

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – THE PROMISE OF AN ALTERNATIVE VS THE REALITY OF ITS GLOBAL AND LOCAL NEOLIBERALIZATION

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*The article interrogates sustainable development as the dominant presumably alternative paradigm of development and functioning of societies that declaratively transcends the ecological and societal limits of the older models. It argues that the dominant understanding of sustainable development that promotes limited incremental changes to the capitalist development model can best be understood as the result of its gradual systematic co-optation and integration into the dominant neoliberal governmentality at the global and local levels. By analysing the gradual neoliberalization of sustainable development in the global and the Slovenian context it argues that these contexts are interdependent concerning the consolidation and resilience of the neoliberal vision of sustainable development in the face of multiple and multidimensional economic and environmental crises. By specifically focusing on the case of Slovenia it demonstrates and reflects on the crucial role of actors that formally and informally represent the public interest such as the state and the organized civil society in re-legitimizing and upholding the neoliberal vision(s) of sustainable development in the context of crises.*

**Key words:** sustainable development; neoliberalism; civil society; NGOs; governmentality.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The intensification of climate change, the proliferation of ecological crises and the global rise in awareness of the man-made nature of these crises since at least the 1970s resulted in the general proliferation and popularization of alternative developmental visions. There was a growing realisation among developed and developing countries that the dominant development model would lead to a severe ecological crisis that if not addressed could potentially

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precipitate the destruction of human societies as we know them (see Mebratu 1998). Hence, from the 1980s onwards a novel concept of development namely sustainable development gradually established itself as the foundation for addressing environmental and societal challenges of development (Mitcham 1995). In the last 30 years it has become a policy goal of international organizations (e.g. the UNO), regional organizations (e.g. the EU), national governments, transnational corporations, national companies, local communities and international, national and regional non-governmental organizations (Baker 2006). This has been reaffirmed in the latest UN Climate Change Conference held in November 2017. Consequently, how sustainable development was and is conceptualized has had and has great consequences for imagining and enacting transformations of the dominant capitalist model of development predicated on notions of continuous economic growth, continuous increase of consumption and of the continuous use of natural resources (see Doyle 1998; Mebratu 1998; Mitcham 1995). Initially, sustainable development was intentionally vaguely defined as its primary purpose was to enable reaching a broad global consensus among various actors on the existential need to transcend the existing model of development (Baker 2006). The UN report *Our common future* (1987) defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs and aspirations of the present generation without destroying the resources needed for future generations to meet their needs (WCED 1987, 54)”. Along with the generational solidarity it also articulated solidarity among the developed and developing countries. The novel developmental model was intended to fulfil the basic needs of the poorest global populations. Simultaneously, it was based on the notion of a necessary transformation of consumption patterns in the developed countries based on sustainable use of resources as these were deemed limited. Although it stressed the role of technological innovation it also focused on the need of a broader social, economic and cultural transformation locally and globally by establishing the three dimensions of development (environment, society and economy) as equally important (see WCED 1987). Hence, it offered a somewhat alternative vision of development that had the potential to lead to more progressive visions (Lewis 2000; Mitcham 1995).

But despite the increasing severeness of the environmental crisis<sup>2</sup> that is acknowledge by majority of central socio-economic and political actors at the local, national and global levels and the acceptance of the need for sustainable development its dominant conceptualizations do not represent a substantial departure from the existing model of development (Mitcham 1995; Wanner 2015). It seems that the contemporary predominant understandings of sustainable development lack even the limited alternative potential of the *Our common future* definition as they argue for a combination of technological innovations and full technological substitution, novel competitive markets and market solutions to environmental issues, voluntary commitments to reforms and complete silence on the issue of intra and inter-generational solidarity and the limits to economic growth (Lloro-Bidart 2017; Véron 2010; UN 2012). It also seems that the popularization, institutionalization and common societal acceptance of understandings of sustainable development that argue for a radical structural transformation of the existing capitalist developmental model face even bigger obstacles than in the past as not even the recent global

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<sup>2</sup> An ever-growing corpus of contemporary research (see Barnosky et al. 2012; Steffen et al. 2015) demonstrates that the current trends of natural resource use will undermine the “carrying capacity” of the environment and/or are already crossing “planetary thresholds” (e.g. biodiversity).

economic crisis could alter the dominant developmental vision locally or globally (Chakravartty and Schiller 2011). While the need to preserve the dominant developmental vision is understandable from the position of the corporate interests it is less understandable why actors such as governments and major (environmental) NGOs that *prima facie* represent the public interest are not capable to articulate and popularize a vision of development entailing substantial structural not incremental changes to the existing model of development.

