Sustainability
in German Family Policy and Politics[1]

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Abstract

Since the turn of the new millennium, the term of sustainability is frequently used in the context of family policy in Germany. On a discursive level, actors tend to refer to changes in actor constellations and in working style as well as in argumentation by using the term. This article aims at reflecting the understanding of sustainability in German family policy concerning its theoretical requirements—namely its normative and integrative aspects—, and at analyzing the implementation of participative aspects by pointing out challenges in actors' cooperation. On the basis of three of the most important expert's reports published in this context as well as of 18 interviews conducted with scientists and policy makers, the paper finds that, although actors frequently refer to sustainability, they have a very heterogeneous understanding of this term concerning normative and integrative aspects. Furthermore, also their behavior in terms of participative aspects shows that theoretical requirements are not integrated into the relevant actors' understanding of sustainability. That is why it can be assumed that sustainability and the underlying discourse in German family policy are not (only) a concrete ambition in themselves but are also used as a means to other ends.

Zusammenfassung

„Nachhaltigkeit" ist zu einem geflügelten Wort in der deutschen Familienpolitik geworden. Seit Beginn des neuen Jahrtausends beziehen familienpolitische Akteure sich auf den Begriff, u. a. um Veränderungen auf der Akteursebene, neue Argumentationsmuster und Arbeitsweisen zu beschreiben. Dieser Artikel zielt darauf ab, das Verständnis der unterschiedlichen familienpolitisch relevanten Akteure und die theoretischen Annahmen der Nachhaltigkeitsforschung bezüglich normativer und integrativer Elemente von Nachhaltigkeit aufzubereiten und die Umsetzung partizipativer Aspekte zu analysieren. Auf der Basis von drei Expertisen und 18 mit Wissenschaft-

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lern und Vertretern aus Politik und Verwaltung geführten Interviews kommt der Artikel zu dem Ergebnis, dass die theoretischen Hintergründe von Nachhaltigkeit im Feld der Familienpolitik nicht im Verständnis der relevanten Akteure verankert sind. Diese Diskrepanz zwischen der im Diskurs vermittelten Ernsthaftigkeit in der Bestrebung um Nachhaltigkeit und der festgestellten Heterogenität des Nachhaltigkeitsverständnisses bzw. den kooperationsbezogenen Herausforderungen führt zu der Vermutung, dass der Diskurs um Nachhaltigkeit in der deutschen Familienpolitik (auch) andere Ziele verfolgt als allein eine tatsächlich nachhaltige Gestaltung des Politikfeldes.

1   Introduction

In the last few years, the term of sustainability is frequently used in the context of family policy in Germany. Emerged in forestry contexts, it originally stands for a lack of natural resources which had been pointed out especially by the Club of Rome (Meadows et al. 1972) in the 1970s. In its more recent version, sustainability does not necessarily deal with a lack of natural resources alone but also with economic or social ones—an understanding which results in a socio-economic-ecological triangle, representing the interdependencies between ecological, economic and social sphere (Nölting et al. 2004: 255). Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 (Rio de Janeiro), the concept of sustainability has been expanded both geographically and concerning its content.

On a scientific level, sustainability research concentrates on the question of how sustainability concepts should be arranged. Its main findings are that they should include normative aspects as well as integrate all relevant dimensions. Last but not least, participation of all relevant actors in the elaboration as well as in the implementation process is considered to be important (Nölting et al. 2004).

To put it in a nutshell, sustainability concepts should consider *normative*, *integrative* and *participative* aspects. The concept's normative base should consist of criteria such as intra- and inter-generational justice, preservation of quality of life and persistence of the system. Furthermore, in the perspective of sustainability's integrative aspect, researchers stress the fact that one has

to consider several dimensions when establishing a sustainability concept (e.g. an ecological, an economic and a social one). However, although there are research activities in this field, the concept of sustainability cannot be understood as a purely scientific one. It rather represents a kind of a politico-ethical, normative idea which is located at the intersection of science, politics, economics and the general public (Schäfer 2008: 21f.). That is also why it is marked by its practical orientation concentrating on the formulation of sustainability concepts (Nölting et al. 2004: 254).

In Germany, questions of sustainability began to arise in the 1990s. Marked ecologically at first, the understanding became multidimensional only some time later. In 1998, the red-green government engaged in developing a national sustainability strategy which was accomplished in 2002 and set up the political landmarks for the following years (Bundesregierung 2002: 323). Only one year earlier, the red-green cabinet had appointed the German Council for Sustainable Development as well as a special committee for sustainable development at the chancellery. In 2004, the German Bundestag established a parliamentary advisory board for sustainable development (Deutscher Bundestag 2004) in which 22 deputies (September 2010) from all parliamentary groups work together (Bundesregierung 2008: 29).[2] As the red-green government underlined the cross sectional aspect of sustainability in its strategy (Bundesregierung 2002: 1), measures in every policy field should meet criteria of sustainability. This is also true for family policy.

Thus, over several decades this policy field has developed in a way very contrary to what theoretical requirements in terms of sustainability might suggest. In fact, it was rather marked by ideologization that reflected the differences between Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) than by inter-partisan cooperation, aiming at defining and reaching goals in a consensual way. That is why until the end of the 1990s, new partisan constellations provoked changes concerning the policy's

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[2] For further details concerning the inauguration of new institutions also see Bundesregierung, 2008.

main foci.[3] Furthermore, its participative character was limited; interest groups for instance had a weak position in German family policy since family interests were for a long time considered to be a private matter (Gerlach 2010: 38f., 429ff.). Against this background, the policy field—in the discourse of which the term of sustainability plays a major role since the beginning of the new millennium—seems to have been very non sustainable in the decades before. However, ideologization became less important at the end of the 1990s, amongst others due to Constitutional Court's rulings, pointing out the importance of families' performances for the whole society. As a consequence, congruence between parties seems to have increased: At the changeover from the red-green (1998-2005) to the Grand coalition (2005-2009), several aspects have endured, e.g. the idea of an income-related parental benefit which was conceptualized under the red-green coalition and implemented by the Grand coalition. Concerning their goals, party programs seem to differ from each other in only a few aspects lately (Gerlach 2010: 156ff.). Parallel to this consistency, the Constitutional Court's rulings, high poverty rates as well as the demographic situation and its consequences led to changes in the understanding of family policy (Gerlach 2010: 156). Additionally, there have been changes concerning actor constellations (e.g. Ristau 2005) as well as changes in working style and in argumentation (Ostner 2007) of family policy actors. These changes are often referred to as being part of a 'new' family policy. As a synonym, the term of 'sustainable' family policy is frequently used in political, public and academic discourse since the beginning of the 21st century. Since family minister Renate Schmidt took office in 2002, there have been several ex-

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[3]   In rare cases, this even led to cancellation of measures that had been introduced by former governments. This was the case of tax exemption for dependent children (*Kinderfreibetrag*) that had been established in 1949 (CDU/CSU majority) and was abolished in 1975 (SPD majority). Some years later, in 1983, it was re-established by a CDU-minister. However, most of the times, measures are not abolished when majorities change. Parties rather tend to introduce measures according to their political focus. As a consequence, a clutter of measures—partly contradictory ones—has been built up over the years.

pert's reports and commitments to this so called sustainable family policy.

