Chapter 2
Politics of Sustainability in the Arctic: A Research Agenda

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Abstract The concept of sustainability has become central in arctic politics. However, there is little agreement on what 'sustainable' means. For different actors (governments, indigenous people, NGOs, etc.) the concept implies different sets of opportunities and precautions. Sustainability, therefore, is a much more fundamental idea to be further elaborated depending on contexts than a definable term with a specific meaning. This paper suggests a set of theoretical questions, which can provide the first steps toward a research agenda on the politics of sustainability. The approach aims to map and analyze the role of sustainability in political and economic strategies in the Arctic. Sustainability has become a fundamental concept that orders the relationship between the environment (nature) and development (economy), however, in the process rearticulating other concepts such as identity (society). Hence, we discuss, first, how, when meeting the Arctic, sustainability changes its meaning and application from the global ecosphere to a regional environment, and, second, how sustainability is again conceptually transformed when meeting Greenlandic ambitions for postcoloniality. This discussion leads us to outline an agenda for how to study the way in which sustainability works as a political concept.

Keywords Concept of sustainability • Political theory • Discourse theory • Postcolonial identity • Greenland

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2.1   Introduction: Sustainability as a Political Concept
in the Arctic

Changes to the climate, global power balances, demands for natural resources, and aspirations for self-determination set the stage for new political struggles in the Arctic. Central to the struggles is the notion of the Arctic as a special place characterized by a nature at once hostile and fragile. In this clash between fragility and the drive towards development, the concept of sustainability has become pivotal. Yet there is neither consensus on what sustainability should refer to, or on how it should be achieved. Despite, or rather because of, its salience for policymaking, there is no consensus about the precise contents of the concept. And this is exactly what makes sustainability such an interesting and politically potent concept. With this chapter, we want to present and advocate for a particular take on sustainability that posits sustainability as a political concept rather than a technical concept.

As the social sciences have been invited to contribute both to perfecting our understanding of sustainability and to implementing it, much scholarship has embraced the concept. In contrast, some critics have advocated a wholesale rejection of the concept on accounts of neo-colonialism. Rather than joining one of these two camps, we suggest an approach that steps back and investigates the diverse political consequences of sustainability becoming a buzzword in the Arctic. For different actors (governments, indigenous people, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc.) the concept implies different sets of opportunities and precautions. There are significant differences between businesses and state governments that tend to see sustainability as a precautionary note in the pursuit of wealth in a fragile setting, indigenous communities that often note that it is their particular lifestyle that should be sustained, and global NGOs such as Greenpeace and the WWF which tend to act as spokespersons for a fragile nature in the context of global environmental balance and biodiversity.

As a concept, sustainability has entered an arctic political reality that may be characterized as postcolonial: Indigenous peoples hold a prominent place and have relatively strong organizations in the Arctic. Their relations to their respective states involve a variety of autonomy arrangements designed to remedy histories of colonialism, paternalism and exploitation. As an extreme case, Greenland, once a colony but now a self-governing territory within the realm of Denmark, regularly declares its ambitions to be independent. Greenland explores new strategies for economic development while negotiating a tension between a postcolonial and an indigenous political identity. Political debates in Greenland play out as a negotiation of how to prioritize and combine, in a sustainable way, political self-government with cultural self-sufficiency in terms of human resources, indigenous cultural practices (Inuit language, social norms, hunting and consumption of wild animals etc.) and imperative elements of Western modernity (Western judicial system, representative democracy, welfare state programs, market economy, etc.). These complexities are features of politics and living conditions generally in the Arctic. But in

Greenland these complexities take on a special character in the light of the unique ambitions of becoming a sovereign nation state – the first involving one of the Arctic's indigenous peoples.