In the following article we will argue that the present situation concerning the dominant discourses and policies of sustainable development that promote limited incremental changes to the dominant capitalist development model can best be understood as the result of the gradual but systematic co-optation and integration of sustainable development into the dominant *neoliberal governmentality* (Foucault 2008), a specific contemporary permutation of the capitalist socio-economic and political systems or regime of government, at the global and the local level. Although some studies (Mitcham 1995; Baker 2006) already at least partially address the global or local dimensions of the history of neoliberalization of sustainable development and the general unsustainable nature of neoliberal governmentality and its development visions there are some crucial lacunas in these studies that we wish to address. Firstly, there is a lack of research that would analyse the interconnectedness of the global and the specific national contexts concerning the neoliberalization of sustainable development, despite several scholars (Bakker 2015; Nelson 2015) arguing that the various processes of neoliberalization cannot be understood without considering the “actually existing neoliberalism” in specific local contexts that are necessary for neoliberalism’s persistence. In this context, we will analyse the global and the Slovenian context concerning the gradual establishment and consolidation of a neoliberal vision of sustainable development. We will argue that the global and the Slovenian context are interdependent concerning the consolidation of the neoliberal vision of sustainable development. Secondly, there is a lack of research that would specifically focus on the resilience of the neoliberal vision of sustainable development and the neoliberal governmentality in the face of multiple and multidimensional economic and environmental crises. In this context, we will specifically focus on the role of actors that formally and informally represent the public interest such as the state and the organized civil society (e.g. NGOs). We will argue that their role is crucial, but under-researched, in establishing, legitimizing and upholding the neoliberal vision(s) and policies of sustainable development and the wider neoliberal governmentality in the context of multidimensional economic and environmental crisis. In order to demonstrate the central role of these actors and the resilience of the neoliberal vision of sustainable development and the neoliberal governmentality, we will focus on the case of Slovenia. This will enable us to argue that even in the national contexts where the neoliberal governmentality and specifically its vision of sustainable development are perceived as non-hegemonic and limited and where neoliberal reforms were not implemented in a radical manner (Lorenčič 2012), the neoliberal governmentality and its vision of sustainable development has colonized the thoughts and activities of (almost) all relevant socio-political actors that represent the public interest. We will argue that this was and is possible due to the specific nature of neoliberal governmentality that is capable to integrate and deradicalize most of its oppositional actors and discourses by systematically and systemically establishing and nurturing a common hegemonic problematization in the sense of a common way of perceiving

environmental and other issues, their causes and the range of intelligible solutions or/and general visions of future development. As we will argue actors representing the public interests, especially the organised civil society are structurally forced and subtly nudged to adopt discourse and enact activities that are intelligible and acceptable in the context of the dominant neoliberal vision of sustainable development.

## **2 NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENTALITY, ITS GENERAL PROBLEMATIZATION AND ITS RESILIENCE**

In order to proceed with the analysis of the gradual historical co-optation and integration of sustainable development into a neoliberal vision of development and in order to grasp the present situation concerning the lack of visible and popular developmental visions that would transcend the neoliberal capitalist development model, we must firstly address what we mean by neoliberalism and why the concept is analytically useful. Despite reservations of scholars (e.g. Dean 2014) regarding the analytical usefulness of neoliberalism and its problematic political use as an instrument of discrediting opposite political positions, we will strive to demonstrate that the concept can be analytically quite potent in critically interrogating the contemporary socio-economic and political context at the global and local level, its dominant sustainable development vision and the lack of opposition to it. We will understand neoliberalism as a general governmentality, a general form of government that is based on specific problematizations and utilizes specific discourses, practices and subjectivities and is predicated on specific knowledge, institutional structures and subjects/actors whose conduct it strives to regulate. It is a contemporary permutation of the capitalist socio-economic and political regime (Bröckling, Krasmann and Lemke 2011; Byrne 2017) that was gradually established as the response to the actual and perceived political, economic and environmental crises of the post-war welfare liberal governmentality (Harvey 2005; Phillips and Ilcan 2004). This was a culmination of a longer political project of certain neoliberal Western intellectuals (e.g. Hayek, Friedman, Becker, Eucken, Rüstow) and corporate elites that strived to delegitimize welfare liberalism and restructure society at the global and local levels according to a novel neoliberal vision of development based on a specific problematization of socio-political and socio-economic issues and relations (Harvey 2005; Mirowski and Plehwe 2016; Foucault 2008). This neoliberal restructuring (neoliberalisation) was and is carried out in the form of a large variety of (moderate or aggressive) policies formulated and continuously implemented at the national and global levels, which were and are mutually interconnected and interdependent (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 350). Although there is a substantial variance concerning the extent of neoliberalization in specific societies and specific historical and socio-political contexts there are some crucial commonalities. Firstly, there is a common goal of these restructurings namely the enhancement of conditions of capitalist accumulation in the face of actual and perceived multiple crises. Secondly, there is a set of common but differently implemented policies such as privatization of public goods and services, liberalization and deregulation of markets, and business friendly re-regulation, strategic re-scaling of governance mechanisms, self-responsibilization of individuals, general reduction of the socio-economic role of the state, balanced budgets etc. (Bakker 2010, Peck et al. 2010). The final, and concerning our analysis crucial, commonality is the shared general

problematization of socio-economic and socio-political relations, issues, their causes and possible solutions.