However, the idea of sustainability in German family policy and politics remains rather nebulous. That is why this article aims at

1. reflecting relevant actors' understanding of sustainability concerning sustainability's *normative* and *integrative* aspects;
2. focusing on the *participative* aspect of sustainability by pointing out challenges concerning actors' cooperation mentioned by the interviewees.[4]

However, giving a concrete definition of sustainability or stating how German family policy and politics should be organized so that they can be considered as sustainable ones goes beyond the scope of this article which seeks to bring together actors' understanding of sustainability and to show the gap between their comprehension and the main theoretical requirements of sustainability (i.e. its integrative, normative and participative aspect).

Asking for actors' conceptions of a sustainable family policy, Chapter 2 refers to three of the most important publications dealing with sustainability in German family policy as well as to 18 interview transcripts. By pointing out *normative* and *integrative* aspects of sustainability, this chapter raises the question in how far scientific findings are integrated into actors' understanding of sustainability. Treating the topic of sustainability in German family politics, Chapter 3 concentrates on the *participative* aspect of sustainability by dealing with questions of cooperation and networks between relevant actors. Firstly, recent changes in German family politics are pointed out. Secondly, structural interdepen-

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[4]   In both cases, the analysis is based on 18 interviews conducted with scientists as well as with policy makers on all federal levels. These semi-structured interviews were recorded and afterwards transliterated. Additionally, in chapter 2, normative and integrative aspects of sustainability are studied on the basis of three of the most important expert's reports in this area (BMFSFJ, 2003; BMFSFJ, 2005; BMFSFJ, 2006). Theoretical findings as well as findings from the interviews and from the expert's reports form a set of variables which are parameterized in several categories such as 'understanding of sustainability', 'dimensions of sustainability' and 'normative criteria of sustainability'.

dencies between the federal levels (central state, federal states and local level) are emphasized. It is shown that although actors refer to good reasons for and instruments of cooperation, they also state that there are several factors which restrain the quality of cooperation. Chapter 4 gives a résumé and asks for the reasons of sustainability discourse in German family policy. As will be shown, sustainability discourse seems to be connected to major societal and political developments that occurred at the turn of the new millennium. That is why it can even be argued that sustainability discourse in German family policy is not an end in itself but can also be considered as being a sort of means to other ends.

2   Sustainability in German family policy

Defining sustainability in the context of family policy is not easy. Contrary to other fields like environmental policy, it seems that questions of sustainability sort of have been imposed on family policy: Apparently, in the course of the formulation of a national sustainability strategy in 2002, political actors were more or less constrained to identify a link between sustainability and their own policy field. In German family policy, this is reflected in publications edited by the Federal Family Ministry dealing with sustainability in family policy. However, due to theoretical requirements concerning actors' participation, it is not enough to simply consider publications when trying to define sustainability. That is why this chapter also takes into consideration interviews conducted with political actors and scientists and their attitudes to a sustainable family policy. A first look seems to reveal that the understanding of sustainability has evolved into a more sophisticated one over the years. Thus, there is still no consistent understanding of sustainability in German family policy, although the term is frequently used in academic as well as in political and public discourse. Due to this missing comprehensive and broadly accepted definition, this article does not aim at contrasting a definition of sustainability in family policy with actors' understanding, but at applying a more inductive approach: It

brings together actors' understanding of sustainability in family policy and contrasts their comprehension with the general theoretical requirements of sustainability research.[5] In a first step it is analyzed what experts and interviewees generally refer to when talking about sustainability in family policy. In a second step, the expert's reports as well as the interviews are analyzed concerning theoretical components: Is there any reference made to sustainability research criteria? Concretely, it is shown in how far experts and interviewees address the three dimensions of sustainability (ecologic, economic and social) and its normative criteria (intra- and intergenerational justice, preservation of quality of life and persistence of the system).[6]

2.1 What is meant by sustainability in family policy?

The first expertise edited by the Federal Family Ministry (BMFSFJ) dealing with sustainability in family policy was written by Rürup and Gruescu in 2003 and has been commissioned parallel to upcoming changes in the welfare system, announced by the Agenda 2010[7] as well as by the Lisbon Strategy[8]. In fact, the expertise brings in the term of sustainability for the first time

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[5]   Establishing a comprehensive definition of sustainability in German family policy or setting up a sustainability concept goes beyond the scope of this article.

[6]   These questions are operationalized by using the criteria 'understanding of sustainability', 'dimensions of sustainability' and 'normative criteria of sustainability'. The third main theoretical requirement—participation of all relevant actors—is dealt with in chapter 3. Information concerning these topics was extracted from the texts (interview transcripts and expert's reports) with the help of the software MIA (Gläser/Laudel 2009).

[7] Inaugurated in 2003 by the red-green government, the Agenda 2010 aims at boosting the ailing economy by fostering the restructuring of the welfare system, e.g. concerning labor market regulations, health care benefits and the pension system.

[8]   In 2000, the European Council wrote down its goal to "become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" in the Lisbon Strategy (see http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm).

in a scientific, family policy-related context,[9] emphasizing an understanding which strongly stresses an economic point of view, taking into account demographic changes by focusing on the question of fertility rates: The authors state that demographic changes (will) have an impact not only on social security systems, but also on the labor market. In order to face them, they advise to strengthen female labor market integration, aiming at reducing the shortage of skilled labor. Secondly, they emphasize that by expanding childcare facilities and introducing a parental benefit, the total fertility rate could be increased in order to insure a high quantity of potential employees in the future.[10] By reaching these two goals—they argue—family policy would contribute to economic growth and could therefore be considered to be sustainable.[11]

Two years later, Bertram et al.[12] applied a more differentiated definition, not regarding solely economic and demographic but also sociological aspects. In parts, Bertram et al. seem to distance themselves from Rürup and Gruescu, e.g. when they state that a sustainable family policy should not be legitimized by questions of fertility rates (BMSFJ 2005: 47). Generally, they stress the generational justice part of sustainability. Furthermore, the authors concentrate on how sustainability can be reached (BMFSFJ 2005: 7ff.). For them, family policy should consist of a mix of time policy, financial transfers and infrastructural support (BMFSFJ 2005: 7). To put it in a nutshell, their understanding of

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[9] Thus, the term has already been discussed in 2002 in the context of the elaboration of a national sustainability strategy, for example on an event hosted by the BMFSFJ in 2002, bringing together all sorts of political and non-political actors (BMFSFJ 2002).

