

Does autonomy matter?

Subnational governments and the challenge of vertical policy integration for sustainable development: a comparative analysis of Quebec, Flanders, North Rhine-Westphalia and North Holland^a

Abstract. Sustainable development needs to be tackled at all governmental levels. Moreover, policies need to be integrated, horizontally and vertically. This article studies the efforts of subnational governments and their strategies towards vertical policy integration. Four cases are compared: Quebec (Canada), Flanders (Belgium), North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) and North Holland (the Netherlands). The assumption is that their approach is determined by their degree of autonomy, which involves their competences within their own borders (*self-rule*), and their influence on national decision making (*shared rule*). The findings, however, show that degree of autonomy does not shape the subnational governments' stance towards vertical policy integration for sustainable development. Rather, it is influenced by other factors, such as political dynamics. The analysis also puts forward that the degree of *self-rule* of subnational governments has a large influence on the content of sustainable development policies, not only at the subnational, but also at the national level.

Résumé. Le développement durable doit être poursuivi à tous les niveaux de pouvoir. En plus, les politiques doivent être intégrées horizontalement et verticalement. Cet article étudie les efforts des gouvernements sous-nationaux et leurs stratégies envers l'intégration politique verticale. Il compare quatre cas d'étude: le Québec (Canada), la Flandre (Belgique), la Rhénanie-du-Nord-Westphalie (Allemagne) et la Hollande Septentrionale (Pays-Bas). L'assomption est que leur approche se détermine par leur degré d'autonomie, qui est constitué par leurs compétences à l'intérieur de leurs propres frontières (*self-rule*) et par leur pouvoir à influencer la prise de décision nationale (*shared rule*). Cependant, les résultats démontrent que le degré d'autonomie ne détermine pas la position des gouvernements sous-nationaux envers l'intégration politique verticale pour le développement durable. Leur position est influencée plutôt par d'autres facteurs, tels que le contexte politique. L'analyse propose aussi que le degré de *self-rule* des gouvernements sous-nationaux a une grande influence sur le contenu des politiques de développement durable, non pas seulement au niveau sous-national, mais aussi au niveau national.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1970s, the international community increasingly realized that continued economic growth without concerns for social and environmental objectives would be unsustainable. It became clear that the world's development trajectory was causing large-scale environmental degradation, irreversible loss of natural resources, social injustice between and within societies, rapid depletion of energy sources, and even troubling changes to the Earth's climate. The concept of 'sustainable development' first prominently appeared in 1980 (IUCN, 1980) and has caused many academic and political debates ever since (Bruyninckx, 2006). The most widely accepted definition stems from the Brundtland Report, which specifies sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987: 43). The issues central to sustainable development are characterized by uncertainty with regard to the outcome of policy choices, and they deal with very complex global and transboundary phenomena (Dovers, 1997: 311-12; Meadowcroft, 2008: 113). They cannot be tackled by separate and one-shot solutions, but they need coordinated action at different levels of governance, from global to local. International and national policies have received wide

^a **Acknowledgements:** This research was funded by the Flemish Policy Research Centre for Sustainable Development (www.steunpuntDO.be). An earlier draft was presented at the 2009 Amsterdam Conference on the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change. The author wishes to thank three anonymous referees of this journal for their helpful comments.

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attention. Moreover, the efforts of local authorities have been much researched. Subnational governments¹, however, have largely remained in the dark. Yet they too have an important role to play, since they are often responsible for the implementation of national and international policies. That is why this article casts its light on the subnational level. The central question is how subnational governments deal with vertical policy integration, one of the key governance requirements of sustainable development (Steurer, 2009). The research focuses on the link between the subnational and the national level of governance.

The assumption assessed is that the approach of subnational governments is determined by their degree of autonomy. The autonomy of subnational governments consists of two elements (Elazar, 1987), the authority that they can exercise within their own jurisdictions (self-rule) and the power that they have to influence national policy and decision making (shared rule). With regard to self-rule, the hypothesis is that the lower their degree of self-rule, the more they are compelled to follow the national sustainable development policy instead of designing their own. With regard to shared rule, it is expected that subnational governments with a higher degree of shared rule have a large say in national decision making for sustainable development.

The next sections offer a conceptual reflection on vertical policy integration for sustainable development and on the degree of autonomy of subnational governments. Subsequently, four cases are compared: Quebec (Canada), Flanders (Belgium), North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) and North Holland (the Netherlands). The results of the comparative analysis serve to identify patterns of vertical policy integration and to verify the link with the subnational governments' degree of autonomy. Conclusions are presented in a final section.

