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Sustainable Development as a Political-Ethical Principle: Accountability, Public Power, and Civil Liberties

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Abstract

The paper aims to restructure the concept of sustainable development not only as a technical and environmental framework, but as a fundamental political-ethical principle in modern public governance. In the face of ecological, institutional, and power ethics crises, the author raises philosophical questions about the nature of public power, accountability, and civil liberties in the age of globalization. The research methodology is grounded in the foundations of human philosophy, social philosophy, and critical theory, and is informed by a systematic and interdisciplinary approach. Through dialectical analysis of pairs of categories, the paper examines the internal contradictions within institutional power and highlights the potential for creating a

democratic and ethical administrative model. The results show that sustainable development should be understood as an existential form of responsible freedom, where accountability is a priori for the birth of legitimate power. The relationship between the state and citizens cannot continue to be based on non-critical representation, but needs to be rebuilt in the spirit of dialogue and intergenerational justice. The conclusion affirms that sustainable development becomes a living reality only when power is reorganized based on ethics and substantive citizen participation, rather than being reduced to formal political slogans.

Keywords: Accountability, Sustainable Development, Public Power, Political Ethics, Civil Liberties

1. Introduction

In the modern context, a series of political and administrative fundamental issues arise for the concept of "sustainable development". In the face of ecological crises, institutional instability, and the erosion of power, sustainable development is no longer a purely technical and environmental goal. However, it has become a fundamental principle, requiring a radical reorientation in public policy thinking and state governance. The author criticizes the deviation of norms in the contemporary administrative system, where power is used to protect group interests, and the principles of democracy and justice are distorted through technocratic discourse and language manipulation. By connecting pairs of categories —such as necessity and freedom, means and purposes, products and subjects, and prices and values—the article constructs a new framework for thinking about accountability, not only as a tool of control but also as a moral-political condition for the emergence of legitimate power. Responsibility is no longer just a post-inspection matter, but an a priori ability to co-create public action, based on social feedback, intergenerational ethics, and the capacity for self-improvement of citizens. In particular, sustainable development is not only a goal, but also a form of political existentialism, where human freedom is defined as the ability to live responsibly in harmony with nature, society, and oneself.

2. Overview of the Research Situation

The idea of sustainable development has faced a long and winding road since it was first described in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) ^[26]. That report marked the beginning of a history of various perspectives on the interconnection of the environment, society, and money. Early studies primarily viewed sustainable development as a means to achieve harmony and balance. It was viewed as a way to accomplish three things simultaneously (Sachs, 1999) ^[21]. This involved making enough money, saving the environment, and getting people to work together. However, many people have pointed out problems with this approach. Dryzek (2005) ^[5] has examined how governments discuss the environment. He says the words used are often used to fool people. They also operate in a manner that prevents people from having a say. Escobar (1995) ^[7] and Ferguson

(1990)^[8] have argued that the concept of "development" has been employed in ways that are not equitable. They say it often uses methods that do not come from the people being changed. Studies on accountability (Dubnick & Frederickson, 2011)^[6] highlight the importance of public space and political ethics in structuring state power. In the field of governance, authors such as Peters (2010)^[18], Bevir (2013)^[2], and Fukuyama (2013)^[11] have thoroughly analyzed the institutional crisis and the limitations of the technocratic state model. Bäckstrand *et al.* (2010)^[1] and Meadowcroft (2007)^[16] propose a sustainable model of democracy, emphasizing the role of deliberation as the foundation for development policy. Recent studies on the legitimacy of power (Levi *et al.*, 2009)^[14] also contribute to understanding sustainable development as a complex political process, rather than as a purely technical goal. Methodologically, poststructural approaches (Dean, 2010)^[4], reflexive methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2001)^[9], and systems theory (Luhmann, 1995)^[15] have contributed to shedding light on the conflicting relationships between individuals, institutions, and policies. Some recent critical studies (Swyngedouw, 2009)^[24] warn that without democratic foundations and dialogue, sustainable development can be co-opted as a tool for legitimizing power. Overall, despite the richness of approaches and theories, current research lacks a philosophical and critical framework that redefines sustainable development as a form of political-ethical existentialism. This gap needs to be filled by integrating philosophical thinking with policy analysis and multidimensional models of accountability practices.

