Governance for a Sustainable World

Research Strategy 2022-2026

The global crises of our time pose a complex web of ecological, economic, technological, and geopolitical challenges that cannot be addressed unilaterally and in a compartmentalized fashion. Shifting power dynamics, rising inequalities, the novel coronavirus pandemic, and a new securitization of environmental politics, are only some of the major contextual conditions against which the quest for sustainable development takes place today.

Against this background, the Environmental Governance Group is at the forefront of sustainability sciences. The group is a vibrant international team of about 60 researchers at Utrecht University’s Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, one of the world’s leading research institutes in its field. The Environmental Governance group was established in the early 2000s and has grown substantially over the last decade due to its success in raising funds for education and research. Today, the Environmental Governance Group is the largest research unit of political and policy scientists in the field of sustainable development in the Netherlands and beyond.

Our research vision is historically grounded, planetary in scale, inclusive, and societally engaging. Our programme is designed to advance sustainability science and policy action for sustainable development by offering novel and societally relevant insights into the politics of sustainability governance at local, regional, national and global levels. Our approach combines theoretical advancement and empirical-analytical research with normative critique and prescriptive, policy design-oriented recommendations. We create rigorous theoretical and empirical knowledge to understand, explain and assess governance practices on important sustainability challenges. In our work we combine different disciplinary perspectives such as political science, public administration, human geography, spatial planning, environmental law and sociology. Much of our research is interdisciplinary, involving cooperation also with natural scientists.

At the Environmental Governance Group, we provide a safe, healthy, inclusive and supportive working environment for staff and students. Senior staff members take the responsibility to mentor PhD candidates and early career scholars to realize their potential as innovative and creative researchers and future change agents.

Our research programme is also interlinked with our educational programmes, especially the BSc Global Sustainability Science, the MSc Sustainable Development, the MSc Water, Science
and Management, the MSc Sustainable Business and Innovation and the MSc Global Challenges for Sustainability (CHARM-EU).

Research themes

Our research programme consists of three themes that focus on the analytical, normative, and transformative dimensions of sustainability governance. These research themes, cutting through all our work, are the core of our research agenda and our activities. Through an innovative mix of these themes, we aim to make theoretical, methodological, and societal impact.

*The Analytical Dimensions of Governance: Actors, Institutions, and Complexes*

Our first research theme concerns the analytical dimensions of sustainability governance. This theme addresses our long-standing theoretical concern of ‘what works where, when, and why’, while recognizing that one cannot address the sustainability challenges of the 21st century by the theoretical frameworks of the 20th century. We focus on the role of actors and institutions, and the dynamics of various governance complexes or configurations that emerge.

Our analyses investigate different institutional designs and modes of governance, and the resulting variation in governance performance. Sustainability policies are pursued through a multitude of different modes of governance, from top-down steering to self-regulation of societal organizations. Theory and observations suggest that no single mode is a panacea, and that these modes vary in effectiveness in fulfilling their policy objectives. What is needed seems to be a context-specific mixture of centralized governance, decentralized governance, public-private governance, interactive governance, and self-governance. In this regard, we pursue empirically grounded analyses of governance systems to advance our theoretical understanding of what works when and why.

We include in our research designs a wide spectrum of political actors with varying degrees of power. We embrace here the diversity of institutions that these actors establish and the complexity of governance arrangements that emerge. For example, we engage in research projects that study the interface of science and policy, and the comparative analysis of private, public-private, and public modes of governance. Moreover, our research covers novel governance arrangements at the local level, especially with a view to modern urban governance. Our research agenda extends also to the global level, with many projects that study the overall effectiveness of international treaty regimes, the steering effects of the UN-led Sustainable Development Goals, and the reform of the entire system of global governance and the United Nations.

Within this extensive research focus, we also explore central crosscutting processes of sustainability governance, cutting horizontally across issues and vertically across levels. For example, we have a long-standing interest in studying environmental policy integration, including research on the politics of policy coherence and the governance of globally networked sustainability risks. We are also interested in analysing scaling policies across multiple levels of governance, for instance on how low-carbon urban practices can be scaled up and mainstreamed.
The Normative Foundations of Governance: Planetary Justice and Democratic Legitimacy

Our second research theme, again cutting across all our activities, is the investigation of the normative foundations of sustainability governance. This research line analyses various normative questions, especially concerning social justice and democratic legitimacy, both theoretically (e.g., what is just under certain theoretical presumptions?) and empirically (what do actors see as just under certain circumstances?).