[10] Both aspects—the question of getting children and of female labor market integration—can, if you believe the expertise, be explained by economic means. For opportunity costs make that the probability of a decision for a child and/or for labor market integration increases or decreases.

[11] Interestingly, this argumentation contradicts 'traditional' family policy measures (e.g. married couples tax splitting) that can be rated as aiming—amongst others—at an increasing fertility rate by means of a low female labor market integration rate.

[12] Nachhaltige Familienpolitik. Zukunftssicherung durch einen Dreiklang von Zeitpolitik, finanzieller Transferpolitik und Infrastrukturpolitik

sustainability in family policy is one of a target group-specific policy that they suppose to be more efficient than 'one fits it all' solutions.

Similar to Bertram et al., the Seventh Family Report[13] defines sustainable family policy as consisting of a mix of time policy, infrastructural support and financial transfers. Within this mix of instruments, the expert committee stresses the importance of time-related measures though, including their adaptation to special situations that might occur in the course of life (BMFSFJ 2006: 266ff.). The committee puts the question of sustainability in a wider perspective and applies a more sophisticated understanding of sustainability than previous expert's reports (Huinink 2007: 392). In fact, it considers family resources to be finite and as families have a positive impact on society, the expert committee states that their resources should be cherished (BMFSFJ 2006: 247). This is even truer against the background of major societal changes (e.g. globalization, the developing of a knowledge society) which makes necessary a reconsideration of family policy instruments. The experts criticize that currently existing instruments do not fit different familial situations but concentrate on a traditional ideal of family and marriage. As a whole, family policy activities do not seem to be coherent to the experts (BMFSFJ 2006: 57). In terms of sustainability, the Seventh Family Report goes further than the other two expert's reports , not only describing what sustainability (should) mean(s) or defining its instruments, but also stating what changes are necessary on a structural and on an actor-centered level in order to reach sustainability in family policy (BMFSFJ 2006: 280ff.). However, it stays nebulous: a really consistent definition of what sustainability in family policy means is not given in the report. In some parts, the experts' reasoning is very concrete—e.g. when they

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[13] Family Reports have been established since 1965 (BMFSFJ 2006: XXIII). Written by experts and edited by the family ministry, they are facing an increasing scientification (Kaufmann 2007: 380). What is new about the Seventh Family Report is the combination of macro and micro sociological perspectives as well as the integration of international comparisons (Huinink 2007: 391). In addition, for the first time, societal actors were integrated into the process of elaboration.

state that child poverty, traditional role models and the bread-winner model do not contribute to sustainability (BMFSFJ 2006: 246ff.)—in some parts it is more or less nebulous—e.g. when they state that a sustainable family policy should be reliable (BMFSFJ 2006: 261). Additionally, when it comes to the important question of how sustainability could be reached, they refer to measures that have already been mentioned by Bertram et al. (BMFSFJ 2005). In fact, it seems that the reports' focus concerning sustainability differs according to the respective author of each passage. This impression is reinforced by an interviewee (member of the committee), stating that it was not the purpose of the Report to find a consistent definition of sustainability (W3) [14].

Analyzing the interviews under the same aspects shows that there is a very heterogeneous general understanding of sustainability, too. Basically, sustainability is said to be a synonym for a good working style in the policy making process (B2; L2) including a long term perspective (B1; B5; L2; K1; K5) and reliability (B3) while reaching the intended effects (B1; B5; B2), for example by evaluating measures (B4). Furthermore, sustainable family policy should consider the lack of (human) resources (B3) as well families' social environment (L1) and consist of a life-long support for families (B3). Furthermore, financial means are picked out as a central theme by the interviewees in the context of sustainability. Some of them state that there should be a decreasing debt rate (B4; L1) and less project-related financing (in contrast to long term financing; L1) respectively a financial situation which does not depend on political decisions (K1). So for some of the interviewees, sufficient financial means are a precondition to sustainability (B1) but some of them state that since there is less money, networking and innovative processes are developing in a better way. Interestingly, one of them considers this lack of money to foster cooperation between actors which he sees to be a precondition to sustainability (L2). The goals of sustaina-

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[14] 'W3' is used as acronym for *Wissenschaft* (science), third interview conducted in this actor group. In the following, *B* stands for *Bund* (central state level), *L* stands for *Land* (federal state level) and *K* for *Kommune* (local level). All in all, eighteen interviews were conducted: three in the group *W*, six in the group *B*, four in the group *L* and five in the group *K*.

bility mentioned go from an increasing fertility (B3; L1) and a decreasing poverty rate (B3) to an increasing satisfaction rate of families (L1). Interviewees state that these goals could be attained by strengthening family policy and social networks (L1; L2), by implementing necessary reforms (B6) as well as by applying a mix of instruments, consisting of time policy, infrastructural support and financial transfers (B3). All in all, it is interesting to see that some of the interviewees have a rather precise understanding of sustainability—most of the times referring to the original environmental concept (L1; B2; B3; K5), some of them referring to (one of) the three expert's reports mentioned above (e.g. B3)—whereas some of them state that sustainability in family policy is just a buzzword to them (B3; L1; K5).

2.2 Integrative and normative aspects in actors' understanding of sustainability

This overview has shown what actors generally understand by 'sustainable family policy'. However, as research states, sustainability should include several dimensions, e.g. an ecological, an economic and a social one (*integrative* aspect of sustainability) and consider normative criteria, e.g. intra- and intergenerational justice, persistence of the system and preservation of life's quality (*normative* aspect of sustainability). Table 1 gives examples of how these dimensions and normative criteria may be understood in the context of family policy.