Problematization can be understood as a specific way of transforming selected set of issues into a general problem with a specific set of causes, which is followed by an articulation of possible solutions that establish novel objects and fields of governing and regulating, novel discourses and novel subjectivities (Foucault 2000). It is a historically specific way of establishing and responding to a socio-political, economic and ecological reality pertinent to a specific governmentality. It is established and consolidated through a prolonged struggle among political forces at the local and global level. Neoliberal problematization establishes the competitive market as the ruling principle of governing relationships not only in the economy, but in all other spheres of society. It imagines the properly established and secured competitive markets as being able to provide the best solutions to all societal, economic and ecological issues at the local, national and the global level. Markets can provide the best possible solutions as they are conceived as an ideal “information processing system” (cf. Hayek 1945) that convey the right information (in the form of prices) in real time to the people in need of it. They are considered as an evolving, adapting, nonlinear and chaotic entity that precludes any comprehensive understanding of it needed to appropriately plan economic processes. Hence, state planning in economic matters is deemed not only problematic but the root cause of all existing socio-economic and political issues. Novel markets are imagined to be the solution to problems perceivably caused by markets. These solutions are not a contradiction but follow the basic premises of neoliberalism that attributes market failure to outside interventions in the logic of the market that is infallible and always leads to economic growth (Foucault 2008; Harcourt 2011; Mirowski 2014). Growth is established as the fundamental economic but also political goal as it provides the general legitimacy of the system (Foucault 2008).

Simultaneously with the market the neoliberal problematization redefines the role of state as one of perpetual interventions as the conditions for competitive markets are not given but must be constructed. These interventions should not target the mechanisms of the free market. They should target the non-economic spheres of societies that are considered the “frame” for establishing and securing the logic of free market competition. Neoliberalism strives to remake and redeploy the state as the core agency that actively fabricates subjectivities, social relations and collective representations suited to making the fiction of the market real and consequential (Peck 2010). The neoliberal problematization considers an interventionist state as a need and as a danger that must be addressed by exploring and utilizing novel formats of techno-managerial governance to protect the free market from “irrational” political interference (Mirowski and Plehwe 2016, 435). Hence, it imagines the incorporation of civil society and the private sector in the novel policy processes and structures such as stakeholder democracy or deliberations as being crucial (Bäckstrand 2006; Véron 2010). But the inclusion of civil society and citizens in general is always limited as democracy is desirable only insofar as democratic institutions encourage the development of the free market and do not intervene in the existing relations of power and the existing economic and development model (Thorsen and Lie 2006). Individuals and communities are also redefined as entrepreneurial subjects, as self-governing and self-regulating entities that are free to make various informed rational choices in order to maximize wellbeing and manage private and community risks. Individuals are imagined as

responsible for their present and future wellbeing, whereby the future is perceived as being something whose risks can be calculated, predicted and responded in advance (Rose 1996).

The neoliberal problematization also specifically reimagines nature and the relationship between nature and socio-economic development. In contrast to past capitalist problematizations that imagined nature as a dead, inert object to be manipulated and controlled with maximum efficiency (Merchant 2008), neoliberalism's reimagining of nature is predicated on the idea that the existing form of capitalist accumulation was pushing the biophysical nature beyond its capacity to function. Moving beyond these perceived limits required a radical reimagining of nature in the sense of its full and complete absorption into the neoliberal governmentality thereby producing a multidimensionally usable nature. Notions such as emission trading, carbon offsetting and on the other hand notions of the natural capital and eco-systemic services are inextricably linked to this neoliberalization of natural phenomena in the sense of their multidimensional valuation either for economic or non-economic reasons (see Castree 2015). Only the valuation of a specific biophysical phenomenon makes it visible, relatable and understandable in the context of the neoliberal governmentality. Furthermore, it makes environmental concerns compatible with the economic growth as the reproduction of the biophysical nature becomes a direct source of value thereby expanding the sphere of productivity to encompass the "natural factory" and its self-organizing and regenerative capacity (Nelson 2015). Nature is reimagined as having limits only in the sense of extraction of natural resources for conventional production process that can be transcended in two interconnected ways and mirror the contemporary transformation of broader capitalist production. Firstly, through technological innovation and the perfect substitution of natural resources with technology (mirroring automatization). Secondly, through the circulation of "the natural capital" in the more conventional form of goods and services (e.g. green tourism) or in the form of credits and information (e.g. ecosystem services, emission trading) that are "unbound by material essence and free to move through global circuits of credit and finance commodities (Dempsey and Robertson 2012, 2)" (mirroring financialization).