3. Research Methods

The paper is approached from the methodologies of human philosophy and social philosophy. It employs a critical philosophical approach combined with a systematic and interdisciplinary approach to restructure the concept of sustainable development from a political-ethical perspective. Based on theoretical analysis, the paper applies dialectics between pairs of categories (such as inevitability – freedom, means – purpose, possession – differentiation) to clarify the internal contradictions in the structure of public power, as well as to show the possibility of transitioning from a technocratic governance model to a moral political model. In addition, the article employs the method of inverting institutional logic, affirming the role of citizens as the subject, not as passive, but as the source of legitimate power. The data were analyzed mainly from published qualitative studies, international academic literature on case studies of institutional failure, and community initiatives. This research method not only enables the description of the actual situation, but also the elaboration of a critical body of knowledge to modify the concepts of responsibility, democracy, and sustainable development in the context of globalization.

4. Discussion

4.1 Sustainable development as a form of human existence: From biological inevitability to creative freedom

Sustainable development is not only a technical and political imperative but also a historic one, arising from the contradiction between existence and self-destruction, and between human possibilities and limitations in nature and society. This existential imperative calls for a fundamental

reorganization of how people organize their lives, not just in relation to nature as an exploited ecosystem, but also in relation to themselves as subjects of moral sense and creative capacity. When affirmed as a "fundamental human and civil right" (Onishchenko *et al.*, 2025, p. 17)^[31], sustainable development no longer stops at governance techniques; it becomes a principle, where humans are not just productive organisms, but entities with existential responsibilities to the world. However, to identify the true nature, it is necessary to reverse the prevailing way of thinking: instead of looking at sustainable development as a consequence of an environmental crisis (i.e., using the results to explain the causes), it is necessary to position it as the capacity of human freedom to create within the limits of natural inevitability. The reduction of sustainable development into the ecological dimension – although necessary – is an expression of one-sided thinking, as it separates the environment from humans and sees nature as an external object to be "protected", rather than as part of human nature through a history of interaction between instinct and creativity. Between needs and capabilities. Behind the claims of "fostering creativity and innovativeness" (Asif, S., & Shahbaz, M. S., 2025, p. 11)^[32] lies an unresolved contradiction: the transformation between biological instincts and human social and moral abilities. Sustainable development cannot be understood as merely satisfying current needs without destroying the ability to meet future needs. It must be the process of reshaping the relationship between means and purpose, between price and value, between production and consumption – that is, between material existence and the humanistic ideal. When turned into a slogan in political marketing, sustainable development falls into a state of alienation: purpose becomes the means, and truth is replaced by falsehood.

To recover the normative connotation of sustainable development, it is necessary to go beyond the three-pillar model, which usually acts as autonomous blocks; rather, it is necessary to create a network of linkages between the ethical, legal, and political dimensions as indispensable infrastructures in the reorganization of human life. Here, sustainable development is no longer a quantitative goal but an existential way of living – a way to live responsibly, freely, and with vision. Therefore, sustainable development needs to be redefined as a multidimensional norm principle, where ecological, social, economic, ethical, and legal factors are not parallel pillars but intertwined dimensions in the network of relationships between individuals and communities. Between the present and the future, between possibilities and needs. Intergenerational commitment is not just an abstract promise, but the result of a transformation in the political perception of time: from the selfish present to the responsible future; from capacity consumption to capacity production; and from pragmatic behavior to just behavior. From here, the standardization of sustainable development is no longer an arbitrary political-legal choice, but a turning point in the formation of the rule of law. Development, therefore, is not a directionless process, but a purposeful structure in which values are internalized through law and public administration. This reshapes the nature of state power as a space of moral responsibility, where "the code of ethics and principles of professionalism" (Yasmin *et al.*, 2024, p. 290)^[33] serves as the foundation for every decision.