Table 1: Concerning its normative and integrative aspects, sustainability in family policy may be understood as for example**…**

		Integrative Aspects	
	ecological dimension	economic dimension	social dimension
intra- and inter-gene-rational justice	…considering people's different needs when influencing their living environment	…redistributing financial means between families and childless people/between the generations	…supporting solidarity within and between the generations
persistence of the system	…giving infra-structural support	…supporting families' functions of (re)production and consumption	…supporting the dissemination of societal values and norms
preservation of life's quality	…arranging people's living environment in a family-friendly way	…insuring humane living conditions, e.g. by giving financial support	…giving families enough resources to cherish their social networks

(Left vertical label: Normative Aspects)

Source: Own listing

When it comes to the *integrative* aspect of sustainability, there is a lack of complexity mainly in the expertise of Rürup and Gruescu (BMFSFJ 2003) that refers exclusively to *economic* aspects of sustainability. Although this emphasis is put into perspective at the end of the expertise (BMFSFJ 2003: 51), the other two dimensions are not mentioned. As already explained, the definition given by Bertram et al. (BMFSFJ 2005) is already a little more differentiated. However, only in the Seventh Family Report (BMFSFJ 2006), all three dimensions are mentioned. For example, the expert committee emphasizes that *ecological* factors like environmental pollution have an impact on the families' quality of life (BMFSFJ 2006: 160). Also, it states that on a *socio-ecological* level, relations to parents and to a wider social network are important for a child's development (BMFSFJ 2006: 186). Against this background, the committee asks for a reform of urban development policy which overcomes the segregation of private and professional life that had been established as an answer to industrialization in the 19th century (BMFSFJ 2006: 191).

Furthermore, the experts refer to a *socio-ecological* model (Bronfenbrenner 1981) when referring to sustainability in family policy (BMFSFJ 2006: 262). On an *economic* level, they state that families have a positive impact on society and thus may not be disadvantaged financially (BMFSFJ 2006: 262).

Some of the interviewees also consider ecological, economic and social aspects of sustainability, although none of them refers to all three of them in the same time. One interviewee emphasizes that on an *economic* level, money could be saved on the long run when investing into family policy-related areas (B1). Another one makes a link between family policy and the demand for employment (L1). B3 emphasizes that sustainable family policy means to financially support families. In addition, a decreasing dept rate (B4; L1) and less project-related financing (L1) are referred to as being indicators for sustainability in family policy. Concerning the *social* dimension, one of the interviewees states that support is needed in the area of social benefits (B1). For another one, sustainability in family policy also means that family poverty rates decrease (B3). On an *ecological* level, according to one interviewee, a family friendly environment, including for instance playgrounds, should be part of a sustainable policy (L1).

Tab. 2: Expert's reports and actors referring to the dimensions of sustainability

	ecological dimension	economic dimension	social dimension
BMFSFJ 2003	No	Yes	No
BMFSFJ 2005	No	Yes	Yes
BMFSFJ 2006	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interviews	L1	B1; B3; B4; L1	B1; B3

Source: Own listing

To put it in a nutshell, none of the interviewees refers to all three dimensions of sustainability. As table 2 shows, the Seventh Family Report is the only text relating to an ecological, an economic as well as to a social dimension. In addition, it is obvious that both expert's reports and interviews predominantly refer to economic aspects when it comes to the question of sustainability

in family policy. In contrast to that, as table 2 shows, the ecological dimension is underrepresented.

Concerning normative criteria of sustainability (namely intra- and intergenerational justice, preservation of quality of life and persistence of the system), most of the times at least one of them is included in the understanding of sustainability in family policy. However, the expertise of Rürup and Gruescu (BMFSFJ 2003) does only refer to the question of survival of the welfare system (endangered by demographic changes). In addition to that, Bertram et al. put an emphasis on generational justice (BMFSFJ 2005: 6ff.). Also the Seventh Family Report speaks of intra- and intergenerational justice in the context of sustainability (BMFSFJ 2006: 92, 105ff.), e.g. when dealing with the question of care or heritage (BMFSFJ 2006: 142f., 147ff.). As well, the committee states that a better quality of life can be reached when an efficient time policy (as part of sustainability) is applied (BMFSFJ 2006: 210).

Also in the interviews, intra- and intergenerational justice is referred to as important topic when it comes to sustainability. One interviewee for example stated that family policy measures (like parental benefit or married couples tax splitting) could cause intragenerational injustice (B1). The same one also emphasized that in terms of intra- and intergenerational justice, it is important to maintain the social security system (B1). Another one underlined that a decreasing poverty rate is an indicator of sustainability of family policy measures (B3). In addition, L1 stated that multi-generational living concepts could be the right answer when it comes to the question of intergenerational justice. Concerning the preservation of quality of life, two of the interviewees underlined that political measures making the realization of desires for children easier are important (B1; B3). Another interviewee considers that an increasing satisfaction rate of families is important in terms of sustainability (L1). B1 stated that in the context of quality of life, it is important not only to consider (potential) future families but problems and needs of already existing ones, e.g. by investing in infrastructures rather than in financial support. The aspect of persistence of the system is mentioned in the context of demographic changes, requiring e.g. a higher

fertility rate (B2; B3; L1). Three interviewees stated that to their mind, this higher fertility rate could be realized when making efforts in other policy fields, e.g. in labor policy (B1; B2; L1). Also, B3 emphasizes that if we want e.g. the social security system to last, family policy must include demographic aspects.

Tab. 3: Expert's reports and actors referring to the normative criteria of sustainability

	intra- and inter-generational justice	preservation of life's quality	persistence of the system
BMFSFJ 2003	No	No	Yes
BMFSFJ 2005	Yes	No	Yes
BMFSFJ 2006	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interviews	B1; B3; L1	B1; B3; L1	B1; B2; B3; L1

Source: Own listing

Table 3 shows that there are some references made to the normative criteria of sustainability. As we can see, there is just one single expertise that refers to all three of them: the Seventh Family Report. However, this one is all-embracing but not coherent in its definition of sustainability (see above). It seems as if the simple fact that it measures 296 pages and that eight experts worked on it for two and a half years necessarily makes that all the important elements are covered. In contrast to the expert's reports, three of the interviewees referred to all three normative aspects of sustainability. However —as for the dimensions of sustainability (see table 2)—most of the interviewed person did not refer to one single normative criterion of sustainability and are therefore not listed in the table.