Vertical policy integration for sustainable development

Sustainable development will not be achieved without a solution to some persistent problems. One of those obstacles is the lack of policy integration, that is the tendency to develop sectoral policies independently from one another and in an isolated manner vis-à-vis other levels of governance (see also Bornemann, 2008). That is why the literature on governance for sustainable development advances integration as a normative policy principle (Bruyninckx, 2006: 268; Zaccà, 2002: 39). Policy integration², it is said, should not only be horizontal (among different policy domains), but also vertical (across different levels of governance). A scan of the major global policy documents on sustainable development, from the World Conservation Strategy in 1980 up to the outcome documents of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, reveals that many have called for increased vertical policy integration. That call is echoed by the OECD, which in its guidelines on sustainable development pleads for a real integration of the efforts of different levels of governance, notably to achieve a successful implementation of global commitments (for example OECD, 2001: 51). International organizations thus concur with the normative challenge advanced by the literature on governance for sustainable development. Since there is a broad consensus on the fact that coherent action at all levels is needed, sustainable development has often been approached through the analytical paradigm of Multi-Level Governance (for example Van den Brande et al., 2011). In a multi-level setting, all levels have their own stake and responsibilities in governance for sustainable development. A general trend is that higher levels are expected to set goals and directions and to provide 'steering', while lower levels are mainly looked at in terms of concrete implementation and context-specific solutions. Yet the main global policy documents advance the demand for vertical policy integration mainly as an obligation for national governments. According to the international discourse, they are responsible for enhancing cooperation with other levels of governance. That is not surprising,

in the view that national governments are the main actors negotiating international action and that only they, as sovereign states, can decide how to organize co-operation with lower levels of governance within their territory.

Since the international texts remain fairly vague on what vertical policy integration really consists of, several authors have tried to characterize it. Brown specifies that vertical policy integration “implies *linking* discrete levels of governance, from local to international, and institutions across different levels” (Brown, 2009: 38, emphasis added). Berger and Steurer have a more concrete characterization, referring to vertical policy integration as “the *coordination* of various policies between the different levels of government” (Berger and Steurer, 2008: 31, emphasis added). A recent study commissioned by the EU Committee of the Regions identifies “coordination in objective-setting, competence distribution and development of provisions and measures across multiple tiers of government” as the content of vertical policy integration (RIMAS, 2009: 64). Berger and Steurer specify that such co-ordination has the aim “to achieve *coherence* between activities at the different political levels, from policy generation to implementation” (Berger and Steurer, 2008: 31, emphasis added). Similarly, Bruyninckx understands the principle of vertical policy integration as “the need to come to better policy coherence between different levels of policy making and implementation” (Bruyninckx, 2006: 269). The notion of coherence is in agreement with Underdal’s criterion of consistency. In what is said to be the first academic treatment of policy integration, Underdal stipulates that integrated policies need to be consistent, meaning that all policy components, including across different levels of governance, are in accord with each other (Underdal 1980: 159, cited in Lafferty and Hovden, 2003: 8). In short, vertical policy integration is understood here as the coherence of policies across levels of governance by means of establishing linkages between them, or evolving towards genuine co-ordinated policy making, from policy generation (which comprises objective-setting, competence distribution and the development of instruments) to implementation.

The question of how vertical policy integration for sustainable development should take place is underdeveloped by researchers. Here, insights are drawn from the study of intergovernmental relations in the field of public administration on the one hand, and from a recent study on the contributions of subnational and local authorities in national sustainable development processes on the other hand. First, Radin (2003) categorizes instruments for intergovernmental relations. Those relations are important to investigate, since existing intergovernmental linkages within a country determine how interaction on sustainable development takes place (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000b: 373), and thus whether vertical policy integration can be successful. According to Radin, instruments for intergovernmental relations are not only traditional institutional mechanisms, but range from communication to structural tools:

- *behavioural instruments*, which mostly involve targeted communication in order to prevent intergovernmental conflicts;
- *research and capacity-building instruments*, involving ‘empowerment’;
- *programmatic instruments*, using financial resources and the redesign of programmes and grant types; and
- *structural instruments*, which use patterns of responsibilities, authorities and leadership to shape intergovernmental relations; these instruments are mostly institutional and can involve commissions or other institutionalized mechanisms aimed at co-ordination (Radin, 2003: 610-14).

