Green Faith?
The influence of faith-based actors on sustainable development discourse

KATHARINA GLAAB AND DORIS FUCHS

University of Muenster

The global environmental crisis is a crisis of modern society, which raises fundamental ethical questions on progress, global justice and the meaning of sustainable development. Against this background, normative contests in global sustainability governance move to the center of attention. Here, scholars have widely discussed the role of environmental NGOs, in general. Interestingly, faith-based actors (FBAs) have only attracted scant attention so far. Yet, they actively participate in international environmental and development negotiations as well as public debates on sustainable development. More importantly, religious belief systems may well provide visionary ideas on sustainability, especially in terms of references on the ‘good life’.

The present paper aims to identify the relevant norms and ideas in FBAs’ communications and to contrast them with other existing ideas on sustainable development. On the basis of a content analysis of FBAs’ submissions in the context of the UN Summit Rio+20, the paper asks: How do FBAs frame sustainable development and what visions of the good life are contained in current articulations of FBAs with respect to sustainable development? In what way do FBAs ideas on sustainable development differ from other actors’ ideas? With such an analysis, the paper creates a foundation for further inquiries into the influence of FBAs on sustainable development discourse and governance.

Work in Progress – please do not cite without permission
“When governments, civil society and particularly religious communities work together, transformation can take place. Faiths and religions are an essential part of that equation. Indeed, the world’s faith communities occupy a unique position in discussions on the fate of our planet and the accelerating impacts of climate change.” (Ban Ki-Moon 2009)

Introduction

Environmental pollution, overfishing, desertification, and climate change are among the biggest challenges of our time. The global character of the ecological crisis has led to a vast search for scientific, economic or technical solutions that could bring about the ‘great transformation’ towards more sustainability. For over 40 years, governments, scientists, international institutions and civil society have been generating knowledge in order to find political courses of action that might stop growing environmental destruction. Yet, the ecological crisis poses not only a scientific and political problem. It is also a moral-ethical challenge to global society. Al Gore argues that in light of the magnitude of the global climate catastrophe, a “moral and spiritual revolution” is necessary (Gore 2006).

Secularization theory argues that religion has lost in importance in society through modernization processes (Berger 1969; Norris and Inglehart 2004). However, postulations such as Al Gore’s indicate that religion may indeed play an important role in political debates such as on the environmental crisis. This corresponds with Jürgen Habermas’ thesis that religions may provide a rich normative resource for secular society (Habermas 2001). Actually, it seems that religions have entered their “ecological phase” (Tucker 2003) and increasingly acknowledge their responsibility for the fate of the environment. For instance, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. is also called the ‘green Patriarch’ due to his environmental engagement and in his inauguration speech the new Pope

1 Paper prepared for the ECPR General Sessions in Bordeaux, September 4-7, 2013.
Francis I. continued Pope Benedict’s progressive green stance and called for the preservation of creation and environment.

While the role of environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in global environmental governance has been widely recognized, religious environmentalism has only attracted scant attention of political science scholars so far. Yet, since the advent of transnational environmental problems, faith-based actors (FBAs) have engaged in the debate on the environment. Moreover, global environmental and social problems interact in a multitude of ways, and FBAs have always been active in global debates on development, of course. Indeed, in global sustainability governance that tackles environmental and social aspects of the ecological crisis, FBAs actively participate in international political negotiations as well as public debates. Their special normative foundation may enable them to set an influential ethical agenda (McElroy 2001, 56). This is especially the case in so far as sustainable development fundamentally is about the question of ‘the good life’. And it is here, that the faiths clearly have something to contribute.

One cannot assume that FBAs will necessarily have a positive influence on sustainable development discourse or promote ideas of ‘the good life’ that correspond to sustainable development understandings and objectives. After all, centuries of faiths in different religious belief systems have not prevented us from getting to this point of ecological crisis. To the contrary, religious arguments can be and have been used in pursuit of goals at odds with sustainable development objectives. Moreover, even if the norms and ideas presently promoted by them in the global governance arena were visionary with respect to sustainable development, FBAs may not be able to garner sufficient discursive power to obtain real influence, in the end.