It is interesting to see that the complexity in the understanding of sustainability seems to decrease with a decreasing federal level: Most of the actors coming from the highest federal level (*Bund*) refer to aspects identified in sustainability research, i.e. to dimensions and normative criteria, when referring to the concept of sustainability. Their comparatively complex understanding of sustainability is visualized in table 2 and 3. In contrast, actors coming from the federal states (*Länder*) are less present in the tables. Last but not least, interviewees coming from the local lev-

el (*Kommune*) cannot be found in the tables at all. As actors coming from the federal level seem to deal more with sustainability, it can be assumed that the concept is more important to them than to local actors. However, this very heterogeneous understanding of sustainability in German family policy does not fit with the pretended relevance of sustainability-related questions put forward in sustainability discourse. This impression is reinforced when taking a look at the participative aspect of sustainability in German family policy.

3   Sustainability in German family politics

3.1 Recent changes in German family politics

Recent changes in German family politics were mainly initiated by a changing understanding of family interests. Until the end of the 1960s, they were considered to be an individual matter in which political actors should not intervene. As a consequence and contrary to other policy fields, an arena in which political interests could be articulated and discussed did not come up for a long time in German family politics (Gerlach 2009: 92). However, normative argumentation—represented amongst others by low congruence between parties as well as between relevant interest groups—lost its importance from the 1970s on. In the 1980s and 1990s, several Federal Constitutional Court's rulings made that family work was bit by bit recognized in the social security system (Gerlach 2000). Today, family issues are no longer considered to be a private matter alone. Against the background of societal changes, resulting in a high old-age dependency ratio, family policy actors now stress the importance of families for socioeconomic development (Gerlach 2009: 97; also see e.g. BMFSFJ 2006).

On a supranational level, the European Union expanded its influence on national family policies in the last years, despite of its lack of formal competences in this field. Also on a non-legislative level, it intervenes in national family policies (Ahrens 2008). In addition, the EU engages in research on family policy-

related questions: For example, under the Seventh Framework Programme, the Commission funds the so called Social Platform on Research for Families and Family Policies which brings together family policy researchers "with at least 40 different stakeholder representatives, such as family associations, policymakers or social partners" (European Commission 2009). The platform aims at elaborating a research agenda, considering key policy questions and identifying research deficits. This commitment of the EU may result in an even stronger engagement in the future.

Also on national administrative level, there have been changes. Reforms concerning the welfare system as a whole (e.g. the Agenda 2010) have been elaborated at the turn of the new millennium, parallel to the coming up of sustainability discourse in family policy. Within this process, responsibilities—mainly on a communicative[15] level though—have been transferred to new actor constellations, e.g. to societal actors reassembled in the Alliance for the Family (*Allianz für die Familie*)[16] or in the Local Alliances for the Family (*Lokale Bündnisse für Familie*)[17]. At the same time, the federal ministry exceeded its formal competences respectively avoided constitutional regulations at some points, e.g. concerning the expansion of childcare facilities.[18] As a con-

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[15] In contrast to financial transfer and jurisdictional prescriptions—all three of them traditional instruments of family policies (Gerlach 20010: 141).

[16] The Alliance for the Family (*Allianz für die Familie*) has been initiated in 2003 by Bertelsmann Foundation and by the Federal Family Ministry. It consolidates activities concerning the reconciliation of work and family life realized by economic and societal actors. All in all, the Alliance aims at reaching changes in mindsets by disseminating examples of best practices (for further details see www.work-life.at/pdf/wlb/0300-GrundPapAllianzFam.pdf).

[17] Set up in 2004 by the Federal Family Ministry and co-financed by the European Social Fund, this initiative aims at bringing together actors that affect families' lives on a local level (for further details see http://lokale-buendnisse-fuer-familie.de/).

[18] The decision that childcare facilities should be expanded was taken on central state level, although federal states and local level are competent in this field. In 2007, the federal government decided to financially support the federal states and the local level in the expansion of childcare facili-

sequence, federal states and local authorities had to cede some of their influence to the central state.

Generally, family policy-related issues seem to have gained importance in electoral processes: Poll results are said to have had an influence on the commitment of parties to family policy-related questions under former chancellor Gerhard Schröder (B3). Traditionally, the relation between Social and Christian Democrats has been marked by important differences in their understanding of family and family policy with the Christian Democrats concentrating on the family as an institution and the Social Democrats supporting individual members of the family. The ideologization resulting from these different points of view began to decrease already in the 1980s, although it could be observed until well into the 1990s (Gerlach 2006: 93). However, since the turn of the new millennium, strong ideological differences seem to only show up in rare cases (Gerlach 2010: 156ff.), although prevailing shortly before elections (Ahrens and Blum 2009: 6). Thus, party congruence concerning family policy matters is currently on a very high level. However, a better standing for family policies as a whole makes that parties—following rather vote and office-seeking than policy-seeking motives (Ahrens andBlum 2009)—have to deal with family policy-related topics if they want to win elections.

In contrast, the Constitutional Court is not constrained by electoral motives and thus seems to follow rather policy-seeking ones. This is, amongst others, due to the fact that its work con-

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ties (Deutscher Bundestag 2007). All in all, the central state engages with four billion Euros. The relevant bill that has been passed in 2008 (*Kinderförderungsgesetz*) changes a bill on financial compensation (*Finanzausgleichsgesetz*) between central state and federal states. However, the *Länder* are not constrained to use the money for the extension of childcare facilities. Akin to the federal state's interference with questions of childcare facilities, the federal government avoided constitutional regulations when it decided to launch the initiative Local Alliances for the Family: According to the Constitutional Law, the federal state can only affect the local level via the federal states. However, interference is possible if the local level's participation happens on a voluntary base only. By resorting to this exception, the federal government managed to implement its initiative on the local level.

centrates on the examination of constitutional requirements (Ahrens and Blum 2009). In the 1990s, it has argued with several rulings for a better representation of families' interests as demanded by the Basic Law (Gerlach 2000).[19] Thus, it has gained influence on the policy field, particularly in the 1990s, without expanding its formal competences though. Gerlach even considers the Court's rulings to be a major reason for changes in terms of interest articulation that occurred afterwards (Gerlach 2009: 90ff.).

Additional to these actors established by the Constitution, societal actors like interest groups (e.g. family associations) are also relevant in the policy making process. Generally, their influence seems to have increased since the International Year of the Family that had been proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1994 (Gerlach 2009: 96). In this period, interest groups have supported or initiated several plaints that led to important family policy-related rulings by the Constitutional Court. Additionally, parallel to the political parties, normative argumentation has lost importance for interest groups as well (Gerlach 2009: 96f.). However, their potential of enforcement remains low which is mainly due to diversification in family interests, leading to heterogeneity (Gerlach 2009: 104). On the contrary, as a special form of interest groups, social partners—namely labor unions and employers' associations, traditionally not associated to this policy field—surely have seen their influence increase in the context of a more economic argumentation in the policy field. It was mainly the employers' associations that pointed out the relation between changes in family lives (revealed by decreasing fertility rates amongst others) and their economic consequences, provoked by a shortage of skilled labor force (SP2[20]). This argumentation can be considered to be the basis for economic aspects in sustainability discourse. All in all, their importance in the legislative process seems to be high, compared to other interest

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[19] Currently, the ruling on the Hartz IV legislation in February 2010 marked the end of a nearly ten years lasting period in which the Court did hardly intervene in the policy field.