In a recent study on sustainable development processes within the EU, Berger and Sedlacko (2009) present a typology of the involvement of subnational and local authorities. Four different types of involvement are identified:

- *links between national sustainable development strategies and subnational sustainable development activities*: the sustainable development activities of both levels are linked, but no co-ordination happens;
- *involvement in general consultation processes for sustainable development*: in this category, subnational governments are one of the many stakeholder groups that are consulted for the preparation or evaluation of the national sustainable development policy;
- *membership in sustainable development councils and/or committees*: subnational governments can, among others, be involved in the multistakeholder councils or interministerial or interdepartmental committees governing the national sustainable development policy; and
- *institutionalized mechanisms for better co-ordination on sustainable development*: these are the most comprehensive mechanisms of vertical policy integration (Berger and Sedlacko, 2009: 5-10).

While Radin's classification focuses more on the type of resource that is used to build intergovernmental relations (for example communication, research, grants), the typology of Berger and Sedlacko is better suited to assess the strength of the involvement of subnational governments in national policy making (from 'loose' linkages to institutionalized co-ordination). I believe both classifications offer useful elements to conceptualize vertical policy integration for sustainable development. Both are used in the present study of vertical policy integration from the perspective of subnational governments. Previous analyses on vertical policy integration for sustainable development, seen from the perspective of national governments, concludes that it is weak and that more efforts should be undertaken to strengthen it (Berger and Steurer, 2008: 46; Niestroy, 2005: 33; RIMAS, 2009: 165; Steurer and Martinuzzi, 2005: 462). An approach from the perspective of subnational governments can provide some new insights into the issue.

Sustainable development and the question of autonomy

My assumption is that the subnational governments' stance towards vertical policy integration for sustainable development is to a large extent determined by their degree of autonomy. That is cited as a major determining variable of subnational policies within the literature on comparative regionalism and federalism (for example Keating and McEwen, 2005: 417; Marks et al., 2008: 111). The degree of autonomy of subnational governments and the competences that are allocated to them are related to the distribution of power within a country. The literature on comparative regionalism and federalism largely ignores sustainable development as a policy area. Yet within the literature on governance for sustainable development, leading authors have identified power distribution as one of the major problems (Berger, 2003; Meadowcroft, 2008: 113). In comparative research on national sustainable development policies, for instance, it has been suggested that federal countries encounter more problems regarding vertical policy integration, notably with regard to the effectiveness of intergovernmental co-ordination or the reconciliation of national and subnational priorities (for example Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000a: 427; OECD, 2002: 20-21). Yet scholars also indicate that decentralization of responsibilities towards subnational governments can be an

opportunity in the area of sustainable development, especially in cases where national governments are reluctant to move forward on the issue (Jørgensen, 2007: 145, 154; Meadowcroft, 2008: 114-15). Toner and Meadowcroft (2009: 81) argue that sustainable development policies can be better adjusted to local conditions when subnational governments have a substantial amount of autonomy. While especially federal systems are regarded as favourable to experimentation (Jørgensen, 2007; Meadowcroft, 2008: 115), the distribution of competences with regard to sustainable development is not only an issue in federal systems, but also in unitary countries. Steurer and Martinuzzi (2005: 462) rightly argue that sustainable development cuts across different governmental levels in any country, notably with regard to domains such as transport or spatial planning.

This article shifts the analytical focus from the national towards the subnational governments. The assumption studied is that the approach of subnational governments towards vertical policy integration is determined by their degree of autonomy. The federal-unitary distinction is by no means an indicator of autonomy. The degree of autonomy of subnational governments can be measured by the *Regional Authority Index* developed by Hooghe et al. (2008a). Based on a number of variables, the index intends to measure the extent to which subnational governments exercise formal authority. It contains two components. *Self-rule* is the subnational governments' independence to exercise authority within their own jurisdictions. *Shared rule* refers to their capacity to shape national decision making (Marks et al., 2008: 114-15)³. I compare four subnational governments: Quebec (Canada), Flanders (Belgium), North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) and North Holland (the Netherlands). The cases were selected on the basis of their degree of autonomy. They have a varying degree of self-rule and of shared rule, as displayed in Table 1. With regard to self-rule, they range from a Canadian province that ranks at the top, to a province of the Netherlands with a very low score. As to shared rule, they vary from the low score of Quebec to the maximum degree of North Rhine-Westphalia. The selection includes two cases with a pronounced territorial identity (Quebec and Flanders), and two that do not have such a strong identity (North Rhine-Westphalia and North Holland). It also includes cases both from within and from outside the EU, in contrast to many other studies on vertical policy integration. The cases allow a sample of vertical policy integration in four OECD countries, one unitary and three federal, and give an indication of how four particular subnational governments deal with the question. A short presentation of the autonomy of each case is presented below.