In this context, administrative law cannot be a neutral technical tool. It must function as a form of moral interpretation – a space where decision-making capacity is balanced between efficiency, social legitimacy, and intergenerational accountability. At that time, the administration is no longer an expression of instrumental reason. However, it becomes an environment for the execution of justice in the most profound sense, where power is depersonalized, open, and transparent, guided by norms rather than local interests. However, the administrative model for sustainable development is facing an opposing model: technocratic conservatism, characterized by paternalism, greed, bureaucracy, short-termism, and social irresponsibility. Here, sustainable development is turned upside down into a linguistic cover, where language is used to conceal the manipulation of policy for the sake of personalizing power. This causes the community's legitimate needs – "distinct needs" (Camelia *et al.*, 2025, p. 37) ^[34] – to be replaced by the goal of profit and control.

The contradiction between these two models reflects the struggle between two conceptions of man and society: on the one hand, the old administrative system, where the product (public decision) was separated from the subject (the citizen); On the other side is the sustainable development model, where products and subjects are formed together in the space of dialogue and political cooperation. This is a clear manifestation of the contradiction between "owning others" and "owning oneself", between "economy" and "politics", between "job position" and "income", between "pure reason" and "historical reality". Therefore, sustainable development needs to be understood as a normative form of thinking, not just as a scientific description or policy frame, but as an existential way of being human in a globalized world. Every political action and every public decision has to be grounded in history, morality, ecology, and humanity. Only then will development transcend the form of consumption into the space of creativity and responsibility where freedom is not arbitrary, but the result of a transformation between necessity and will, between instinct and knowledge, between the individual and the community.

4.2 Accountability, public institutions and sustainable development: From institutional inevitability to civil liberties

Amid ecological crises, political instability, and the erosion of institutional trust, the redefinition of sustainable development in public management cannot be reduced to a legal or technocratic level. It demands intervention in the power structure itself, where the transition between means and purpose becomes the pivot. When public power, intended to serve the common good, is turned into a tool to maintain privilege and group interests, the institution's inevitability must be questioned to pave the way for political and moral freedom. Every administrative decision, from land planning to budget allocation, cannot be based only on short term performance indicators, but has to take into account the correlation between *the community's needs and capacities* over time and across intergenerational contexts it is here that the concept of sustainable development comes forth as a counterintuitive principle, questioning the artificial union between *economics and politics*, between *means and ends*, and calling for the reestablishment of the

balance between governance efficiency inevitability and social justice freedom.

From this foundation, accountability cannot be limited to a technical monitoring tool, but must be understood as a central ethical-political structure of public power in substantive democracy. The flexibility and variability in the content of this concept – often seen as a weakness – is a testament to its "dynamic" nature: where *language and power, will and knowledge* do not exist independently but co-create each other through interactions between the state and society. Semantically traced, "accountability" refers to the ability to be held accountable in a political space created by the public itself. It is not only the ability to act, but also the ability to take responsibility for the meaning of the action, in the eyes of others. Here, the subject is no longer the producer of the action; instead, the action itself, when publicized, criticized, and evaluated, becomes the source of the subject. Thus, accountability is the meeting point between the individual and the institution, between the instinct of power and the needs of the community, between *gratification and coercion*, between *truth and falsehood*. It does not stop at a legal requirement; rather, it is an *event* where the inevitability of power must give way to human freedom. It is in this structure that the saying "a just and equitable transition exists" (Smith, A. F., 2025, p. 119) ^[35] becomes the condition for establishing the legitimacy of the institution: the state exists only when it is constructed, maintained, and limited by social feedback.

The two-dimensional model of accountability – vertical and horizontal – can only be enforced if it is embedded in a transformative relationship between *the product and the subject*. In this model, the state is no longer the producer of decisions imposed on society but becomes a product continuously created through citizen criticism and social action. Vertical accountability, between powerful bodies, reflects the classical check-and-balance logic. However, it is horizontal accountability – between citizens and the state – where *political causes* are attributed to *moral outcomes*: the people are not just passive objects but the legitimate source of public power. In this sense, accountability is not only an institution of control but also the ability for citizens to become political actors through checks, dialogues, and protests. Freedom—as a possibility of choice and rejection—comes not from the kindness of power but from active citizen action, including voting, debating, demonstrating, striking, and even withdrawing from cooperation. Because "the state-led system is built based on a normative goal of becoming a greener society" (Kadfak *et al.*, 2024, p. 104) ^[36] – but that norm itself needs to be reshaped from *the voice of society*, not imposed as a *political price* listed by the ruling elite.