It is a consequence, we suggest, of these complexities that sustainability requires further theorization as a *political* concept. That means that we should look at sustainability as a concept that does something to the way in which politics unfolds. We will elaborate this notion below. For the sake of argument, in this chapter we make the assumption that sustainability has become a concept that plays a central role in all arctic development discussions. The important question we should ask is how we should understand this idea. The main ambition of this chapter, then, is to present an approach and a set of questions that could be seen as the first steps toward a new research agenda on sustainability in the Arctic. Because Greenlandic politics embrace all the dilemmas invoked by sustainability, we use Greenland as a case study to show how the concept of sustainability operates politically. The argument is structured as follows: we commence with an outline of sustainability as a political concept followed by a discussion of sustainability in Greenland's postcolonial politics. This allows us to draw out the key analytical questions which we suggest should be asked when pursuing research on the politics of sustainability in the Arctic.

2.2   Sustainability as a Fundamental Concept

Since the Brundtland Report, sustainability has invoked – for lack of a better term – traditional, technical-rational authority to inform development policies. However, we suggest that sustainability has become a much more fundamental concept ordering the relationship between the environment (nature), development (economy), and identity (how can society develop while staying the same).

Whereas the concept of sustainability can be traced back centuries (Warde 2011), its rise to prominence as a political program rather than a tool for academic analysis only came about in the 1980s. As it became clear that the ecosystem of the planet was under threat from the production and development strategies of an ever more industrialized world, the reconciliation of society's developmental goals with the planet's environmental limits became the foundation of an idea that achieved political attention from the mid-1980s. The 1987 report "Our Common Future" by the so-called Brundtland Commission (also known as the World Commission on Environment and Development) was concerned with how to achieve sustainable development defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987).

An overarching aim was to reinstate scientific and technological knowledge production in societies' efforts to achieve environmentally sustainable improvements in human well-being (Kates 1999). Four distinct research programs had developed: biological research relating humanity to its natural resource base; geophysical

research relating human activities to the earth's climate; social research placing human institutions, economic systems and beliefs in nature as its environment; and finally technological research on the design of devices and systems to produce more social goods with less harm to the natural environment (Kates 2000). Current research on sustainability in the Arctic generally stays within one of these distinct research programs, committing normatively to turning unsustainabilities into sustainabilities. However, in committing to sustainability, much research blinds itself to the political effects of employing the concept of sustainability (cf. Sachs 1990; Banerjee 2003; Lélé 1991; Beckerman 1994).

We, therefore, suggest an approach that investigates what political role is played by the concept of sustainability and the practices (including knowledge production) induced by the concept. In this light, politics could be seen as a struggle between competing visions of the future (Palonen 2006) where concepts like sustainability, development, and identity are employed to implicitly or explicitly prognosticate and prescribe specific futures (Koselleck 1985). Since the arrival of Europeans in the Arctic, a discussion has been taking place about how to value and mediate between identity and development. From nineteenth century administrators to early twentieth century explorers and anthropologists, the question was: Can and should the Inuit stay true to their original culture – or must they develop according to a Western model, lest they die out (Høiris 1986)?

The key for analyzing sustainability is to identify its referent object – in other words, what needs to be sustained – and investigate how sustainability helps organize concepts in coherent narratives (Ricœur 1988). By entering established discourses structured around identity and development, the concept of sustainability changes them. Generations of Inuit leaders have submitted different reformulations of the problematique, trying to combine indigenous identity with modern development in various ways (Thomsen 1996). Particularly with the de-legitimization of authorities in the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of indigenous leaders has presented colonialism and modernization as a threat to their identity (Gad 2005, 2013).

Relative to identity and development, sustainability is a newcomer to political struggles in the Arctic. At first, sustainability in the Arctic was all about protecting a fragile environment (Tennberg and Keskitalo 2002); later it branched out to encompass also the sustainability of human societies in the Arctic (Tennberg 2000). To talk about sustaining human societies diverts the meaning of sustainability from the technical character that came to the fore in the 1980s to one referring to a particular identity.

What is common, however, to the various discourses on sustainability and development in the Arctic is the emphasis of a unique regional environment which, in the more abstract sense, involves the particular characteristics of the materiality of arctic space. The cultural identities of peoples living in the Arctic are seen as shaped by the harshness and remoteness of arctic space (Lorentzen et al. 1999). Economic development has been seen as inhibited by the climate and distances of the Arctic, but also potentially facilitated and even necessitated by its natural resources (Howard

2009). So, arctic space constitutes both the natural environment as fragile, and sustainability as a particularly fragile balancing act between identity, state authority and economic development.