[20] 'SP2' stands for *Sozialpartner* (social partner), second interview conducted in this actor group.

groups (SP3). Also individual actors like companies or foundations can record an increasing importance.

3.2 Structural interdependencies and their influence on actors' cooperation

Additional to these changes on an actor-centered level, networks have been established, reassembling e.g. (local) politicians, social partners, interest groups and individual actors (e.g. Local Alliances for the Family, Federal Family Forum[21]). Following Bonoli (2003), it can be assumed that this process has been fostered by upcoming socioeconomic transformations and financial shortages which have generated new social risks (like single parenthood or career interruptions due to childbearing) that concern a highly heterogeneous group. As a large minority of the population is (potentially) affected by new social risks and as social programs covering new social risks are cheaper than programs covering old ones, politicians and employers tend to support them (Bonoli 2005: 441). Following Bonoli (2005: 443f.), this attitude to new social risks even facilitates the creation of new, unconventional networks. Changes in the federal ministry's strategy concerning the integration of actors can be seen in this context.[22]

Generally, the existence and increasing number of networks is frequently interpreted as success in terms of cooperation and said to be an indicator for sustainability (e.g. Ristau 2005: 22; BMFSFJ 2006a). At first glance, this political style fostering integration of actors indeed meets theoretical requirements of sustainability by taking into account its participative, bottom-up character (Renn et al. 2007: 74). But the quantity of networks or

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[21] The Federal Family Forum (*Bundesforum Familie)* consists of more than 100 actors, e.g. family associations, social partners or foundations. Financed by the Federal Family Ministry, it works project-related, dealing with topics like values, migration or media and their consequences for families (for further details see http://www.bundesforum-familie.de/).

[22] In terms of sustainability, both societal and federal cooperation are important. The following paragraph focuses on the latter. For details on the cooperation between societal and state actors, see Ahrens (2010).

network partners should not be the only indicator for this. The participative aspect of sustainability should also be understood as including qualitative aspects. As an example, the cooperation between actors coming from very different backgrounds (e.g. oppositional and governing parties) should be considered to be more important in terms of sustainability than the cooperation between actors having a very similar (e.g. partisan) background. Generally, also the quality of cooperation—judged by relevant actors—should be included in the participative aspect of sustainability. To sum up, it can be argued that quality of cooperation is at least as important as its quantity when it comes to the question of elaborating and implementing sustainability concepts.

Indeed, most of the interviewees refer to the question of cooperation. However, they emphasize that it is not always easy to realize. It can be assumed that this is because its quantity as well as its quality are—amongst others—influenced by structural interdependencies which seem to influence the interaction between actors: Scharpf et al. underline the fact that interdependencies between political structures of a multi-level system can cause problems when it comes to information processing or decision making (Scharpf et al. 1976: 55). Indeed, questions of interdependencies, information transfer and cooperation are also referred to in the interviews.[23] At first glance, interviewed actors[24] go in the same direction as sustainability researchers when they state that cooperation and the establishment of networks is important to them (e.g. L3). Some of them emphasize that strategic cooperation, bringing together actors with similar or different competences, could be beneficial for the policy field (e.g. L1; L3). Others stress the fact that cooperation is indispensable in order to strengthen the own possibility of gaining acceptance (e.g. B2). Also, cooperation is often related to financial aspects in

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[23] The three expert's reports are not taken into account in the following paragraphs since they are less application-orientated than the interviews.

[24] In order to answer this question of quality in actors' cooperation in the context of sustainability, I consider the results of the interviews concerning the category 'structural interdependencies', dealing with topics like federalism, opposition versus government and cooperation between family policy actors.

the interviews. Interestingly, one of the interviewees thinks that a lack of financial means can foster cooperation between actors as well as increase the quality of projects (L2). Despite of this general approval of the fact that cooperation is important, interviewees stress that reality is different. They emphasize that by complicating communication, structural interdependencies can restrain the quality of cooperation. As pointed out in the following, this problem can show up on a vertical level (e.g. concerning cooperation between central state and federal states), on a horizontal level (e.g. concerning cooperation between regional state ministries or between federal ministries) and on a hierarchical level (e.g. concerning cooperation between government and opposition). As this article follows an inductive approach, the following paragraphs refer to cooperation in different contexts and stages of the legislative process as they have been mentioned by the interviewees.

Concerning the vertical level, interviewees stress the fact that cooperation between local, federal state and central state level is important (e.g. B6). In fact, there are (formal and informal) meetings between federal state and central state level (L2), for example intra-federal-state conferences concerning topics like youth and family policy or social and labor policy that are accompanied by working groups consisting of central state and federal state representatives (L3). On a local level, some representatives from the Local Alliances for the Family are regularly invited by the federal state's ministry (K3).

However, cooperation on this level is not easy: One interviewee for example stated that to his mind, there are too many governing levels, messages and resources have to pass in order to reach the responsible persons (B4). Another one emphasized that it was not possible for the federal states to push through rules of conduct concerning their cooperation with the central state level (L3). One problem in this relation seems to be the fact that concepts that had been elaborated on federal state level are frequently taken over by the federal ministry, without considering regional differences though (L2; L3). On the other hand, the relation between central state and federal states is determined by concur-

rent legislation which makes that the *Länder* can put a veto on concepts coming from the central state level (L2).

Additionally, the federal levels' relation seems to be importantly shaped by financial aspects. In this perspective, one interviewee complained that "everyone just wants to implement his own concepts by using the others' money" (B6; own translation). Also, another interviewee criticizes that subsidies are sometimes not transferred to the level they were originally thought for (B4). Against this background, ideas coming from another level are often refused by the other ones (B6). This problem is even more serious when constitutional requirements are not respected by all the actors, as another interviewee emphasized. This has happened for example in the case in which the federal ministry interfered into the question of creating additional child care facilities—a field which normally belongs to the competences of the federal states (B5).