(insert Table 1 here)

With a maximum score on self-rule, *Quebec* and the other Canadian provinces have the highest autonomy within their own jurisdictions of all subnational governments worldwide. Quebec has wide-ranging competences in areas such as agriculture, environment and immigration, and exclusive ownership over public lands and natural resources (Hooghe et al., 2008b: 188). Yet the distribution of competences in Canada is in many cases opaque, due to the fact that the Constitution, written in 1867, is often unclear (Poirier, 2009: 108-10). Especially for new policy issues that can be a problem (Simeon and Papillon, 2006: 102). Many issues are consequently characterized by incoherent or contradictory policies (Skogstad, 2000: 72; Tomblin, 2000: 146). Both levels of government have such a wide range of responsibilities and instruments that they can design and conduct policies in nearly every domain they want (Simeon and Papillon, 2006: 115). Quebec's degree of shared rule is relatively low, due to the fact that the provinces have no say in federal policy making through the parliament (Bakvis and Skogstad, 2002: 5).

Also *Flanders's* score on self-rule is relatively high. In Belgium, the allocation of competences is based on the principle of exclusive competences, meaning that the legislation

and implementation of each matter can only pertain to one level of government (Reuchamps and Onclin, 2009: 30). Federal laws are only binding for the federal government and no hierarchy exists between federal and subnational legislation. Flanders disposes of exclusive competences in many important areas such as environment, spatial planning, economic development and transport (Hooghe et al., 2008b: 185-86). Flanders also has a relatively high degree of shared rule, due to the formal powers the subnational entities have through the Belgian federal legislature⁴. Moreover, in external relations their autonomy is exceptional, since they can carry out autonomous foreign policies, including the conclusion of international treaties, for all issues for which they are internally competent (Paquin, 2003).

North Rhine-Westphalia and the other German states (*Länder*) score slightly lower on self-rule. They enjoy some exclusive legislative competences, for example in education or natural resources (Hooghe et al., 2008b: 193). Yet most policy areas in Germany—such as economic policy making, energy, agriculture, environment and social welfare—are concurrent competences, meaning that the states can only legislate as long as the federal level has not done so (Münch, 2008: 25). Legislation in those fields has most often been undertaken by the federal parliament, which is why Schneider (2005: 131) states that the political balance lies in favour of the federal government. Moreover, in contrast to Canadian and Belgian federalism, the states also have to implement federal law. On shared rule, in contrast, the German states receive the maximum score, mostly because of the far-reaching powers of the German upper chamber, the *Bundesrat*⁵. That chamber represents the states and gives them a tight grip on the formulation of federal law (Hooghe et al., 2008b: 245). The German federal system is conceived in such a way that both levels are intricately intertwined and cannot operate independently from one another, with a relative concentration of legislative powers at the federal level and an extensive decentralization of implementation responsibilities towards the states. That so-called *Verflechtung* has been identified as an important obstacle to flexible policy-making (see Scharpf, 1985).

North Holland is one of the twelve provinces of the Netherlands, a typical unitary yet decentralized state (Hulst, 2005). Because their tasks are often restricted to the implementation of national policies, their score on self-rule is low. Yet over the past decades the provinces received new tasks in social and economic policies and have increasingly been active in environmental protection, agriculture and transport (Hendriks, 2001: 149). Their most important powers concern spatial planning (Hulst, 2005: 100). Although the political salience and visibility of the provinces are low, they are well-equipped to mobilize relevant players within a specific policy issue and therefore often assume a coordinating and steering role in policy making (Driessen, 2000). On shared rule, they receive a surprisingly high score, mainly due to the fact that the provincial assemblies elect the members of the upper house of the Dutch parliament (Hooghe et al., 2008b: 248). In practice, however, their role in national decision making is small.

Results of the analysis

The comparative analysis was based on a study of policy documents, on secondary literature, and on 44 interviews conducted in the four cases, with political and administrative officials and with experts, both at the national as well as at the subnational level⁶. Sustainable development policy is approached as a ‘meta-policy’, that is “a policy designed to guide the development of numerous more specific policies” (O’Toole, 2004: 38). The conclusions emanating from this research can thus only be valid for sustainable development as a meta-policy, and do not constitute a judgment on overall vertical policy integration in other or more specific policy areas. The comparative analysis was conducted between August 2007 and

January 2010, so later policy initiatives are not taken into account. The remainder of this section presents the results of the analysis. First, an overview of the existing mechanisms for vertical policy integration is given. Second and third, the link between respectively self-rule and shared rule and vertical policy integration is assessed.