We are interested here in three areas of normative inquiry. First, we study the legitimacy, accountability, transparency, and hence democratic quality of governance arrangements. We analyse such questions at the local and national level, for instance with a view to assessing the normative foundations of Dutch flood risk management. Yet we are also interested in the exploration of global democracy, for example in our research on the democratization of international institutions and organizations.

Second, we are researching problems of inequality in sustainability policies at local, national, and global levels, with a focus both on normative theories of justice and on empirical assessments of inequalities and of processes that lead to such inequalities (and here with a special concern for the global poor). We offer critical perspectives, including those from the Global South, with a view to contributing to research on degrowth and decolonizing sustainability.

Third, our normative research addresses the status of environmental values as such, especially when it comes to questions of planetary integrity, planetary justice, planetary stewardship, and norm hierarchies that may be needed to give prime of place to considerations of planetary well-being and stability.

Governance and Societal Transformations

Our third key research theme is the relationship between governance and societal transformations. Societies and planetary systems are undergoing profound changes – climate change, biodiversity loss, urbanization, digitization, geopolitical and sociocultural shifts, among others – which creates immense challenges for governance. In this context, we examine both the governance of societal transformations as well as transformations in governance systems.

Transformations in politics, society and the economy are widely called for to bring about a more sustainable and just world. But how can such transformations be governed to ensure that they are achieved, benefit people and the environment, and do not introduce new problems? What sorts of deliberate actions are needed to pursue transformation by different actors, such as governments, businesses, local communities, non-government organizations, social movements, international organizations and political leaders? How do multiple simultaneous transformations interact? And what are the consequences of transformative change within and across different domains, communities and countries?

Crucially, we need transformations in governance itself to realize radical societal change. Political systems across all levels broadly fail to deliver on ambitious goals and to equitably serve all
people in society. Moreover, political systems may be incapable of dealing with new pressures and demands that arise in a rapidly changing world. Yet, understanding how political and governance systems change is enormously challenging. Issues of power, inertia, interlocking actions, divergent interests and multiple forms of authority come into focus. Examining how governance can be transformed is a key strength and interest of our research programme, where we examine such processes across cities, communities, regions, nations, and global regimes.

Research foci

Research at the Environmental Governance Group covers a wide range of sectors of governance in diverse geographical settings. We of course have research programmes that advance knowledge on governance systems in the Netherlands, where our institute is based. Yet we also work from a comparative perspective and conduct research on many other European countries. In addition, we have major research lines focussing on non-European countries, including countries in Asia, such as Bangladesh, Indonesia or India; Latin America, including Colombia and Ecuador; and Africa, with research on South Africa, Ghana, and other countries. Lastly, our work is often comparative, bringing in a global perspective on local governance, and much of our work addresses also global governance, with complex governance sites such as the United Nations, the UN conventions on climate or biodiversity, and specialized agencies such as the International Labour Organization or the World Bank.

Concerning concrete sustainability challenges, our interest is broad and diverse. We study the governance of climate change mitigation from the local to the global level, by assessing adaptation policies and international agreements, examining the role of non-state actors, and by the critical assessment of new technologies such as geo-engineering. We also research food systems governance, with related sustainability challenges such as biodiversity loss, severe environmental degradation, farmer livelihood and unhealthy diets. We aim here to understand stability and change in food regimes, particularly the unmaking of capitalism in food systems, the governance of sustainable and nature-based agriculture, the role of alternative food networks and futuring and serious gaming for food policy change. Furthermore, we are interested in governance questions around the urban environment, with research on low-carbon urban development, the governance of nature-based solutions for urban sustainability, climate adaptation and urban resilience, and urban transformations more generally. Furthermore, we study water governance, flood risk governance and the governance of water quality, with a focus on governance practices worldwide. In addition, we are interested in sustainable value chains, which are difficult to govern owing to their international nature and the involvement of many different companies. Self-governance is an important mode of governance, which we study by focusing on corporate social responsibility, extended producer responsibility, efforts to govern the circular economy, standard setting, and the role of finance. Finally, we analyse and evaluate a wide range of governance modes aimed at biodiversity recovery, from international agreements such as the Ramsar Convention to voluntary conservation by farmers. Of particular interest is the governance of
concepts that aim at reconciling biodiversity recovery with socio-economic objectives, including urban nature-based solutions and agroecology.