From this perspective, representative democracy cannot become a cover for institutional appropriation and the separation of powers, where anti-democratic representatives disguise themselves as the people to maintain privileges. Any identification between public power and personal interest – as if the state were *the private property of the powerful* – is an immoral reversal of the public norm. Here, accountability must be reestablished as a means for safeguarding human political identity, in which citizens are no longer absorbed into policy 'objects' but become coauthors of power. In other words, accountability is a place where *possession is transformed into a community, money is controlled by norms, ownership of others is replaced by*

ownership of oneself, and politics is no longer manipulated by monopolistic economics. In this space, the person and the community are not separated but share a place of both contradiction and solidarity, where *difference* makes sameness, and *recognizing difference* preserves it. ultimately, accountability is the inevitable conversion into freedom where power is no longer an inalienable privilege but becomes an obligation limited by justice. Only when this concept is placed within the multidimensional structure of sustainable development – with its long-term vision, intergenerational perspective, and complex social responsiveness – will public administration move away from being a tool of power rationalization to become a means of democratic realization. In other words, it is institutions, not individuals, that need to be monitored, questioned, and reinvented from a human foundation.

4.3 Political, civic, and public space responsibilities in restructuring sustainable development policies

Political passivity in the implementation of public policy cannot be tolerated – a phenomenon that is often disguised as "emergency" or "force majeure" situations. These manifestations, in fact, not only mask the absence of long-term planning, development vision, and moral responsibility of public institutions, but also become a political means to maintain the existing power structure. In particular, power is no longer a means of serving the community but transforms into a self-purpose, leading to a shift between public interest and group interests, and between legitimacy and political coercion. We need to reverse the relationship between public power and public interests: it is not the state that is the absolute subject with the authority to enact policies, but public policy is the product of an intersectoral dialogue process, including the participation of citizens, civil society, etc, Science, and market forces. Here, the need itself cannot be understood in terms of material scarcity alone, but rather the ability to co-create political reality, based on intellect, creativity, and intergenerational responsibility: "Promotes development-oriented policies that support productive activities, the creation of decent jobs, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation" (Zielinski, M., 2025, p. 9) ^[37].

The renaturalizing of the concept of ' public policy ' is not merely a matter of broadening the audience of participants, but one of deconstructing the modern state model as an institution with its authority imposed from on high. Instead, it must become a co-creative space in which each individual is simultaneously a beneficiary and a political creator. In it, citizenship is no longer simply an obligation to obey, but is redefined as a responsible, continuous, and directed capacity for political action. This model of public governance in this historical context no longer functions as an "executive apparatus" but has become a democratic innovation ecosystem, in which "sustainable development" is not only a goal, but a principle of organizing public action, which is the foundation for an "innovation ecosystem" (Shavkatov *et al.*, 2024, p. 15) ^[38]. On that basis, the concept of accountability also needs to be reversed and restructured. It cannot be limited to a mechanism for controlling existing power. However, it must be understood as a condition for the birth of legitimate power, as an intrinsic moral and political norm of all public action. If, in the past, accountability was based on a balance between representation and representation, it must now be extended to a bottom-up critical system where citizens can intervene,

construct, and challenge structures of representation that are no longer legitimate.

Although the current legal system has incorporated several support mechanisms for information disclosure, budget transparency, public ethics, and administrative litigation, it still essentially keeps citizens in a passive position as objects of the ' observation ' more than political action. Meanwhile, a sustainable democracy requires accountability through intersectoral dialogue and consistent activity, which are inseparable from the public sphere. Without critical language, without absolute transparency, and without meaningful dialogue, every indicator becomes a technocratic game rather than a moral standard. "*Financial independence*" (Xu *et al.*, 2024, p. 496) ^[39] would be an illusion if separated from the ability to co-create and respond. One principle must be reversed. Secrecy is the exception, not the rule. Every public act, if it cannot be traced, responded to, and understood, loses its political significance and becomes the possession of non-political power. Truth is then no longer the target of public speech, but rather the product of "structural falsehood" – where language is appropriated as a tool of manipulation rather than constructiveness.