Mechanisms for vertical policy integration

Table 2 gives an overview of the different mechanisms for vertical policy integration for sustainable development that have been identified in the analysis, ranged according to the classification of Berger and Sedlacko.

(insert Table 2 here)

Table 2 confronts the reader with an almost empty landscape with regard to vertical policy integration for sustainable development. In what follows I give an overview of the mechanisms that exist or that do not exist in each of the four cases.

In the first case of analysis, Quebec, absolutely no mechanisms for vertical policy integration for sustainable development were found. While both the Quebec government and the Canadian federal government have established sustainable development policies, no linkages exist between the two. Rather, it seems that the two policies coexist side by side in 'two solitudes'⁷. At both levels, the sustainable development policy is largely conceived as making governmental actions more sustainable. They take place within their respective scope of competences, with until now little impact outside the governmental realm.

The Flemish case shows the most substantive mechanisms for vertical policy integration for sustainable development. First of all, Flanders is a member of the Federal Council for Sustainable Development, and it is involved as an observer in the Interdepartmental Commission on Sustainable Development. The former is a multistakeholder advisory body aimed at formulating recommendations for the federal sustainable development policy. The latter is an interdepartmental committee which prepares the federal sustainable development plans. They are both federal (rather than national) organs, but since the subnational governments are allowed to seat in them, they become structural instruments for intergovernmental relations. Flanders proactively uses those mechanisms, but they have no impact on the Flemish sustainable development policy itself. Therefore, they do not achieve real vertical policy integration. Secondly, in 2004 the federal State Secretary for Sustainable Development took the initiative of inviting the subnational governments to negotiate a *national* strategy for sustainable development (encompassing both the federal and the subnational governments) to comply with international commitments. One of the objectives was greater coherence between the policies of the different levels, which is the essence of vertical policy integration. Yet the negotiations ended in nothing more than a framework text proclaiming good intentions, and no new initiatives were taken to restart the process.

The federal government in Germany was relatively late in taking up the sustainable development challenge (Tils, 2007: 164) and until recently no initiatives were taken to ensure vertical policy integration. Yet an ever louder call for increased integration has pushed the government to make more efforts for intergovernmental co-operation on sustainable development. Following the 2008 progress report on the German strategy for sustainable development, the federal State Secretary Committee on Sustainable Development⁸, at which subnational representatives were exceptionally invited, decided that informal working groups would be set up. In those working groups, the federal government and a selection of states would closely co-operate on three specific themes (public procurement, land use, and sustainable development indicators). The mechanism is a structural instrument for vertical policy integration for sustainable development, and a first step towards a real institutionalized

mechanism for better co-ordination. However, North Rhine-Westphalia is no active partner in this mechanism, which appears to be due to the low priority it currently attaches to sustainable development (cf infra).

The Dutch provinces play no role whatsoever in the national government's approach on sustainable development. The only mechanism for vertical policy integration for sustainable development is a link in the form of a nationally financed programme called *Learning for Sustainable Development*. That programme, which exists since 2003, is intended to anchor sustainable development within provinces (among other beneficiaries) by means of financing projects to promote sustainable development and investing in capacity-building. Each province has to develop an ambition statement in which it expresses its view on sustainable development and the priority themes to be supported by the programme. North Holland's approach towards sustainable development is not influenced by the national sustainable development policy. In North Holland, sustainable development has until now rather been framed as the province's answer to climate change. That is why climate change is the main theme in North Holland's ambition statement. The document intends to bridge the gap between sustainable development and North Holland's climate policy. The link is made up by a programmatic and capacity-building instrument. It is mainly aimed at financing provincial projects and stimulating capacity-building. The programme is a rather weak mechanism for vertical policy integration, since it only makes a formal connection between the policies of both levels, but it is not aimed at co-ordination or at policy coherence.

Self-rule and sustainable development

How does the degree of self-rule of subnational governments affect the content of their sustainable development policies? Two subquestions were asked to help investigate that link. First, I verified whether the subnational governments are involved in the implementation of the national (or federal) sustainable development policy. Second, it was assessed to which degree the sustainable development policy of the subnational governments is related to the national sustainable development policy. Table 3 summarizes the major findings. The subnational governments' score on self-rule is indicated in the first row.

