

Research Project

The sustainabilization of the state. Forms, Functions and Formation of Sustainability Governance in Swiss Cantons

Third-party funded project

Project title The sustainabilization of the state. Forms, Functions and Formation of Sustainability Governance in Swiss Cantons

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Department

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Status Completed

This project builds on emerging practices of states to establish institutional capacities for coping with commitments related to sustainable development on the one hand, and on existing scientific claims demanding that states have to transform themselves in order to play a decisive role in sustainability governance on the other hand (e.g. claims on policy integration, participation etc.). We want to capture this perceived and claimed “differentness” theoretically and by analyzing the states’ concrete endeavors to sustainabilize themselves. Accordingly, the project strives for contributing to an improved understanding of the self-transformation of the political-administrative system toward sustainability. Hereby, the project builds on the results of an explorative pre-study. To substantiate this preliminary work, we will approach the overall question on three levels. First, we look at the generic aspects of “sustainabilization” on a conceptual level. We especially want to elaborate a framework of the sustainable state with regard to its own internal and external governance functions. Second and based on the according conceptual basis, we will empirically analyze the practical efforts of sustainabilizing Swiss cantonal administrations. An important reason for choosing the subnational level is that the pre-study revealed a diversity of already developed practices. Hence, the framework could be applied to different cases and an informative comparison can be established. Third, the project includes a practice-oriented level by collaborating with cantonal representatives in an accompanying focus group not only to disseminate research results, but also to ensure a mutual learning process between the practitioners and the research team. The latter builds on the dialogue between scholars and sustainability administrators from Swiss cantons already established in the pre-study. The scientific part is composed of a theoretical part and an empirical part. We first develop an analytical framework of the sustainable state, based on a critical discussion of concepts from transition, sustainability, and governance theory. The empirical part will be guided but what we take to be a new and innovative framework. Based on a documentary analysis to reveal existing forms of the sustainable state in all Swiss cantons, we will select distinct cases for further in-depth inquiries. We will employ a qualitative case study approach to investigate the working of sustainability governance arrangements in selected Swiss cantons and we will assess their capacities to bring forth functions of sustainable governance with reference to the analytical framework. To do so, we will conduct interviews with key actors in the public administration as well societal actors. We will analyze the data using methods of qualitative content analysis. Finally, and employing the method of process tracing, we will capture the formation of sustainability governance arrangements in the selected cases. With the project, we add innovative knowledge to the sustainability governance literature in mainly four respects. First, it

establishes an informed notion of the governance functions of the sustainable state. Second, it provides empirical knowledge on sustainable transformation processes within the state along the studied Swiss cantons. Third, it illuminates the role of key sustainability actors in transforming governance. Fourth, the project adds practical, socially robust knowledge to improve the capacities for sustainability governance in Swiss cantons.

Keywords Swiss Cantons; Sustainability Governance; Sustainability Offices; Sustainable State; Sustainable Development; Public Administration

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