Accountability, therefore, must be understood as a kind of "moral-political sensor", the ability to listen to the future in the present. Accountability cannot be limited to short-term results; It must include both the ability to replicate the capacity for action of society, institutions, and the environment. Here, accountability is a form of self-organization between dimensions: short-term and long-term, will and knowledge, needs and capabilities, production and regeneration, benefits and values, and development and conservation. Information is only politically valuable when it relates to action, process, and result, and allows citizens to respond, intervene, or refuse. Only then can information become a political truth, rather than the product of technocrat manipulation or the abuse of information. Without dialogue, without openness, there can be no democracy. Finally, sustainable development must become a guiding principle of public policy reflection to counteract the tendency to alienate means and purposes, profit and morality, possession and service, and economy and politics. "Money is a means of competition, while ethics is the goal of sustainability" (Quoc, N.A., Van Y., N., 2024, p. 4080) ^[40]. It is not just a slogan, but a principle of action: politics cannot be replaced by the market, just as life cannot be exchanged for price.

4.4 Accountability in Public Management: From Administrative Reaction to Intergenerational Political Ethics

Political concerns in public administration are no longer local or random phenomena – they have become permanent structures, repeated as an inevitability in many social contexts. Behaviors such as short-term electoral reactions, cronyism, manipulation of the concept of "public interest", or irresponsible recruitment are not only manifestations of inadequacy in implementation but also the result of deviations from the principles of institutional organization itself. Here, instinctive power is not removed but "legitimized", making the institution no longer a tool to serve the community but a means of self-sustaining and reproducing itself. The evaluation and revocation of erroneous administrative decisions – even those of

responsibility – are only "retroactive" and insufficient to create a sustainable political space. Control is not a substitute for creativity, nor can "positive money attitudes" (Manalo, A., 2025, p. 207) ^[41] arise from obligation. Instead, they must emerge from the transformation between need and ability, between will and knowledge, and between the instinct of possession and the capacity to share. Accountability, then, is not only a reaction to institutional failure but also an a priori capacity to steer public action in an intergenerational and interdisciplinary manner – where freedom does not deny inevitability but turns it into the capacity for community creation. Core of what has to be reconstituted is this: the ability to respond does not derive from social pressure but from the institution's political and ethical commitment to human dignity and to the future of society. Public management, as an ethical practice, cannot serve as an efficient apparatus; it must know what it is doing, how, and for whom. That is, it is necessary to shift from the technocratic model of purpose to a model of listening, dialogue, and co-creation with society. Public managers are no longer executive technicians, but creative intermediaries between social needs and capabilities, between policy production and the pursuit of justice. In this space, society not only needs to be heard but also has the right to evaluate, question, and reshape methods, outcomes, and exclusions from the policy selection process. Accountability involves not only the result but also the process, time, and possibilities for rejection, meaning it questions not only what was done but also what could have been.

Any public action that ignores multidimensional sustainability – through action or silence – risks severing the relationship between purpose and means, between value and price, between commitment and execution. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to dispel the illusion that all decisions can be made through ideal public discussion. What is more necessary is to establish flexible standards—sufficiently objective and sufficiently human—so that public acts operate within the confines of life's needs, without turning "sustainable development" into a non-political, abstract imperative. When organized with knowledge, accountability fosters political trust – not blind trust, but a belief that is informed. When people understand the workings of the state and know that their voices are valid, trust ceases to be just an emotion and becomes a way to limit power legally. In that space, accountability is not a form of coercion but a social resonance box, where public groups are not only heard but also co-constructed into the political reality. Here, short-term behaviors and long-term consequences, as well as political will and moral implications, are interconnected within the same action structure.