(insert Table 3)

The hypothesis was that the subnational governments with a lower degree of self-rule would play a large role in the implementation of the national sustainable development policy. That is usually the case in the Netherlands and Germany, where subnational governments are traditionally responsible for the implementation of national policies, while in Belgium and Canada federal policies normally do not impact the subnational level. For sustainable development, however, the picture is quite different from traditional policy areas. In none of the four cases the subnational government is involved in the implementation of the national sustainable development policy. That is all the more surprising in the Dutch and German case, since the national sustainable development policy includes goals that concern subnational competences⁹. Only in Germany initiatives have been taken to start working with the states, but North Rhine-Westphalia was not involved. In general, it appears that governance for sustainable development at the national levels is conceived as a purely governmental policy, formulated and implemented by national executives, with no role for the subnational levels. For their part, the subnational governments turn upon themselves, and conduct a sustainable development policy that is enacted within the limits of their own competences, in line with their political priorities and without clear linkages to the national level. The intertwinement that is often observed in sectoral policy areas therefore does not apply. Only in the case of North Holland, a weak link exists with the national sustainable development policy, in the

form of the *Learning for Sustainable Development* programme (cf supra). In the case of Quebec, it is striking that the sustainable development policy bears strong resemblance to the Canadian federal sustainable development policy, although there are no formal links between the two. That is because Quebec has invested in lesson-drawing in order to gain insights from foreign experiences (including other Canadian provinces and several OECD countries including Canada). Some instruments of the federal model have been copied, such as the position of the Commissioner for Sustainable Development, although important adjustments have been made (Happaerts and Van den Brande, 2011).

Since neither of the four cases, with a high nor a low degree of self-rule, are involved in the implementation of the national sustainable development policy, my analysis suggests that degree of self-rule as such does not influence vertical policy integration for sustainable development. However, the findings point out that self-rule is an important factor determining the content of subnational sustainable development policies. Each government attempts to conduct a sustainable development policy within the framework of its own autonomy. That explains, for instance, the focus on climate change in North Holland's sustainable development policy. Indeed, because of their considerable competences in spatial planning, the Dutch provinces are important partners in climate policy, which has a significant spatial dimension (for example coastal adaptation measures or renewable energy projects). The high degree of self-rule of Flanders and Quebec explains why their policies mostly resemble the policies of a nation-state (for example with legal instruments). Their high autonomy enables widespread action for sustainable development. In contrast, most policy-making difficulties are experienced at the federal level in Belgium and Canada, where the high degree of self-rule of the subnational entities restricts the freedom of movement of the federal governments. For instance, whereas Quebec's considerable spectrum of competences has given rise to a sustainable development policy with wide-ranging themes, the Canadian federal sustainable development policy is much more focused on environmental issues only, an area where competences are not always clearly divided (Hoberg and Harrison, 1994: 124).

Shared rule and sustainable development

To evaluate the relation between the degree of shared rule of subnational governments and vertical policy integration, it was analyzed whether subnational governments are involved in national decision making for sustainable development policy, and which strategy subnational governments adopt towards that policy. The findings are summarized in Table 4. The cases' score on shared rule is indicated in the first row.

(insert Table 4 here)

The findings show that all four cases have no or very limited authority to shape national decision making for sustainable development. Only in the case of Flanders, although it does not have the largest degree of shared rule, possibilities exist to influence decision making on the federal sustainable development policy, and those possibilities are abundantly used. Such possibilities were not found in the other cases. Even North Rhine-Westphalia, which has the highest degree of shared rule, is not involved in the recent German effort for better co-ordination on sustainable development. From these cases, no causal link can thus be drawn between the degree of shared rule of a subnational government and the amount of influence it can exert on national decision making for sustainable development.

So what does explain the lack of influence of the degree of shared rule? From the perspective of the national governments, co-ordination problems are invoked. Our respondents at the national level in Canada, Germany and the Netherlands stress that intra-governmental co-operation for sustainable development is already such a hard task, that

