

Summary

This paper is a documentation of the first steps taken by the junior research group “PoNa – Shaping nature. Rural development and agricultural biotechnology between criticism and vision”.

Our central research question is how polity, policy and politics shape nature as well as the diverse and interactive relationships between nature and society. With this question in mind, we have developed an understanding of sustainability that is shared by all members of our project. This common conception of sustainability is to serve as a “bridging concept” and has three different functions. Firstly, it reveals our target knowledge and identifies the contents and normative positions of our project. Secondly, it provides us with categories and sub-categories for our analytical framework, serving both a methodical and analytic function. Thirdly, the bridging concept helps us in the interdisciplinary research process to integrate terms, concepts and theories.

Our search for approaches, concepts and theories of sustainability was informed by a critical, emancipatory perspective. The core aspects of this perspective are the critique of domination, a search for intra- and intergenerational justice, the deconstruction of dichotomies and separations that cause socio-economic crises, a search for new kinds of interconnectedness between these dichotomies and separations as well as the questioning of alleged social certitudes.

This paper gives an overview of the different approaches, concepts and theories that were discussed. It traces our project’s evolving understanding of sustainability, which was created as a result of discussions based on these approaches, concepts and theories. Our view of sustainability comprises these nine categories: the question of how polity, policy and politics, and shape nature requires (from our critical perspective) not only a consideration of the understanding of nature (1) and polity, policy and politics (2), but also of economics (3), power, and domination (4), gender relations (5), strategies of efficiency, sufficiency and consistency (6), time (7), knowledge (8) and reflexivity (9).

Sub-categories describe and elaborate these nine main categories. They are further differentiated by questions meant to structure both guiding knowledge and interpretation. In this way we hope to be able to understand and evaluate against the background of our understanding of sustainability how polity, policy and politics shape nature. The next stage of our research will deal with the descriptive and interpretative analysis of documents in the field of rural development and agricultural biotechnology. Thus, we should be able to develop recommendations on procedures, structures and contents that will contribute to transformation processes towards sustainability.