Two steps, then, are necessary to assess the discursive influence of FBAs in global sustainability governance. First, relevant norms and ideas that are reflected in FBAs’ communications (and practices) need to be identified and
contrasted with other existing ideas on sustainable development and the good life, in order to obtain an idea of the potential direction of this influence. Secondly, developments in sustainable development governance need to be explored against the background of FBAs’ communications to gather an understanding of the extent of their influence. The present paper takes the first step. Based on a content analysis of FBA’s submissions in the context of the UN Summit Rio+20, it identifies relevant norms and ideas and contrasts them to other existing ideas on sustainable development. Specifically, it asks: What visions of sustainable development and the good life are contained in current articulations of faith-based actors with respect to sustainable development? With this analysis, the paper creates a foundation for comprehensive assessments of FBAs discursive influence in sustainability governance.

The paper will proceed as follows: First, we will present the theoretical framework of our analysis, delineating the role of discursive power by non-state actors, the constructed nature of sustainable development, and the role of the good life in this context. Secondly, we present our methodological approach, describing why and how we use qualitative content analysis to analyze which documents. Thirdly, we present the empirical results of this analysis before the concluding section summarizes our paper and identifies implications for science and policy.

Discursive Power, FBAs, and Sustainable Development

The governance approach attributes substantial political influence to non-state actors. Importantly, these actors do not just achieve political influence via state-actors, i.e. through lobbying and other forms of exerting influence on political decision makers and bureaucrats, from the perspective of this approach. Rather, non-state actors also shape politics and policy in a more direct way, for instance, via taking an active role in shaping ideas and beliefs as
well as setting, implementing and/or enforcing rules and regulations themselves.

Numerous studies applying a governance perspective have described and assessed the political roles of business (Levy and Newell 2005; Falkner 2009; Fuchs 2007; 2013) or of civil society (Florini 2000; Scholte 2004; Holzscheiter 2005; Crouch 2008). They have delineated the various facets of the political power of non-state actors in today’s globalized world and differentiated between actor specific and structural determinants as well as between material and ideational sources of this power (Fuchs and Glaab 2011). While demonstrating the massive political influence business actors, specifically transnational corporations (TNCs), have been able to obtain on the basis of their material resources as well as increasing discursive power (Fuchs 2013), scholars have also pointed out that civil society actors potentially still have substantial influence on the basis of their political legitimacy. The latter, in turn, results from the perception that these actors pursue public rather than private interests, while politicians and economic actors often are assumed to pursue private gain in the form of power or financial profit. Accordingly, the scientific and political debates have also frequently tended to ascribe a positive contribution to sustainability governance to civil society actors.² Such moral legitimacy could be attributed to FBAS, in particular, given their orientation towards belief-systems and reference to most fundamental values and norms.

One could ask, of course, whether FBAs do play a political role just as other civil society actors in ‘secularized politics’. After all, secularization theory has made the comprehensive assumption that religion is less and less important in modern society (Berger 1969; Norris and Inglehart 2004). The assumed

² Such an a priori ascription of a positive influence of civil society actors on sustainable development is problematic, however (Frantz and Fuchs Forthcoming). Infrastructure development necessary for the German energy transition towards renewable energy sources, for instance, frequently faces local opposition, best explained with the well-known NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) effects. Moreover, with business and industry oriented non-governmental organizations (BINGOs) business actors increasingly take on the mask of civil society to benefit from the perceived legitimacy of the latter.
retreat of religion into the private sphere argues that public-political and religious spaces are fundamentally separate. Hence, religion is not political and can only contribute within certain political and social settings to political debates. The secular worldview reduces reality to matter and narrates the relationship between humanity and nature as dichotomous and supposedly independent of religious views and arguments (Litfin 2003, 30ff). In consequence, the supposed separation between religion and politics seems particularly relevant, in global sustainability governance: first, because the globalized and transnational character of the environment is debated in supranational fora that are dominated by a cosmopolitan secular elite (Berger 1999, 11; cf. Bush 2007) and second, because science tends to play an important role in environmental debates, and natural scientists have the image of viewing religion as irrational and unhelpful in solving problems (Wilson 2012, 21).