2.3   Sustainability in Greenlandic Politics of Postcoloniality

Greenland is a self-governing territory within the realm of Denmark. It was a Danish colony from 1721 to 1953. After the formal decolonization process in the wake of World War II, Greenland experienced some devolution of powers from Denmark but also, and somewhat paradoxically, a growing Danish presence and a "Danification" of private businesses and public services. One could say that Greenland was decolonized by being integrated (Beukel et al. 2010). This generated protests and gave birth to a national independence movement that resulted in the introduction of Home Rule in 1979. This process of "Greenlandification" developed further, and in 2009 an Act on Self-Government was adopted. In the present situation, Greenland enjoys a large degree of autonomy in domestic matters, but does not retain decision-making power on questions pertaining to citizenship, monetary, foreign, defense and security policy (Ackrén and Jakobsen 2015).

The 2009 Act, however, included a promise of full political independence from Denmark. The preamble of the Act on Self-Government stated that "the people of Greenland is a people pursuant to international law with the right of self-determination". In the Self-Government Act the conditions for independence are specified. On the one hand, a "Decision regarding Greenland's independence shall be taken by the people of Greenland" (21(1)). On the other hand, the procedure states, "An agreement between Naalakkersuisut [the Government of Greenland] and the [Danish] Government regarding the introduction of independence for Greenland shall be concluded … with the consent of the Folketing [Danish Parliament]" (21(3)). Before the Danish Parliament concludes, the agreement shall have "the consent of Inatsisartut and shall be endorsed by a referendum in Greenland" (21(3). Hence, this is the process through which Greenland can obtain political independence from Denmark (cf. Kleist 2010).

The economy remains a significant obstacle to this aim. It follows from the constitutional arrangement that increasing political autonomy from Denmark requires an economic surplus on Greenland's budget balance and thus, simply speaking, independence requires economic development (Strandsbjerg 2014). Obviously, the transfer of an annual grant of more than 3.5 billion Danish kroner (US$ 550 million) that Greenland receives from the Danish government budget, would stop once Greenland becomes independent from Denmark. Moreover, Greenland paid a crucial price for the formal recognition of its right to independence. In pursuant of the 2009 Act and in contrast to the provisions of the 1978 act, Greenland has to pay for further devolution. According to Article 5(1), the annual block grant is fixed at the 2009 level. Moreover, Article 6(1) states: "Fields of responsibility that are assumed by the Greenland Self-Government authorities … shall be financed by the Self-

Government authorities from the date of assumption". During the Home Rule years, every field of responsibility 'taken home' had a cheque attached to it in the form of an increased block grant.

So, in a speech on "Greenland's way forward" at the international conference 'Arctic Frontiers' in Tromsø, Norway in January 2014, then Greenlandic Premier Aleqa Hammond declared that Greenland's short term goal is a sustainable economy in order to obtain the long term goal of political independence: "I want Greenland to have a self-sustaining economy based on our own resources with a greater degree of integration into the world economy. Greenland's long-term political goal is independence" (Hammond 2014). Both the long-term goal of independence (however defined) and the immediate task of a self-sustaining economy outlasted Aleqa Hammond's brief period in power. Indeed, they are generally accepted across most of the political spectrum in Greenland, although differences pertain to the details of the roadmap for independence and the urgency of progress.

A further complication to the politics of sustainability in Greenland is the unsustainable nature of not only the financial side of the economy but also the human resources situation (Lang 2008). Greenland insists on proceeding as a technologically advanced welfare state, even if the level of education among the general population cannot sustain it. The result is a steady import of humanpower from the former colonizing power, Denmark and a continued reliance on the Danish language. This postcolonial re-enactment of colonial dependence forms the background of Aleqa Hammond's claim at the presentation of her government's working programme in April 2013 that "a special Greenlandic element should be to include culture in the concept of sustainable development. The process of reconciliation and forgiveness will be a central element in a sustainable development. Hence, the initiation of a series of activities, e.g. conferences, seminars and debates, aimed at uncovering the 'effects of colonial times'" (Aleqa Hammond in *Rigsombudsmanden* 2013: 6; our translation). With this, Hammond explicitly tied sustainability and potential sovereignty to a particular vision of Greenlandic culture conditioned by postcolonial ties to Denmark.

