is important to assess possible technological consequences from the perspective of sustainable development. The chances of achieving sustainability goals through innovation should also be transparently weighed against the risks involved.
- ▶ *Utilising so-called “ratchet mechanisms” as an instrument of better law-making:* environmental laws and ordinances should include a continuous increase in their ambition levels; for environmental taxes, for example, this means dynamically rising tax rates, for regulations a continuous and automatic increase of their standards.
- ▶ *Testing and reinforcing constitutional law* to effectively consider environmental aspects in the various policy areas and if necessary include constitutional control mechanisms. In the case of legislative proposals with harmful environmental impacts, the instrument of judicial review can be used to reinforce Article 20a of the German Grundgesetz. If necessary, proposals for strengthening (environmental) constitutional law should be developed.

*C. Discourse*

**Approach 4: Acceptance can be promoted by strengthening environmental policy in discourses.**

The societal perception of complex environmental issues and thus also their legitimacy in the political process strongly depends on whether these issues are integrated into meaningful narratives. Environmental policy can thus also be *strengthened in discourse*, whereby this should not merely be understood as improved public relations work. The active controllability of discourses should also not be overestimated. Concrete action could include:

- ▶ *Translating environmental policy into convincing and well-prepared narratives:* Good communication plays a key role in gaining support for ambitious environmental policy. Environmental policy can and therefore should be translated into convincing and well-prepared narratives in political discourse. As described above, narratives are successful if they are supported by actors recognized by the public as legitimate and credible; if they can be linked to dominant discourses (‘discursive affinity’); if they are sufficiently open for

different positions and interests to be tied to them; if they can be associated with historical events or situational circumstances; if they make problems communicable through appealing narrative structures; and if they are narrated in comprehensible language and thus connect well with the everyday understanding of the audience.

- ▶ An example could be the *'use' of societal trends and social innovations*: environmental policy can refer to societal trends and social innovations, can build on and support them. More and more people are abandoning their private cars, meat-based diets or other environmentally-intensive practices – this can benefit and reinforce environmental policy.
- ▶ A purposeful approach to dealing with *destructive narratives*, counterarguments, “alternative facts” and false statements is essential to successful communication of environmental policy. This approach must go beyond a reflexive rejection. Rather, it must reconstruct these destructive arguments and refute them emphatically in public discourse. This also applies to scientific contributions that deliberately attempt to delegitimise and break up a far-reaching scientific consensus on environmental problems in reaction to political interventions (through so-called “merchants of doubt”, see Oreskes & Conway 2010).

#### D. Ethics

Ethical argumentation can help improve understanding of the normative foundations of (environmental) policy by critically analysing and specifying the meaning of concepts such as freedom, justice or responsibility. It can further contribute to strengthening environmental policy in fields that have yet to be addressed or that have not been addressed effectively enough, but which have a high potential for positive sustainability effects and environmental impacts. One such field is consumption in all its facets and references to questions of sufficiency policy.

**Approach 5: The acceptability of environmental policy can be strengthened by addressing its ethical legitimacy.**

Concrete approaches include, inter alia:

- ▶ *Disclosing normative principles* in order to make the acceptability of arguments and approaches verifiable: environmental policy cannot and should not be derived solely from its apparent purely factual necessity stemming from its technical and economic advantages, but ultimately from acceptable ethical principles. At the same time, environmental policy-makers should explicitly deal with the normative foundations of those policies that they make responsible for non-sustainable development processes and that they want to see replaced for good reasons.
- ▶ *Incorporating aspects of social inequality and social exclusion more strongly into national and international environmental policy – in the sense of sustainable development*: Environmental policy measures that exacerbate social exclusion are hardly compatible with the 2030 Agenda (“leave no one behind”). If environmental policy increases its competence in social and development policy issues, resistance from competing policy fields and ministries as well as populist actors can be better countered. If the social policy synergies (“co-benefits”) of effective environmental policy can be demonstrated in a comprehensible way, this will reduce the pressure to justify environmental regulation. At the same time, environmental policy can make use of existing approaches for social equity that are already established in other fields (healthcare, mobility, housing, etc.).

**Approach 6: The acceptability of environmental policy can be promoted by using ethical arguments to support issues which have so far not been successfully addressed (e.g. sustainable consumption).**

Ethical argumentation can help to strengthen environmental policy in those fields that have not yet been addressed or have not yet been addressed effectively enough, but have a high potential for positive sustainability effects and environmental impacts. One such field is consumption, especially if many insignificant private consumption decisions lead to serious sustainability impact (so-called “quantity problem”). In view of the worldwide socio-ecological effects of mass consumption, consumer behaviour can no longer be regarded as a private matter, especially in affluent countries. Concrete actions could be i.e.:

- ▶ *Not focusing solely on consumption:* When private consumption decisions lead to socio-ecological problems, the question arises of who is obliged to change their actions. Often, attention is focused almost exclusively on individual consumers. However, it would be unfair to hold people responsible if consumer behaviour alone could not lead to a solution to the problem. Rather, the structural framework conditions of consumption – societal guiding principles, production patterns, the existing market economy system, etc. – must be taken into account and changed. Against the background of social conflicts over freedom and justice, a liberal state must discuss how responsibility should be distributed between the various social actors and what partial responsibility consumers can actually assume.
- ▶ *Showing aspects of justice in the “quantity problem”:* Dealing with the quantity problem concerns questions of justice (i.e. what we are justifiably obliged to do for others) and questions of good (i.e. what our individually successful life should look like; good life). The political approach to the quantity problem should emphasise issues of justice, because the consequences of individual actions and ways of life necessarily also affect others – both currently on a global scale as well as future generations.
- ▶ *Promoting sufficiency thinking and sufficiency policies:* Sufficiency means changing need and consumption patterns in such a way that undesirable social-ecological consequences are avoided. At the same time, new forms of communal living emerge when one asks: “What do we really need for a good life without harming others?”. However, it is neither possible nor desirable for the democratic state to regulate all questions of good living. A broader debate on the (environmentally relevant) conditions of good living, on the other hand, can support sufficiency thinking and a change in consumer behaviour and can also reach new social groups that are not yet aware of this issue. Sufficiency policies are suitable for addressing an overall problematic use of environmentally relevant goods and placing them in a (new) relationship with the conditions of good living. The connection between questions of justice and individual and collective good living forms the central basis of sufficient lifestyles.
- ▶ *Making decision frameworks transparent and fairer:* In public discourse, interventions in the supposed freedom of consumers are often vehemently rejected. This overlooks the fact that consumption always takes place in socially designed orders that favour certain consumption patterns over others (“decision architectures”). Since consumption is always socially enabled, we cannot see anything wrong with this. However, these architectures must be tested for their environmental compatibility and designed fairly. Political instruments can also be used to support consumers in making more sustainable decisions (“nudging”). Changes in these decision architectures can then, for good reasons, restrict existing but problematic freedom. It is legitimate to use non-market forms of regulation as well.
- ▶ *Rethinking the ethical foundations of sustainable development:* The idea of sustainable development is a concretisation of justice towards all living beings today and in the future. This forms the framework within which questions of individual consumption, decision

architectures and other dimensions of the quantity problem must be asked and answered. Sustainable development does not conflict with the freedom of individuals who (want to) lead their successful good lives in a morally responsible manner. On the contrary: a correctly understood freedom and responsibility are mutually dependent. Ultimately, the solution to the quantity problem lies in a way of life based on solidarity, which is currently only visible in contours. In the future, environmental policy should participate more strongly in social debates about a just common future.

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