Importantly, in much of this research, we work from a system perspective, seeing issues not in isolation but from the nexus between multiple different challenges. Our system approach also requires us increasingly to explore quantitative and data-driven research programmes, such as social network analysis.

Lastly, we not only focus on certain sectors and specific regions, but also on concrete and important societal questions and debates. We contribute, for example, to societal debates around ‘degrowth’; criticize the work of major philanthropic foundations; study the political effects of the UN approach of global steering through 17 Sustainable Development Goals; and investigate current policy programmes around a ‘participative society’; overall we seek to contribute to a decolonization of Western modes of science, politics, and governance.

Science for impact

Designing and conducting research in a way that contributes to solving sustainability problems and promoting transformative change is a cornerstone of our strategy. With our research, we want to generate new scientific insights that are useful for our society. We address here not only governments and political actors but also stakeholders in civil society, business and the media. For us, a scientific project or publication is not an end but a means to engage with stakeholders, provide them with knowledge and tools and influence the sustainability agenda. We use three interlinked strategies to stimulate productive science-society interactions: involve, inspire and influence.

First, we involve stakeholders in any stage of a research project, including its design. Depending on the nature and purpose of a research project, these can be stakeholders on the local level (citizens, local governments, community organisations or businesses), but also stakeholders operating on national, international and global levels (civil society organizations, international treaty organizations or UN panels). Our approach draws on intensive interaction and collaboration with potential users of new scientific knowledge. In short, this way of working is transdisciplinary research and knowledge co-creation.

Secondly, we inspire stakeholders with the results of our research projects by disseminating their content and promoting debate about these results. To this end, we encourage the public engagement of our team members and promote their public advisory roles, popular newspaper publications, radio interviews, blogs and other means of sharing the research findings. We seek to inspire stakeholders at all levels, from local communities in climate adaptation efforts to United Nations high-level panels discussing the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. We also encourage stakeholders to inspire us by sharing their issues, visions and experiences relevant to our research activities.

Thirdly, we aim to influence social change towards sustainability by translating our scientific insights into practical instruments for governments, businesses, civil society organizations and
citizens. We do this for example by developing action perspectives, policy instruments, guidelines, serious games and new ways of public-private cooperation, often in close collaboration with stakeholders. Recently, for example, we developed a toolkit with practical foresight methods and instruments for organizing citizen participation in the building climate-proof and sustainable futures. Another way to influence social processes is by coaching students to become future change agents. We see these students as representatives of the future generation and train them in transdisciplinary research and active engagement in sustainability debates.

**Research collaborations**

We collaborate extensively on research and impact across multiple levels. We lead research on governance and sustainability within the Copernicus Institute, while also collaborating with colleagues in other sections on topics such as energy and food system transitions, local and regional ecosystem management, urban transformation, and climate policy and new technologies. Moreover, we also collaborate with other departments within the Faculty of Geosciences on challenges of urban governance, governance in the Global South, and governance of deltas.

We participate actively within the university-wide strategic themes ‘Pathways to Sustainability’ and ‘Institutions for Open Societies’. For example, we contribute to steering boards, hubs and working groups, seed funded projects and flagship events such as conferences and seminars. We also collaborate with a variety of departments on shared research topics including the Faculty of Law, Economics and Management (on oceans and marine governance), the Faculty of Humanities (on sustainable development ethics), and the Centre for Global Challenges (on sustainability transitions and justice).

A particular strength is our extensive global collaboration within multiple research projects, networks and communities. We lead and participate in international projects with partners across Europe and beyond on topics such as global sustainability, climate change, deltas, risk, water-energy-food nexus, reefs, degrowth and circular economy, among others. We contribute to many research networks often in key leadership roles, including the International Sustainable Development Research Society and the International Association for the Study of the Commons. Our group is pivotal in the global leadership of the Earth System Governance Project, the largest network of social scientists working on the politics and governance of global environmental change and transformation. Members of our group serve on the Scientific Steering Committee and as Chairs of this network, lead and participate in Taskforces on cutting-edge topics in the field, and contribute to convening global conferences which draw together many hundreds of leading scholars annually, among other activities. The International Project Office of the Earth System Governance Project is headquartered at Utrecht University from 2019-2024, further enhancing the global reputation and position of Utrecht University in the field of sustainability.