The neoliberal problematization proved extremely resilient as even a radical destabilization of neoliberal governmentality in the form of the global financial and economic crisis at the national and global level did not lead to, as many scholars predicted (Birch and Mykhnenko 2013; Duménil and Lévy 2013; Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2010; Stiglitz 2008), a radical change not only of existing functioning of societies but also concerning the articulated visions of future models of development. This was due to specific characteristic of neoliberal governmentality and its functioning. Firstly, it continuously reproduces and re-inscribes its problematization at the global and local level through macro policies (e.g. austerity) of states and international institutions such as IMF and World Bank, WTO), policies and practices at the mezzo level of institutions (think tanks, universities, schools, workplace, hospitals, non-formal learning contexts etc.) and the micro level of everyday practices (e.g. shopping, learning, reading, watching, going out etc.) of individual and collective subjects (Lazzarato 2009; Mirowski 2014; Rose 1996; Wacquant 2010). Additionally, it actively absorbs, deradicalize and utilize any critique of its general paradigm, its policies, practices and consequences by preserving its general problematization as the dominant framework of intelligibility even in the context of severe crises (Lazzarato 2009; Mirowski 2014).

### 3 THE GRADUAL NEOLIBERALIZATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ITS GLOBAL INSTITUTIONALIZATION AS THE DOMINANT VISION OF FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Since the late 1960 environmental scientists and especially ecological movements and NGOs began to popularize the notion of humanity's responsibility for various environmental crises (Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien 2005). In 1980 the notion of sustainable development entered the global policy field in the document *The World Conservation Strategy* jointly prepared by ICUN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) and UNEP (United Nations Environment Program) and the WWF (World Wildlife Fund). In it the crucial reasons for the ecological degradation and the unsustainability of the present model were defined as the negative effects of the existing trade regime, the growth of world population, social inequality and poverty. The notion of sustainable development was beginning to be institutionalized as a novel vision of development and as a critique of the existing model of development parallelly and sometimes linked with the neoliberal critique and vision of a novel development model (Lewis 2000). However, sustainable development was co-opted and integrated into the neoliberal governmentality during a rather long process of continuous political struggles. According to several scholars (Baker et al.1997; Elliott 2002; Mawhinney 2002; Rogers, Jalal and Boyd 2007; Schmandt and Ward 2000), the report of the Brundtland commission titled *Our Common Future* prepared on behalf of the UN in 1987 represents one of the crucial milestones for the global popularization and proliferation of sustainable development in the sense of connecting ecological sustainability and social and economic issues. The central definition of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987)" became the dominant definition (Lafferty 1995). The concept built upon two central notions namely the notion of fulfilling the basic needs of the poorest global populations and the notion of limited natural resources that will not be sufficient for fulfilling the present and future needs of global populations. Nature was imagined as having a limited capacity to absorb the negative consequences of the present levels of consumption in developed countries. The report set specific limits to development. Although it stressed the role of technological development in attaining sustainable development it focused on the need of a broader social, economic and cultural transformation. However, this vision did not transcend the capitalist model of development as it imagined sustainable development to unproblematically enable economic growth and a sustainable exploitation of natural resources with the protection of environment. The Brundtland report framed sustainable development from the perspective of ensuring the survival of the capitalist form of production and its accumulation processes in a more global poor friendly way without addressing the existing relations of power (Wanner 2015). It established that sustainable development could be achieved only through the cooperation of actors from all socio-political spheres in a novel horizontal governance regime that included international organisations, states, NGOs, civil society groups and individual citizens. However, the stark asymmetries in power and capabilities that should preclude the levelling of responsibility of various actors were not addressed. The report also did not address the role of multinational corporations as one of the primary agents of support of the existing development model and their potential role in hindering or supporting a sustainable future model (Baker et al. 1997; Doyle 1998).