2.3.1   Greenland in the Politics of Sustainability in the Arctic

As one case among other arctic societies, Greenland has been approached by scholars as a struggle between indigenousness and modernization, both at the level of concrete societal practices and at the level of identity discourses. This has shown how Greenlandic politics is shaped as a negotiation of the specific combination of practices and aims promoted as indigenous with developments deemed necessary for prospering culturally, economically, and politically in a modern world (Thomsen 1996; Gad 2009). In this perspective, Greenland stands out as unique in the Arctic by aiming to become the first sovereign, indigenous nation state (Strandsbjerg 2014).

When the concept of sustainability is introduced to the Arctic, it changes its meaning and application from the global ecosphere to a regional environment. In this regard, sustainability seems to be conceptually transformed to allow rather than limit development in a fragile arctic environment. Scholarship often points to the Arctic as a special case; both nature and societies here are presented as particularly fragile (Lorentzen et al. 1999). Hence, the Arctic has become an arena for clashes between, on the one hand, institutions and NGOs promoting a global model for environmental management and, on the other hand, local knowledge and the cultural significance of the Inuit way of life (Caulfield 1997). These clashes illustrate the tension between sustainability as a universal concern and as a local concern.

In the Arctic, sustainability often means the sustainability a particular way of life (Berman et al. 2004; Buckler and Wright 2009), an understanding which might contradict universal attempts to regulate and manage the environment in a globally sustainable manner. This tension is but one example of what happens when a universal discourse on sustainability meets the discourses on arctic particularity and the regional interests of arctic politics. We argue, that the peculiarity of arctic space makes a difference – but we still need to see the full picture of what this peculiarity means in order to understand how the concept of sustainability works in the Arctic.

The point we want to make here is that we need to understand what difference the Arctic as a region with specific characteristics does to sustainability, and the different ways in which the concept of sustainability is employed in current struggles to define postcolonial statehood in Greenland and elsewhere in the Arctic. In Greenland, as discussed above, discourses on the particularity of arctic sustainability, arctic identity, arctic security, and arctic development are configured in a particular way due to the unique double role of the nation-state in Greenland. As a self-governing territory within the realm of Denmark, Greenland does not yet enjoy full sovereignty, but Self-Government is a promise of full sovereignty in the future. In this way a separate, future sovereign state is built into the constitutional arrangement of an existing post-imperial state.

We argue, that this arrangement makes a difference when the global struggles over the reconfiguration of arctic space are articulated in Greenland. It makes a difference whether one has in mind the sustainability, identity, security, and development of a future Greenlandic nation-state with its own independent national economy and human resource base, or whether Greenlandic identity is bound to be developed in a sustainable way within a Danish state ultimately in charge of citizenship, fiscal, foreign, defense and security policy. In sum, we propose that this makes a difference, but we still need to understand just what difference this peculiar version of post-coloniality means for how the concept of sustainability works in Greenland.

To recapture the argument, Greenland is in midst of a local struggle over how state authority is to be configured. This struggle is fueled by a developing climate change narrative that combines actual developments and political aspirations. It is said that arctic global warming means melting ice, both ice sheet and sea ice, and that melting ice means more accessibility to on shore and off shore natural resources, more possibilities for sailing in arctic waters and growing feasibilities for new

shipping routes through the Arctic Ocean. Furthermore, more access to natural resources means more mining to meet growing demands on a global scale and more exploration for oil and gas in the Arctic, and more possibilities for new shipping routes mean more attractiveness for Asian interest in the Arctic.