To put it in a nutshell, the central state level is accused of not involving the federal states in an adequate way. Unaffected the political background of their respective ministry, interviewees state that cooperation was stronger under Renate Schmidt (2002-2005) than under Ursula von der Leyen (2005-2009) (L2; L3). They emphasize that this political style can create problems of implementation when it comes to concrete measures (L2; L3). However, when they have the same political background, actors' cooperation seems to be easier: On an intra-partisan level, actors coming from central state and from federal state level meet on a regular base (e.g. L1; L4). But only in individual cases, inter-partisan cooperation between the two levels exists (B5). Most of the times, it remains difficult to cooperate, mainly prior to elections (L4). Concerning the cooperation between federal states and local authorities, partisan belonging respectively a high congruence between actors seems to play a major role as well. One interviewee indicated that quantity and quality of cooperation depended on the commitment of local actors as well as on the question if they are belonging to the same party as the government on federal state level (L2). Besides, interviews conducted on local level showed that the existence of unconventional networks—in this case the Local Alliances for the Family—is not a

guarantee for good cooperation between actors. It even does not guarantee cooperation at all (K3).

Regarding the horizontal type of cooperation, the same seems to be true for the relation between the federal states: There are regular meetings of federal states' representatives which provide a basis for their coordination and cooperation. As for the vertical type of cooperation, if governing parties are the same, good cooperation between representatives coming from the same level is probable. However, if majorities are different, cooperation is more problematic (L3; L4). Still, on a working level, cooperation between the federal states seems to be marked more by policy-seeking motives. One interviewee even indicated that cooperation between ministerial staff of different federal states sometimes is better than cooperation between a consultant and his minister (L2). This seems to be even truer for the local level on which actors seem to follow rather policy seeking motives (B1), so that cooperation between parties could be easier. However, as actors from the Local Alliances for the Family emphasize, cooperation between political and societal actors on the local level is not always easy (K2). Also on central state level, an exchange of arguments between members of different parties (as well as of governing and oppositional parties) can take place, but only in very rare cases arguments from another party are taken over (B1). In fact, there seems to be a sort of tension between strategy and content when it comes to cooperation: On the one hand, actors coming from the same level and having the same political background are said to cooperate with regard to content (L1; L3). On the other hand, inter-partisan cooperation in terms of content seems to only show up in very rare cases (B4). More often, cooperation seems to be a means to a strategic end and thus does not imperatively have something to do with considerations regarding content: According to one interviewee, oppositional parties tend to coordinate their voting behavior, but in general there are no agreements concerning content (B4). This behavior pattern seems to be a strategic one: If oppositional parties cooperate, it is easier for them to put pressure on the government (B4). In this perspective, cooperation on a horizontal level (e.g. between the federal states) can lead to a blockade on the vertical level (e.g. concern-

ing the relation of federal state and central state level) (L2). On a local level, cooperation can be problematic as well, unaffected political belongings: Due to a lack of time of their coordinators as well as to a lack of professionalism with regard to many voluntary actors, some Local Alliances for the Family seem to be unable to exchange information and foster cooperation. In one case, there is even no cooperation between two of these local networks existing in the same city (K3).

Also, the policy's cross sectional character and the administrative responsibility resulting from it can be considered to be a sort of horizontal interdependency: Many topics related to family policy are not decided on in the family committee of the Bundestag (B1) but e.g. in the committee on Labor and Social Affairs. Besides, measures concerning e.g. child poverty can not be dealt with by the Federal Family Ministry when they concern other policy fields like for example labor or integration policy (B3). However, these structures do not imperatively restrain cooperation as one interviewee stresses: Changing majorities can lead to changing ministerial responsibilities. As a consequence, actors from two different ministries possibly already have been colleagues in other ministerial constellations. This can have a positive impact on future cooperation between them (L3).

But how can cooperation be characterized from a hierarchical point of view? This question affects both vertical and horizontal types of cooperation since it refers to the relation between government and opposition.

Against the background of electoral processes, this relation is mostly seen as being a problematic one for it has been shown above that intra-partisan cooperation seems to be easier than inter-partisan one. This is true for both horizontal and vertical types of cooperation. Probably, this is because on an intra-partisan level, actors are more or less constrained to work together if they want to be successful in terms of elections. In contrast, governing parties and those coming from the opposition respectively two oppositional parties are not forced to do so. This is reflected by most of the interviewees' statements, emphasizing that cooperation within the party or between governing parties is rather good. So, if parties cooperate although they are not constrained to do

so, this is far more astonishing than cooperation between governing parties or intra-partisan cooperation. That is why in terms of sustainability, an emphasis should be put on this inter-partisan cooperation since the concept of sustainability aims at bringing together all relevant actors, unaffected their political belonging.

Generally, a look at the hierarchical aspect of cooperation shows that there is no official cooperation between the federal ministry (as part of the government) and the opposition (B4; B5). As a matter of principle, there seems to be a lack of information that concerns mainly oppositional parties. This is also true for the working level, except if there are private relations which are reluctantly made use of though (B4). Oppositional actors are informed about governmental actions on a formal way, e.g. by the State Secretary or by the press relations officer, the rest of the ministerial staff being ordered to avoid communication with the opposition (B6; B5). One interviewee even stated that he wishes for a sort of early-warning system that would allow parties to exchange information on a working level—even if this could be disadvantageous on a strategic level, mainly prior to elections (B4). Another one emphasized that this political style reminds him of a sort of cement wall between opposition and government (B6). Also on federal state level, oppositional parties are excluded from the flow of communication (e.g. L4), although in a less consistent way than on the central state level (B6).[25]

However, in some cases parties do cooperate. This can be for strategic reasons, e.g. when two oppositional parties want to veto a bill (L1). But in some rare cases, inter-partisan cooperation even takes place with regard to content (B6), even if this can be on a very informal level: According to an interviewee, there can be agreements between government and opposition saying that if the opposition wants a bill to pass, it has to deal with governmental refusal in the first place. Some time later, the government brings in the bill with minor changes and it passes (B1). Additionally, morally shaped topics (B1) and personal commitment

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[25] However, on federal state level, one interviewee stated that in the governments' advisory board, there is also a member coming from the opposition (L1).

can also lead to cooperation between government and opposition (B6; B4).

As the previous paragraphs show, there are cases of inter-partisan cooperation. However, they are rare, amongst others due to the fact that in many cases, communication between actors (mainly between oppositional and governing ones) which could lead to cooperation and open-ended processes is missing. Of course, the fact that opposition and government cooperate less closely than e.g. governing parties is inherent to the representative democratic system we live in. However, communication and cooperation between relevant actors should be fostered in the perspective of sustainability's theoretical requirements, i.e. its participative aspect.