Although including the idea of a novel governance structure and the levelling of responsibility the Brundtland report was not initially build upon a neoliberal vision. However, as sustainable development become more popular among the wider civil society, scientists, policy makers and the media it gradually became the crucial context of a political struggle concerning the form and content of the future model of socio-political and economic development. There was a growing realisation among the primary agents of neoliberalization (e.g. corporations, think-tanks, neoliberal academicians, politicians and international organisations) that sustainable development should be re-framed along the lines of neoliberal problematization (Rowell 1996). A specific framing of sustainable development would namely set the coordinates for future development models and as such severely limit the possible alternatives (Mebratu 1998). Since 1989 we can observe the dual activity of the establishing neoliberal governmentality that began to sow doubt and ignorance while it simultaneously began to actively intervene in the emerging global and national policy field of sustainable development (Mirowski 2014). There was a concerted effort at the global and national level by various actors including think-tanks (e.g. the Global Climate Coalition), astroturf groups, corporations and lobbying groups to prevent any radical changes to the existing development model (Rowell 1996). Along with climate change denialism specific actors (e.g. think-tanks, corporate groups) began to promote and lobby for the re-framing of sustainable development along neoliberal lines in the sense of presenting it as a “rational” alternative to radical solutions (Doyle 1998; Mirowski 2014; Slobodian 2018).

At the global level we can see the starting point of this process in the documents of the UN conference titled *the Earth Summit* (Rio de Janeiro), which represented a crucial consolidation of the concept of sustainable development and its gradual neoliberalization (Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien 2005; Mebratu 1998). There were three documents that were adopted The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the action plan Agenda 21 and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (the precursor of the 1997 adopted Kyoto protocol<sup>3</sup> on climate change). The documents firmly established the neoliberal notion that the free market is the best possible mechanism to achieve sustainable development by producing technological solutions and efficiency and effectiveness gains that could overcome biophysical limits (Doyle 1998). It successfully deradicalized the popular critiques of the dominant development model, while it also successfully obfuscated the responsibility of the developed world for the past and present environmental degradation that was addressed in the Brundtland report. It did not address the fundamental structures, practices and mechanisms of capitalist economy and politics (e.g. militarism, unregulated activities of MNCs, undemocratic nature of international development organisations, unfair terms of trade) that were preventing an inclusive and democratic development an official goal of the Agenda 21 (Chatterjee and Finger 1994). The neoliberal nature of the Agenda 21 can be observed not only in the notions of the need to expand the market mechanisms but also in the notion that nature can and should be financially valued as its valuation in the form of natural capital is crucial for its sustainability (Pearce and Barbier 2000). Furthermore, economic growth was established as paramount while the ecological issues were recoded as environmental costs

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<sup>3</sup> The protocol is one of the few legally binding documents in the field of sustainable development. It aimed to establish mechanism to reduce and regulate the emission of greenhouse gasses by establishing novel markets for emission trading and for furthering ecological investments.



that can be appropriately measured. All environmental issues were recoded as issues of efficiency (technological, economic, political, organisational, educational) (Doyle 1998). Additionally, a limited regulation with specific limited institutional reforms at the national and global level was imagined as sufficient to establish the coordination among various sector policies needed to attain sustainable development. Consequently, a range of specific public policy instruments were proposed such as environmental indicators and other market-based policy instruments as well as voluntary agreements on reducing and limiting pollution. (Baker 2006). Each successive institutionalization of sustainable development (e.g. the 2000 Millennium goals, the second Earth Summit titled The World Summit on Sustainable Development Rio +10 conference) lead to its further integration into the consolidating neoliberal governmentality at the global level.

The beginning of the global financial crisis in 2008 combined with the sharp rise in food and oil prices temporarily destabilized the dominant neoliberal development model. The destabilization enabled the temporal visibility and popularization of its critiques at the national and global level (Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2010). However, these critiques were made impotent due to the active interventions of crucial agents of neoliberalism (international organisations, national governments, corporations and the media) to re-stabilize the hegemony by re-articulating and reorganizing the neoliberal discourse and policies along supposedly radically different visions (deradicalizing critiques), while retaining the crucial fundamentals of the neoliberal development vision (Chakravartty and Schiller 2011). But this was only possible due to the general societal embeddedness and continuity of neoliberal practices, discourse and subjectivities at the local levels in the face of the crisis. This embeddedness established the conditions of possibility for the neoliberal problematization to hold its status as the general framework for understanding the key issues and formulating “novel” visions of development even by actors perceivably representing alternative visions (see Mirowski 2014).

The partially transformed discourse but untransformed problematization of sustainable development can be witnessed in 2009. It was then that the OECD Declaration on Green Growth situated the notion of the green economy firmly as part of sustainable development. With the 2012 Rio+20 UN Conference green growth became the foundation of a presumably novel sustainable development model. This discourse establishes green growth as a solution to all socio-economic and ecological problems. Hence, green growth is one in the series of responses of neoliberal governmentality to counter-hegemonic challenges in the form of arguments concerning inherent limits to growth. Like previous articulations it masks contradictions between economic and ecological sustainability and furthers marketization of societies by imagining nature as natural capital and striving to establish markets for “nature” its products and services (Wanner 2015). Like previous responses it also depoliticizes development to an issue of objective technocratic, managerialist and economic solutions that mask the underlying structural inequalities and power asymmetries that will exacerbate existing global and national inequalities and dominant power structures (OECD 2011).