The increasing complexity of public life – with its overlapping conflicts between societies, "economic diversification" (Brika *et al.*, 2025, p. 10) ^[42], lifestyles, and ecological crises – is posing an urgent need for a model of restructuring public politics that goes beyond reactive thinking. In that perspective, the new public service is not simply a technical reform, but a foundation for a new political ethic, in which the state not only 'governs well' but unleashes the creative capacity of citizens as self-owners. That is why sustainability in public management is inextricably linked to political transformation, in which each decision is no longer the result of instrumental reason or 'price' calculations, but rather the sum of interdisciplinary

knowledge, intergenerational time and real needs. Traditional tools for measuring costs and benefits have become inadequate in the face of life's complex nature. Instead, a creative, ethically charged act directed toward the community is needed, where responsibility is no longer a compulsory obligation but the highest form of freedom.

In that perspective, accountability can become the foundation for a self-regulating and self-improving public sphere, as it is nurtured by transparency, feedback, and the capacity for mutual learning. At that time, policy is no longer a temporary response of the government, but a long-term strategy of the state, where the future is integrated into the present as an attractive and innovative possibility. Social control, in the sustainable democratic citizenship model, is no longer an act of resistance, but a creation of community politics, where norms, performance, and effectiveness are evaluated in terms of intergenerational justice and human integrity to "address systemic inequities and promote substantive justice" (Gulo *et al.*, 2025, p. 299) ^[43]. However, this transformation cannot be achieved in a short period of time or by a top-down decision. This is a long journey where consistency rather than speed rules the day, and where any shortcuts are a betrayal of principle. However, one thing is sure: when shaped by the principle of sustainable development, accountability is no longer a form of technocracy, but a living democracy that should be defended as a civilized value of a free society.

5. Results

The results of the study suggest that sustainable development cannot continue to be understood as a neutral technical framework or a purely policy objective. Instead, it needs to be restructured as a fundamental political-ethical principle, where public power serves not as a means of protecting group interests but as an existential space of justice, accountability, and social creativity. Accountability – when understood as an a priori structure rather than just a post-inspection tool – becomes a condition for the birth of legitimate power. The relationship between the state and its citizens, as well as between policy and the community, cannot continue to be based on a non-critical representation model; it needs to be rebuilt in the spirit of dialogue, transparency, and intergenerational cooperation. In particular, the analysis results highlight the need to reverse the pairs of dominance-submission, efficiency-ethics, and possession-serve, thereby creating a new institutional paradigm that is not only operationally efficient but also justifiable in terms of value and sustainability over historical time.

6. Conclusion

The article clarifies that sustainable development is not just a policy goal or a governance framework, but must be redefined as a fundamental political ethical principle, where public power is built from the bottom up through dialogue, responsibility and social feedback. The focus is not on administrative performance, but on the co-creation between the state and citizens in the public sphere – where political action is tied to intergenerational ethics and collective wisdom. Accountability, in this context, is no longer a tool of technocratic oversight, but a condition for the emergence of legitimate power, enabling citizens to become subjects of political action, rather than merely passive beneficiaries of public decision making. Sustainable development, therefore,

is the existential form of responsible freedom – a way of organizing social life that transcends the separation between means and purpose, between benefits and justice. The most important conclusion is that sustainable development will be a reality, rather than a slogan, only when public power is restructured based on political ethics and with the substantive participation of citizens. This is not just an academic challenge, but a vital imperative for every institution faced with a crisis of faith, morality, and the future.

7. Values, limitations, and continuation of research

The paper presents a philosophical and critical approach to rethink the concept of sustainable development, widening the theoretical basis of public management in the direction of ethical democracy and intergenerational responsibility. By bridging the gap between philosophical categories and policy analysis, this paper aims to build an interdisciplinary framework of thought that surpasses the limitations of contemporary technocracy. Nonetheless, because the article is primarily focused on theoretical and conceptual critique, it has yet to explore quantitative surveys or specific analyses of practical cases to exemplify its arguments. This limitation opens up the next direction of research: a field survey of institutional models that have been implementing the principle of multidimensional accountability, thereby examining the ability to transform power, justice, and sustainable development in specific social contexts.

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