Greenlandic political discourses combine the Asian interests in Greenland's natural resources with the possibility of economic sustainability as the pre-condition for political independence. These factors and this climate change narrative set the stage for a renegotiation not only of the materiality of arctic space but also of post-colonial sovereignty and statehood in Greenland. The climate change narrative, however, also implies that sustainability is conceptually transforming to allow rather than to limit development in this fragile arctic environment. Thus, in her opening speech of the Greenland Parliament in September 2013, then Premier Aleqa Hammond stated that "climate change and the receding ice mean that new business opportunities become available" and that the "mining industry can expand the exploration of raw materials", and that the more ice-free arctic waters in the future may play a role as "an alternative route for container traffic to and from Asia" (Hammond 2013).

So, one plausible scenario is that the goal of economic sustainability driven by exploitation of natural resources in order to obtain political independence marginalizes notions of cultural, social, and political sustainability. The consequence of such developments is that sustainability is transformed from a concept meant to limit development to a concept meant to allow development to take place in an otherwise fragile arctic environment.

2.4 Politics of Postcoloniality and Sustainability in the Arctic: Towards a Research Agenda

This chapter has been motived by the observation that sustainability has become an important and widely applied concept in arctic development discourses while, at the same time, there is little or no agreement between these discourses about the meaning of the concept. This has spurred us to pursue a theoretical approach – or research agenda – to capture the rise of sustainability discourses as a political process renegotiating the relationship between nature, society and development in the political struggles unfolding in the Arctic. This calls for a more nuanced analysis of how and where good and bad futures are envisioned when talking about sustainable development in the Arctic (Tennberg et al. 2014; Sejersen 2014, 2015). The intricacies should be systematically investigated in a research agenda involving both a mapping and a systematic analysis of the role of sustainability in various political and economic strategies in the Arctic.

To acquire a better understanding of arctic development, we need to capture sustainability as a political concept. Sustainability cannot be taken for granted – neither with regards to its substantial meaning nor to its political effects. We need to analyze

the uses of the concept of sustainability, rather than assume that it works as a sign-post for problem solving and the rational balancing of interests.

The aim of such a research agenda is to theorize the changes that take place in the Arctic by investigating how the concept of sustainability is given radically different meanings and how these different meanings inform different political strategies. The agenda involves a series of consecutive steps:

- The first task will be to identify and map separate discourses of sustainability in the Arctic. Scholarly reports, political debates, regulatory texts as well as statements from all types of stakeholders in the Arctic should be analyzed to distill claims about *what* should be sustained, in relation to *what* environment or larger community or greater good, as well as *who* is responsible for getting us to sustainability.
- A second task will involve charting the genealogies of each discourse. From where do central ideas come? Did international governance bodies or national regulatory traditions provide the language in which each sustainability discourse is couched? Who promotes each discourse? How do the promoters work together or fight each other? How have the discourses clashed and merged? And what scenarios can be built to understand and predict future clashes or mergers?
- A final task will be to investigate how concepts of nature, identity and development are being reconfigured in these different discourses.

The research following this agenda should pay specific attention to the way in which discourses play out and order distinct scales. First, how is arctic space renegotiated in struggles over the meaning of sustainability and how is a global concept of sustainability given distinct meaning when articulated to arctic space? Second, how is postcolonial statehood and sovereignty renegotiated, especially when the struggles over the meaning of sustainability in the Arctic meet Greenlandic strategies for postcoloniality? We need to understand how the different ways in which the concept of sustainability is employed in current struggles to define postcolonial statehood in Greenland and independence from Denmark, and in parallel processes in other parts of the Arctic.

Hence, two research questions relating to specific changes in geographical scale are each in need of theoretical and empirical investigation. First, what happens when global discourses on sustainability meet the regional particularities of arctic material space? Second, what happens when the resulting discourses on arctic sustainability meet the prospects of Greenland as an indigenous nation state in the Arctic – and, in parallel, when they meet the way other distinct arctic communities envision each their futures? In both of these changes in scale, two core analytical questions are central: How is the concept of sustainability given radically different meanings? And how do these different meanings inform different political strategies?

By pursuing these questions we would get a better understanding of how sustainability works as a concept, but there is also the normative implication that by highlighting the political character – as opposed to its technical-rational appearance – of sustainability, the referent object, and hence what should be sustained, is opened for a political discussion proper.

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