#### 4 THE NEOLIBERALIZATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SLOVENIA

Due to Slovenia's specific peripheral geopolitical position and history characterized by a gradual transition from state socialism to capitalist liberal democratic system that has not followed the initial neoliberal shock doctrine of most other Post-socialist Eastern European states (Klein 2008; Lorenčič 2012), the neoliberalization of sustainable development in Slovenia can offer important and interesting insights concerning neoliberal governmentality, the specific vision of sustainable development and the persistence of the neoliberal problematization. Hence, the case study of Slovenia is crucial to reflect how neoliberal problematization is established and consolidated as a commonsensical framework of articulating visions of development even in the national contexts where the neoliberal governmentality and specifically its vision of development are perceived as non-hegemonic and limited and where neoliberal reforms were not implemented in a radical manner. It is crucial for analysing the interconnectedness of the global and the specific national context concerning the consolidation of the dominant understanding of sustainable development and to reflect on the mutual co-dependence of the global and local neoliberal governmentality and its resilience in the face of crises.

Similarly to the global and other national contexts (Mitcham 1995), the organized civil society and specifically ecological NGOs played a central role in focusing the Slovenian society's attention to ecological issues and raising its awareness on the interrelatedness of ecological issues and the dominant paradigm or model of development. The initial popularization of the concept of sustainable development was carried out by the ecological NGOs in 1995, when 19 Slovenian NGOs inspired by the UN *Agenda 21 action plan* adopted a draft strategy for sustainable development of Slovenia termed *Agenda 21 for Slovenia - a contribution of the NGOs*. Among them the leading role was played by the newly established NGO Umanotera – The Slovenian foundation for sustainable development. In the following years Umanotera established and led a strong institutionalized network of most other relevant NGOs in the field. On the other hand, the Slovenian NGOs had during the 1990s a relatively weak standing vis-à-vis other socio-political and economic actors. They lacked funding, organizational capacity and institutionalization (Lukšič 1998). Similarly to other global and national NGOs, the Slovenian NGOs played an initial double role in the process of establishing the field of sustainable development. Firstly, they were the primary actors that politicized the need to change the dominant developmental paradigm. Secondly, they began to play a central role as “anti-political machines (Ferguson 1990)” in the sense that they substantially contributed in framing the issue of sustainable development as an issue of expertise, clarity, measurability and as a non-antagonistic issue. Somewhat specific to the Slovenian context they also began to play a crucial role in neoliberalization of sustainable development in the sense of legitimizing market-based and technological solutions, which can be partially attributed to the mentioned neoliberalized nature of the UN Agenda 21.

While the Slovenian civil society and especially ecological NGOs played a central role in the initial politicization and popularization of sustainable development the state played a central role in institutionalizing and embedding specific developmental visions especially in the form of national developmental strategic documents. These documents played and play a central role in setting

the coordinates for long-term economic and societal development (Escobar 1995). They were and are strongly influenced by global trends, local business interests and to lesser extent local civil society interests (Abrahamsen 2000). The Slovenian national strategic documents were heavily influenced by and have substantially drawn from global and EU strategic documents in the field of (sustainable) development. But they were not imposed by global actors but were adopted voluntarily. These documents played and play a central part in establishing and consolidating specific developmental models as dominant, legitimate and rational. They substantially influenced and influence the broader socio-political discourses and practices in the field of sustainable development, as they are being formulated and disseminated by the formally central actor working in the public interest.

A brief analysis of Slovenian developmental plans gives us a rather clear picture regarding the official vision of sustainable development in Slovenia that was from the outset locked into a neoliberal framework, which demonstrates that in Slovenia the central context and agents of establishment of neoliberal problematization and the specific local variant of neoliberal governmentality were state actors formally representing the public interest. The first proper institutionalization of the term can be traced to the fourth national developmental plan adopted at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The document titled *Slovenia in the New Decade – Sustainability, Competitiveness and Membership in the EU: Strategy of economic development of Slovenia 2001-2006* (2001) firstly established sustainable development in the sense of development, which is based on three dimensions (economic, social and ecological) that are in balance and on the idea of inter-generational solidarity as an explicit goal. The document initially imagined sustainable development as part of a supposedly novel developmental paradigm. The paradigm was based upon the neoliberal idea of absolute necessity of raising the productivity of labour, raising national competitiveness and increasing the material wellbeing of the individual and society. Consequently, the attainment of sustainable development was understood as being the question of developing the right technology and generating the right knowledge that will resolve central societal and ecological issues of economic development.