However, a growing literature has questioned the assumed differentiation between religion and politics and the perception of politics as a secular space (Kubálková 2000; Kratochwil 2005; Barbato and Kratochwil 2009). They challenge secularization theory with the claim that religion has not disappeared in politics. Rather, it becomes increasingly de-privatized (Casanova 1994). In this view, religion is part of the public sphere and questions dominant social and political forces, beliefs and values. Hence, scholars see the public political debates reflecting signs of the religious and showing an increasing mix of religious and secular arguments. According to them, the “politicization of religion” does not only play out in political mobilization of religious values in local contexts, but similarly through articulation in the global sphere (Minkenberg and Willems 2003). They argue that religious arguments are being made and accommodated in the public sphere and need to be analyzed as such (Audi 1993; Audi and Wolterstorff 1997). Indeed, we can notice many voices
of faith-based institutions and actors in political debates in general, and in sustainability related debates in particular.

Accordingly, the potential contribution of FBAs to global governance in general, and global sustainability governance, in particular, deserves our attention. This is even more the case, since scholars ascribe increasing importance to discursive power, the potential strong suite of FBAs in times of globalized and mediatized, or even solely performed governance (Crouch 2008). Discursive power is the power to shape governance processes and outcomes via the shaping of relevant norms and ideas. It intervenes at the earliest stages of the political process, i.e. before the formation of interests, as it shapes the construction of the identities of political actors, problems and solutions, as well as of what is considered political and what private as such. Accordingly, this form of power is highly comprehensive and pervasive, hardly visible and impossible to measure, at the same time.

The importance of discursive power becomes particularly clear, when we focus on sustainable development as political objective. The concept of sustainable development was placed on the international political agenda by the Brundtland Commission and its identification of the need to pursue intra- and intergenerational justice with a fostering of ecological and social objectives in conjunction with economic ones (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). While soon becoming extremely popular in political discourse, the concept has invited continuous discursive contests regarding its meaning. This is partly due to vagueness, a characteristic frequently associated with broad conceptual norms and likely necessary for their popularity. It is also due to the potential impact of the concept, or rather the pursuit of the objectives it captures on fundamental questions of societal and economic organization. In other words, when it comes to the pursuit of sustainable development a lot of actors potentially have a lot at stake.
Scholars have analyzed discursive contests regarding the construction of sustainable development in many ways. Hajer (1995) laid important groundwork here by analyzing the role of story lines and narratives in these discursive contests. Other scholars deconstructed the use of ‘sustainable development’ by various state and non-state actors and in various policy areas (Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Kalfagianni 2006; Graf 2013; Feist and Fuchs 2013). What is missing so far, however, is an analysis of the contribution of FBAs to the discursive construction of sustainable development. This is surprising as the integration of science and religion may give an integral ecological perspective and a better understanding of sustainability politics (Litfin 2003).

Indeed, a simple secular world view can be associated with many of the sources of the current ecological crisis:

Modernity’s emblematic faith in technology, the doctrine of progress, the centrality of instrumental reason, the sanctity of individual freedom, the denial of the sacred – all of these have been suggested as sources of an environmentally destructive cultural tendency (ibid., 30).

Here, the potential contribution of religion to environmental governance becomes clear. It can bring ethical arguments back into the global sustainability discourse thereby potentially enriching the secularization perspective. Moreover, religious views and arguments perhaps can help bridge the knowledge action gap and activate individual sustainable behavior (Gottlieb 2006; Wolf and Gjerris 2009; Peterson 2010). In pursuit of such objectives, we see FBAs influencing environmental negotiations, agendas, individual or in cooperation with environmental NGOs or states, resulting even in joint declarations.