4 Conclusions

Having developed in a way very contrary to what theoretical requirements in terms of sustainability might suggest, German family policy and politics were for a long time marked by ideologization and limited participation. However, socioeconomic transformation—caused by demographic changes amongst others—led to changes which are frequently subsumed under the term of 'sustainability'. Indeed, the analysis of three expert's reports as well as of 18 interviews showed that although it has evolved into a more sophisticated one over the years, the understanding of sustainability in family policy still remains very heterogeneous. Additionally, as the interviewees pointed out in the context of the participative aspect of sustainability, changes on an actor-centered level, e.g. concerning the quantity of new networks, did not imperatively come along with a good quality of cooperation. In fact, interviewees stressed the fact that the communication between actors can be complicated by structural interdependencies —a situation that can result in problems in terms of cooperation. In detail, this problem shows up on a vertical level (e.g. when central state and federal states cooperate) as well as on a horizontal level (e.g. when ministries on central state level cooperate) and can also be identified with regard to hierarchical aspects (e.g.

when government and opposition cooperate). All in all, although there is inter-partisan cooperation in some rare cases, vote- and office-seeking motives seem to prevail for partisan actors.[26] In general, the cooperation between family policy actors often seems to be loose, depending on party affiliation, congruence, individual efforts, on strategic considerations or on specific topics. To put it in a nutshell, the simple fact of having different federal levels and responsibilities is not the main problem. A lack of communication that is amongst others caused by structural interdependencies seems to be.

But why then are relevant actors frequently referring to the term of sustainability in the context of family policy? As already foreshadowed, sustainability discourse came up parallel to European and national incidences that affected the policy field. On EU-level, the Council adopted the Lisbon Strategy which, from a family policy point of view, attests that efforts should be made concerning the integration of women to the labor market as well as concerning "a new benchmark for improved childcare provision" (European Council 2000). On national level, the Agenda 2010, inaugurated in 2003, aimed at reforming the social security system in order to face demographic changes, amongst others (Bundesregierung 2003: 6). In both cases, experts and politicians had come to the conclusion that a reorganization of (parts of) the welfare system had become necessary.

Having remained small and insignificant with a "little number of employees, little money and little legislative competence", representing little influence (Ristau 2005: 21; own translation) in this period, the Federal Family Ministry has been affected by these decisions which could potentially have had resulted in cost containment measures. Against this background, family policy actors had to rethink their strategies for the future. A 'new' or so called 'sustainable' family policy was called out. It should not only establish strategic networks and integrate new actors like social partners (e.g. in the Alliance for the Family) but also in-

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[26] Of course, also policy-seeking motives could get in the way of a cooperation between government and opposition, e.g. in the case in which their policy goals differ considerably.

clude economic and demographic argumentation as well as an evaluation of family policy measures (Ristau 2005: 22; BMFSFJ 2003; BMFSFJ 2005; BMFSFJ 2006; CDU, CSU, SPD 2005: 116ff.; DIW 2002; DIW 2003).

As shown in the following, many of these aspects and measures summarized under the term of sustainability seem to go back to national or European concepts that do not imperatively have something to do with family policies in the first place. In other words: It seems that sustainability discourse in German family policy did not only start at the same time but that there is also a link between the upcoming of sustainability discourse and the developments described above with regard to content. For example, Ristau[27] (2005: 17) and Kohli (2007: 396) state that there is indeed a close link between changes in family policy and the Agenda 2010. As an example, Ristau emphasizes that the children's allowance (*Kinderzuschlag*), written down in the Agenda 2010 and inaugurated in 2005, follows the same principles (*Fördern und Fordern* i.e. giving support and making demands) than the Agenda as a whole (Ristau, 2005: 21). Besides, there are parallels between the reform of unemployment benefits and the new parental benefit, inaugurated in 2007: Both of them are income-related and paid only for a relatively short period (Ristau 2005: 22). Also, the expansion of childcare facilities—one main element of sustainability discourse—had already been mentioned in the Agenda 2010.

Against this background, Ostner states that the Seventh Family Report can be considered to be a political instrument that aims at building up and maintaining acceptance for changes (Ostner 2007: 385). In the same view, it could be argued that the expert's reports analyzed in Chapter 2 did not seriously aim at bringing in sustainability in German family policy and politics. On the con-

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[27] Ristau, head of department (family, welfare work and commitment) in the Federal Family Ministry under Renate Schmidt as well as under Ursula von der Leyen, has also been manager of former chancellor Schröder's electoral campaign in 2002. Appointed as head of the department in the family ministry after the elections to the Bundestag, Ristau probably has been marked by the considerations concerning the upcoming Agenda 2010.

trary, it could be assumed—as Ostner does for the Family Report —that they are, in parts, a sort of ex post legitimation of changes that had been induced by politicians before on national and on European level. From this point of view, sustainability discourse in German family policy would be rather a label for and a legitimation of previous decisions than standing for a substantially new policy style (as stated on discursive level). This could be particularly true for changes emerging against the background of the Agenda 2010 (which had in fact been influenced by the EU Lisbon-Strategy)—a major welfare reform that has been very contested.

However, it is not sure whether at that time (before the publication of the expert's reports discussed above), relevant actors already acted in a strategic and holistic manner that would include such a systematical proceeding. It rather seems to be that a strategic way of thinking came up after the Seventh Family Report, e.g. with the installation of the Center for family benefits (*Kompetenzzentrum für familienbezogene Leistungen*) which, for the first time, systematically listed all existing family policy measures.[28]

Against this background, it can be assumed that political actors simply made use of sustainability discourse in order to achieve their respective ideas and goals. And indeed, sustainability discourse seems to have supported changes. Together with e.g. financial straits which caused new forms of governance (e.g. a stronger participation of the civil society), it surely did help to win over new actors, create new networks and strengthen the policy field as a whole (Ristau 2005). Nonetheless, a closer look reveals that relevant actors' understanding of sustainability concerning its *normative* and *integrative* aspects as well as their judgment concerning the *participative* aspect of sustainability— i.e. actors' cooperation—do not fully take into account the scientific understanding of these three theoretical requirements. In this

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[28] Interestingly, the follow-up project of the Center for family benefits (*Kompetenzzentrum für familienbezogene Leistungen* 2006-2009) is called Center for sustainable family policy (*Kompetenzzentrum für nachhaltige Familienpolitik*).

view, further research activities should be concentrated on the elaboration of a policy-specific sustainability concept.

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