It took four years for the term to become one of the central terms for thinking the future development of Slovenia at the state level and as such was consolidated and institutionalized to a substantial degree in the novel Slovenian development strategy. The term was utilized for promoting a more radical neoliberal developmental model that was favoured at the global and the EU level and especially by the new Slovenian right wing government that was in power since the end of 2004. The Slovenian Development Strategy (UMAR 2005), adopted in 2005, was primarily understood as a comprehensive strategy for the development of Slovenian society. The Strategy's third central strategic goal was the goal of intergenerational co-natural development based upon the principles of sustainable development. These no-where specified principles would play a central role in measuring development in all areas. The Strategy consolidated the neoliberal problematization as the fundamental framework for imagining the future sustainable development. The document stressed the need to deregulate and liberalize markets and to implement the principles of competition in every socio-political sphere. Economic rationality and efficiency were established as primary measurements of legitimacy of social services and the idea of redistribution as a central idea of progressive conceptualizations of sustainable development was delegitimized (ibid., 8–10). The document also

stressed the need for a common and equal responsibility of all social stakeholders for the development of the society, which masked the existing severe power asymmetries in societies among various stakeholders. The Strategy established material economic growth as the primary goal of the new developmental model. The social and the ecological dimensions were directly or indirectly imagined as subordinated to the economic dimension.

Despite major socio-economic and political changes including the global financial crisis in the following 12 years the Strategy and its vision remained officially unchanged until December 2017 when the present *Slovenian Development Strategy – Slovenia 2030* (Vlada RS 2017) was adopted. However, the fundamental vision of development did not drastically change. It is still predicated on the idea of the need for continuous economic growth, sustainable development as a comparative advantage of the economy, the need to increase productivity of labour, while it incorporates novel ideas (e.g. idea of delinking economic growth and the use of natural resources) tied to the concept of green growth, which is itself based on a neoliberal problematization (ibid., 11–14). Consequently, the contemporary official Slovenian developmental vision and the field of sustainable development remains tightly integrated in the neoliberal governmentality and derives and consolidates the neoliberal problematization (see Wanner 2015).

## 5 THE ORGANISED CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POST CRISIS RESILIENCE OF THE NEOLIBERALIZED VISION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

While the role of the Slovene and other states in consolidating the neoliberal problematization and vision of sustainable development in the post-crisis era is considered central (e.g. Mirowski 2014) the role of the civil society in this process at the national but also global level is less understood and researched. As we will demonstrate through our interrogation of the case of Slovenian civil society its role in this process was and is instrumental.

In 2007, a year before the global financial crisis, major Slovenian ecological NGOs established a network titled Plan B for Slovenia that was coordinated by Umanotera. The central goal of the network was the creation of a platform for articulating comprehensive strategies of development that would offer an alternative vision to official national developmental plans. In the same year the first document titled Plan B for Slovenia 1.0 was formulated. This was followed by Plan B for Slovenia 2.0 in 2010 and Plan B for Slovenia 4.0 in 2012.<sup>4</sup> These documents were authored by multiple authors that included nationally recognized civil society experts and scientist working in the wider field of sustainable development and consequently can be seen as providing an authoritative vision of development predominant in the organized civil society.<sup>5</sup> As Plan B 1.0 was formulated before the global crisis and Plan B 2.0, despite some effort by the editing team to synthesize a common civil society vision remained a collection of various sometimes diametrically opposed visions (Ogorelec 2013), Plan B 4.0 can be considered a more or less coherent vision of development. Hence, we will critically interrogate only the latter.

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<sup>4</sup> The Plan B for Slovenia 3.0 was a manifesto targeting political parties before the parliamentary elections of 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Among the authors were economists, sociologists, political scientists, climate scientists etc.