additional co-ordination with subnational governments would be practically impossible. Intergovernmental co-operation in those three countries mostly happens on a sectoral basis for specific policy issues, but not for sustainable development. The fact that they each have to count with twelve or more subnational entities could also play a role, whereas Belgium has only five, the governments of which are all located in or close to Brussels (which facilitates intergovernmental co-operation). A similar argument is made by Toner and Meadowcroft (2009: 80) who claim that geographically extensive states face a particularly difficult challenge with regard to policy coherence for sustainable development. However, looking at it from the perspective of subnational governments, not the co-ordination problems but political factors seem most decisive. North Holland does have different influence mechanisms at its disposal to weigh on national decision making (for example the North Holland lobbyist in The Hague or the interprovincial pressure organization IPO) but those are not used in the context of sustainable development. Similarly, Quebec has not undertaken any attempts to influence the federal sustainable development policy. Interviews point out that, as the federal sustainable development policy has no repercussions on Quebec, provincial officials do not feel concerned by it. Moreover, the federal approach is generally perceived as being not very successful. North Rhine-Westphalia's absence in the recent initiative for better intergovernmental co-ordination on sustainable development is due to the fact that the current government attaches no political priority to the topic¹⁰. The analysis thus suggests that political will for sustainable development is decisive for the subnational governments' strategy towards the national sustainable development policy. Previous research shows that a political actor with a significant dose of political will for sustainable development and with enough bargaining power is needed in order for sustainable development to be institutionalized. In European cases, that actor is often the green party (Happaerts and Van den Brande, 2011). Yet with regard to vertical policy integration, my analysis shows that political will for sustainable development is not the only rationale. Flanders proactively uses the opportunities it has to be involved in national decision making on sustainable development, not only to provide genuine input for the federal sustainable development plans, but also to verify whether the federal government does not take initiatives within Flemish competences. Indeed, in intergovernmental co-ordination the Belgian subnational governments often display a strategy of demarcation, meaning that they guard against federal trespassing on subnational competences. Niestroy (2005: 77) states that Belgium's complex institutional construction leads to an emphasis on co-operation on procedures rather than on substance (see also Happaerts et al., 2011). That shows that instruments for intergovernmental relations are not always used for the purpose of vertical policy integration.

Conclusions

Held against the normative statements of governance requirements for sustainable development, the analysis of vertical policy integration seen from the perspective of four subnational governments paints a grim picture. In the examined cases, few mechanisms for vertical policy integration for sustainable development are in place. As a consequence, the general goal of vertical policy integration—reaching better policy coherence between different levels of government—is not met. That conclusion is in line with previous analyses of governance for sustainable development at the national level.

My findings suggest that the degree of self-rule of subnational governments does not have a decisive impact on vertical policy integration for sustainable development. In all cases, ranging from North Holland with a low degree of self-rule to Quebec with the maximum score, the subnational government has no role in the implementation of the national

sustainable development policy. However, self-rule has an important impact on the policy content of subnational sustainable development policies. All subnational governments conduct a sustainable development policy within the scope of their competences, which ranges from some initiatives in the area of climate policy in the case of North Holland, to a wide-ranging sustainable development strategy with a legal base and a spectrum of policy instruments in the case of Quebec. As for the national sustainable development policies, the federal governments in Belgium and Canada have very limited room to maneuver due to the high degree of self-rule of their subnational entities. Therefore, autonomy clearly matters for the content of sustainable development policies.

It also appears that the degree of shared rule of subnational governments is irrelevant for vertical policy integration for sustainable development. That could be due to the fact that the indicator is largely based upon the power of subnational governments in national legislation, while sustainable development policies tend to be executive strategies formulated and implemented outside of national parliaments. In the cases investigated in this article, no causal link could be drawn with the degree of shared rule of a subnational government and the amount of influence it can exert on national decision making for sustainable development. That involvement is rather determined by other factors, such as existing practices of intergovernmental relations, but also the political weight subnational governments attach to sustainable development.

The federal-unitary distinction was not explicitly used in the analysis, since it is not an indicator for the autonomy of subnational governments. The cases confirm that the distinction does not matter here. Both unitary systems and different types of federal systems show little differences in how they deal with vertical policy integration for sustainable development. Even the system of co-operative federalism in Germany does not guarantee strong mechanisms for intergovernmental co-operation. In general, it seems that, both at the national and at the subnational level, sustainable development policies as ‘meta-policies’ are often conceived as executive policies which have little or no influence outside the governmental realm or on other levels of government. That is why, except in the Belgian case, it often falls outside of the traditional instruments for intergovernmental co-operation, which are mostly sectoral in nature.

