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Abstract

It is a well-known problem for decision makers to clearly indicate what is meant by 'sustainable development'. Scientific research approaches in the field seem to be divided between the 'objective' approach of the subject (argued to be based on 'hard' scientific facts, e.g. risk assessment, environmental impact assessment, various indicator systems, etc.) and more 'subjective' or 'participatory' approaches (argued to incorporate 'ethical values', 'worldviews', 'cultural perspectives', etc.). Another (related) division seems to be between approaches which acknowledge and conceptualise their role in the political sphere, and others which deny, pass over or minimise such a role. In this PhD research, we aim to go beyond this unproductive distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' approaches. Our approach is based on the insight (and demonstration) that actually both approaches represent a particular interpretation of more general justification schemes (and are both inherently political). In order to substantiate this point of view, four research tracks were followed: i) a (meta-) theoretical investigation of sustainability conceptions, ii) an analysis of the operationalisation of sustainability in various governance strategies, iii) two case-studies (ExternE and the policy development cycle in the case of the Belgian nuclear phase out), and iv) the development of a practical proposal for sustainable energy governance.