Plan B 4.0 was initially conceived as a response to the socio-economic crisis and as an explicit critique of the neoliberal development model. However, as we will demonstrate it represents a subtle and gradual re-legitimation and further consolidation of the neoliberal understanding of sustainable development. The document is interesting not only concerning its vision of development but also due to its reflection on the structural role of NGOs in sustainable development and in general as policy supporting actors. Its process of formulation and adoption is also rather revealing regarding the neoliberalization of the formulated vision and the incorporation of NGOs into the neoliberal governmentality. The document explicitly establishes the proposed model as an alternative to the existing dominant one, while it clearly reaffirms the central notions of the neoliberal problematization. Hence, Sustainable development is understood as a comparative advantage of Slovenia that will guarantee the rise of competitiveness of its economy and solve the economic crisis (Beltran 2012, 4). The paradigm of continuous economic growth is reaffirmed, and a plethora of neoliberal inspired notions are utilized such as competitiveness, efficiency, effectiveness, innovation, creative potential of human resources and human capital and increased productivity (Beltran 2012, 4, 12, 31). Sustainable development is perceived as being dependent on technological innovation, the creation of novel marketization of nature such as green tourism and the creation of novel ecological consumer subjectivities and practices such as green consumerism. The document demonstrates its neoliberal problematization in the form of the intended structural role that NGOs should play in attaining sustainable development. In this context, it is unintentionally revealing concerning the represented and actual structural role of NGOs in the functioning of the neoliberal governmentality (see Beltran 2012, 21–22). The NGOs are imagined as one of the three crucial actors (along with the government and corporate sector) whose cooperation is needed to attain sustainable development. They are imagined as actors that have the knowledge and implementational capabilities in the field of sustainable development. Additionally, they are supposedly capable to generate novel development visions and mobilize, inform and raise awareness of citizens concerning the need for sustainable development. Finally, they are established as independent and autonomous and as such as legitimate representatives of the public interest (see Bryant 2002; Sending and Neumann 2006). In contrast to this imagined role and capabilities of NGOs, the document also paints a rather dire picture of the actual state of Slovenian environmental organisations (Beltran 2012, 21). They are underfunded and understaffed and financially dependent on either government or corporate grants, which severely undermines their independence and their possibility for formulating development visions that are not compatible with either corporate or government expectation and neoliberal problematization. Even if they secure alternative financial resources the NGOs are limited in their strategic possibilities to articulate and popularize alternative visions due to the inherent containing nature of the declarative open policy discussions that already have pre-established coordinates that prevent any radical alternative visions (Ogorelec 2013). This inevitably leads to NGOs playing an instrumental role of legitimators of neoliberal problematization and neoliberalized sustainable development and demonstrates the local functioning of the neoliberal governmentality in the field of sustainable development and its resilience in the face of crisis. The global re-legitimation and resilience of the neoliberal governmentality and its problematization is mutually interdependent with the specific local re-consolidations and re-legitimations of it.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The article argued that the dominant understanding of sustainable development that promotes limited incremental changes to the capitalist development model can best be understood as the result of the gradual but systematic co-optation and integration of sustainable development into the dominant neoliberal governmentality, a specific contemporary permutation of the capitalist socio-economic and political systems or regime of government at the global and the local level. By analysing the global and the Slovenian context concerning the gradual neoliberalization of sustainable development we argued that the global and the Slovenian context are interdependent concerning the consolidation of the neoliberal vision of sustainable development and the functioning of the neoliberal governmentality. We also addressed the under-researched issue concerning the resilience of the neoliberal vision of sustainable development and the neoliberal governmentality in the face of multiple and multidimensional economic and environmental crises. We specifically focused on the role of actors that formally and informally represented the public interest such as the state and the organized civil society (e.g. NGOs) where we argued that their role was crucial in re-legitimizing and upholding the neoliberal vision(s) of sustainable development and in the resilience of the wider neoliberal governmentality. Focusing specifically on the case of Slovenia proved very fruitful. It enabled us to demonstrate that even in the national contexts where the neoliberal governmentality and specifically its vision of sustainable development are perceived as non-hegemonic and limited and where neoliberal reforms were not implemented in a radical manner, the neoliberal vision of sustainable development and its underlying problematization has penetrated the thoughts and activities of all relevant socio-political actors that represent the public interest. The case of Slovenia enabled us to understand and interrogate the way organised civil society is structurally forced and/or subtly nudged to adopt discourse and enact activities that are intelligible and acceptable in the context of the dominant neoliberal vision of sustainable development.

The dominance of the neoliberal vision of sustainable development would not be problematic if it produced viable solutions to environmental crises and socio-economic issues. However, as researchers (see Mirowski 2014; Rogers 2013) demonstrate, every neoliberal solution (e.g. emission trading, green consumerism) marketed as leading to sustainable development was proven a failure in remedying the dire situation. Consequently, in view of the present and future extremely negative environmental trends directly<sup>6</sup> connected with the existing dominant model of development the popularization and implementation of alternative visions of development are not optional but necessary. But these visions will have to transcend not only the hegemonic neoliberal problematization of development but also the even more fundamental feature of the existing capitalist system namely its compulsion for perpetual accumulation of capital and hence expansion of the absorption of biophysical resources. Therefore, a return to the somewhat more inclusive pre-neoliberal model of the developmental capitalist state is not an option. This would also not address the stark inequality and asymmetries of power and capabilities at the local and global level in a fundamental way and it would not

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<sup>6</sup> See Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Available at: <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/>.

address the constitutive antagonisms of the capitalist world systems and production process. Therefore, this novel vision will have to re-politicize development in a fundamental way and in this way severely restrain technocratic governance and techno-market solutionism and make development globally inclusive and radically democratic. Finally, the vision will have to redefine our collective relation with nature not as an autonomous, reified reference point but in the sense of an always-already socially produced entity with which we are in dependent and co-constitutive relationship.

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