Although the degree of autonomy of subnational governments does not explain patterns of vertical policy integration, the research does confirm that weak vertical policy integration is to a certain extent explained by power distribution. Indeed, in all countries, no matter how autonomous the subnational governments are, competences are shared between levels of governance. That poses a challenge to vertical policy integration in all cases. The normative discourse of international policy documents (for instance, the need for coherent action at all levels of governance) clashes with the reality within countries, where responsibilities are divided and one level of government’s freedom of movement is restricted by the other. Yet it is clear that vertical policy integration—or the lack thereof—is a complex matter accounted for by many different factors. The analysis suggests that political factors are very determining in how sustainable development is conceived (or framed) within different governments, how it is translated into policies, and how governments manage the challenge of integration with other levels. Those political factors include the political weight a subnational government attaches to sustainable development, and its strategy towards co-ordination with the national government in general. In future research, such political factors should be investigated in greater detail. Future research could also target other factors that can possibly explain the approach of subnational governments towards vertical policy integration, such as economic strength or ‘identity politics’. It could be interesting to amplify this research with cases of economically weaker subnational governments, for instance within the same countries, to see whether their approach is different. Moreover, the presence of a strong territorial identity,

although it did not seem to play a role in this particular topic, has often been invoked as an explanatory factor in the study of subnational governments, also within the field of sustainable development (for example Happaerts et al., 2010b).

This article approached a previously examined problem from a new angle, the perspective of individual subnational governments. It has shown that not only national governments are accountable when vertical policy integration is insufficient. Knowing the strategies and political priorities of subnational governments is at least equally important when one wants to understand the reality of vertical policy integration for sustainable development.

Endotes

¹ I define a *subnational entity* as “a coherent territorial entity situated between local and national levels with a capacity for authoritative decision-making” (Marks et al., 2008: 113). This entails entities such as provinces, states or regions. I prefer to use the term ‘region(al)’, however, to denote the level of governance above the nation-state, for example the EU, as is common in International Relations theory and the literature on global governance.

² Policy integration only deals with the coherence between different policies, either of one single government or between governments at different levels. It should not be confused with the concept of integration (political, economic, etc.) studied by the regional (e.g. European) integration literature.

³ Self-rule is composed by four indicators: ‘institutional depth’, ‘policy scope’, ‘fiscal autonomy’ and ‘representation’. Shared rule consists of ‘law making’, ‘executive control’, ‘fiscal control’ and ‘constitutional reform’ (Hooghe et al., 2008a).

⁴ However, according to Swenden and Jans (2006: 882), the Belgian upper chamber fails to defend subnational interests.

⁵ However, decision making in the *Bundesrat* is determined more by party political differences than by collective interest representation by the states (Schneider, 2005: 128).

⁶ A list of interviewees can be obtained from the author.

⁷ I borrow this expression from Pelletier (2009: 79), who, in reference to a famous novel by MacLennan (1945), writes that the federal dynamic in Canada is mostly determined by two major communities that live in two solitudes.

⁸ In Germany, state secretaries are the heads of a ministry. The State Secretary Committee on Sustainable Development is a horizontal coordination body in which all ministries are represented, chaired by the Chancellor’s Office.

⁹ For instance, the German sustainable development strategy includes goals on education and spatial planning, which fall almost entirely within the competences of the states and of local authorities. Those goals cannot be met without the co-operation of lower levels.

¹⁰ The coalition of Christian Democrats and Liberals that took office in 2005 completely shut down the sustainable development initiatives of the previous government, which were strongly associated with the Green Party (Happaerts et al., 2010a: 140). This stands in contrast with the sustainable development policy of the German federal government, which has survived several changes of government.

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TABLE 1
Degree of autonomy of selected cases

	self-rule (maximum: 15)	shared rule (maximum: 9)
Quebec	15	5
Flanders	13	7
North Rhine-Westphalia	12	9
North Holland	8	6.5

Source: Hooghe et al. (2008a)

TABLE 2
Mechanisms for vertical policy integration

	Quebec	Flanders	North Rhine- Westphalia	North Holland
Links with national policy				programme <i>Learning for Sustainable Development</i>
General consultation processes				
Sustainable development councils / committees		involvement in federal council and federal commission		
Institutionalized mechanisms for better co-ordination		(failed) project for a <i>national</i> sustainable development strategy	(recent federal initiative, but without North Rhine-Westphalia)	

TABLE 3
Self-rule and vertical policy integration

	Quebec (15/15)	Flanders (13/15)	North Rhine- Westphalia (12/15)	North Holland (8/15)
Involved in implementation of national SD policy?	No	No	No	No
Link with national SD policy?	No, but lesson- drawing	No	No	Yes (weakly)

TABLE 4
 Shared rule and vertical policy integration

	Quebec (5/9)	Flanders (7/9)	North Rhine- Westphalia (9/9)	North Holland (6.5/9)
Involved in national decision making for sustainable development?	No	Yes	No	No
Strategy towards national policy	Not our problem	No trespassing on Flemish competences	Little political interest for sustainable development	Influence mechanisms are not used