

FORSK 2025

Forslagsstiller: DBP-CBS

Key Actors in Consultation process: IKL- CBS; University of Copenhagen (Department of Political Science); Aalborg University-Copenhagen; Capital Region of Denmark (Greater Copenhagen), Think-tanks: CONCITO, Mandag Morgen, Earthshine.

**Title of focus area:**

Frameworks for Strategic Sustainability Governance (FSSG)

**Summary:**

Sustainability challenges call for inclusive, agile, determined and coordinated research and action. The recent adoption of sustainable development goals and the Paris climate agreement combines the need for coordinated actions in combating climate change, water management, resilient urban growth and food security, with the need to meet social challenges such as reducing inequality, building effective, accountable institutions and creating partnerships across actors and levels. These challenges can only find a significant response by means of research and action that clearly defines frameworks for strategic action to shape and strengthen systematic and multi-scalar governance approaches. There is need to research what kind of structures, actions and governance mechanisms can support solutions at different geographical scales and how they can be orchestrated in frameworks ensuring viability, legitimacy and sustainability of solutions. Research has to investigate how multi-actor and multi-level governance and leadership for sustainability can be operationalized, and how national, local and transnational governance mechanisms can contribute to meeting particular sustainability challenges. From a Danish perspective this is especially important, considering the need to: (1) translate new regional and global governance arrangements into contextualized local solutions of relevance to both society and businesses in Denmark; and (2) understand how local experiences in Denmark can help improve the design and orchestration of governance solutions in other localities and contexts.

**Societal Challenges and Research Needs:**

With the recent adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the signing of the Paris Agreement within the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, governments, international organizations, business and civil society groups are now under pressure to deliver solutions to global and local sustainability problems. Existing research highlights how problems such as climate change, loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation arise from patterns of production and consumption, costly transportation and energy provision infrastructure, vested political interests, regulatory environments, and deeply held values contributing to unsustainable development trajectories. Although technical and scientific solutions for many of these pressing problems are available, there is a lack of adequate governance frameworks that can help coordinate and facilitate strategic efforts, include and orchestrate contributions of state and non-state actors, and operate at different geographical scales. In other words, there is a persistent need for research to better understand, improve and strengthen the *Frameworks for Strategic Sustainability Governance*. What exist today are fragmented and multi-layered governing fields where inter-governmental organizations and legal treaties operate alongside, and in interaction with, market-based instruments in different kinds of partnerships – resulting in cross-border rule-making, weak implementation and enforcement activities, and impacts revolving between several decision-making levels.

Existing research on *Frameworks for Strategic Sustainability Governance* has started to map out actors, processes and configuration of stakeholders that are involved in these efforts. But there is need to also examine how they build, maintain and expand their legitimacy in view of different audiences, and the processes of participation and accountability attached to multi-stakeholder sustainability initiatives – particularly as they are strongly moving toward intelligent communication technologies. The increasing

digitalization of solutions and organizations acting toward sustainability brings questions of the role and limits of democratic rule-making vis à vis effectiveness, and of the potential for new forms of democratic engagement emerging in these interactions. Moreover, there is lack of knowledge on what kinds of institutions, networks and innovative actions governments and organizations can usefully orchestrate towards attaining common goals, and on what factors can enhance legitimacy and democratic inclusion, strengthen their effectiveness, and deepen and sustain their impact. The proposed research area will draw from, and contribute directly to, three key scholarly literatures on: multi-level governance, sustainability transitions/transition management, and sustainability entrepreneurship. These three literatures focus explicitly on innovation in the context of systems, and employ multi-scalar approaches that are pertinent to the challenges faced by nations and communities. Even so, there are research and policy relevance gaps in each, suggesting the need for both integration and further research.

### **Danish preconditions:**

Denmark has demonstrated over many years a keen capacity to promote innovation-led sustainability and green solutions through a dynamic interplay between political, academic and business actors. Yet, large parts of the Danish business community and Danish public institutions need to increasingly operate under regional and transnational forms of sustainability governance, including intergovernmental agreements, multi-stakeholder initiatives, public procurement in public-private partnerships, market-based standards, corporate social responsibility and self-governance processes. A number of these relevant governance framework dynamics are addressed in Danish research, but they are dispersed across institutions and need better venues for collaboration. These include, for example, research on certification systems for energy-efficient buildings, sustainable biofuels and biomass, sustainability indicator systems, transnational environmental governance for the maritime and aviation industries, and for water, waste and air pollution. Interdisciplinary cooperation on climate change and other sustainability challenges in Denmark is growing, but the integration of social sciences and business studies with natural sciences and engineering is still at its early stages. This is limiting the potential impact of scientific and technical solutions for sustainability, and their potential adoption by governments, business and organized civil society groups. Danish public institutions, civil society organizations and particularly the business community, which excels at green technology development, can draw strong benefits from better integration of governance and regulatory issues in research on *Frameworks for Strategic Sustainability Governance*.

### **Goals and perspectives:**

Pressing sustainability challenges such as climate change are of global nature. To be solved, they require research that sheds light on the strategic frameworks that can help orchestrate actors and their actions at global, regional, national and local levels. Multi-scalar and multi-sited research is thus needed for understanding the governance framing conditions of: (a) the numerous local, national and transnational experiments, public-private partnerships and entrepreneurial governance initiatives that are being carried out by industry associations and individual corporations, international and local NGOs, and other non-state actors – including the numerous Danish experiences in this field; and (b) the possible mechanisms and strategies that Denmark, in cooperation with other nation states and international organizations, can advance to orchestrate sustainability governance, address its current fragmentation, and secure effective implementation and positive local, national, regional and global sustainability outcomes.

The suggested research under this theme would create value for society – as without functioning frameworks for strategic sustainability governance it is unlikely that systemic and coordinated responses between state and non-state actors will materialize. The benefits that such responses could bring would be in the form of new integrated system solutions and implementation networks – addressing key challenges such as urban mobility and health, circular economy, renewable energy, and circular resource flow management. In particular, research on *Frameworks for Strategic Sustainability Governance* would draw from, and make a lasting impact on, a variety of actors: (1) local and national governments along with public-private

partnerships, major cities, academic institutions and foundations; (2) non-governmental organizations and organized civil society groups; (3) regional and international organizations; (4) industry associations, multinational corporations, and small and medium enterprises. Because of its multi-actor nature, FSSG research would be carried out in cooperation between academia and business, non-governmental organizations, think-tanks and public institutions.

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**The Consultation Process involved the following persons and institutions:**

(Below please find examples of e-mail expressions of support. Letters of support were not so far requested)

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