The neglect of the role of FBAs in global sustainability governance is particularly surprising, moreover, as their normative objectives often would appear to go to the core of sustainable development as such: the pursuit of the good life. As pointed out above, the core of sustainable development is the idea
of inter- and intragenerational justice. Its basis is the wish to allow all human beings a life in dignity, which in turn requires the provision of a minimum in resources. This wish relates to millennia old and ongoing inquiries into the characteristics of a good life and the determinants of individual and societal capabilities for leading such a life (e.g. Aristotle and Irwin 2008; Nussbaum 2003). Not surprisingly, important representatives of different faiths have contributed their thoughts and ideas to the inquiries (Dalai Lama and Hopkins 2003).

A focus on ideas about the good life in different faiths’ communications about sustainable development highlights that there is not one universal vision about the good life in particular or sustainable development in general, even (or especially) among the different faiths. In fact, some ideas promoted by some faiths, such as a focus on the afterlife or, at the extreme, the promise of rewards in the afterlife for killing people, would contradict with ideas of a good life held by members of another (or even the same) faith. The question to what extent universalistic statements about the nature and determinants of a good life has been highly controversial, in general. Accordingly, our inquiry into references of FBAs to the good life and sustainable development is not motivated by the expectation to identify one coherent vision or position. Rather, we expect to find many different, sometimes corresponding or complementary and sometimes contradictory narratives, which in combination give a first idea of FBAs potential discursive influence on global sustainability governance.

More fundamentally, we do not assume that FBAs always pursue objectives in accordance with sustainable development. There is ambivalence in religious traditions’ relationship with the environment: on the one hand, they may contribute to an environmental ethic, on the other hand the “dark side of religious tradition” shows responsibility for the environmental crisis (Tucker 2003, 19). Therefore “blanket claims to environmental purity” have to be critically examined, as most religions have a mixed record with respect to
ecological behavior (ibid., 25). Furthermore, FBAs may well support local interests in their fight against political strategies pursuing sustainability related objectives. However, such examples are more likely below the national level and therefore less probably in our case. Yet, more in general, environmental and social sustainability objectives sometimes are at odds with each other, and even different social or environmental objectives may sometimes conflict, so that the promotion of some sustainability related objectives by FBAs (and others) could work against other sustainability related objectives.

Still, in times of an ecological crisis that calls for a normative reorientation in the eyes of many observers, FBAs may present a source of inspiration. Accordingly, we are interested in gaining a better understanding of how they contribute to global sustainability governance via the discursive construction of sustainable development and references to the good life in international political processes. In this paper, we therefore pursue a qualitative content analysis of their submissions in the context of the Rio+20 summit. This analysis does not allow us to gauge the actual discursive power, i.e. achieved influence of FBAs. However, it provides us with a first idea of the potential direction of this influence and its normative foundations.

Methodological Approach

With the concept of discursive power, we take a constructivist view on the world. From this perspective meaning finds its expression in discourses that are mediated through language. Discursive constructions can be found in texts but also performances, or discursive practices. Therefore, we look for FBAs ideas of the good life in sustainable development communications. In order to compile the material for analysis, the list of organizations at the Rio+20 conference that formally submitted an input document for the compilation of a draft outcome document for the conference was searched for those groups that
could clearly be identified as religious, faith-based or spiritual in title or own mission-statement. Of a total of 677 submissions that were recorded, 73% (493) came from major groups that comprised non-governmental actors. Among this group, 16 documents submitted by faith-based actors were selected. Additionally, the submission of the Holy See, which belongs to the group of member states but is clearly assigned to be religious, was added to the data corpus.³

Many more faith-based organizations issued statements in context of the negotiations in form of press releases, reports on their organization’s websites or documented organized side-events at the venue. Yet, in our analysis only those articulations were of importance that were formally submitted within the policy process with the direct intention of influencing the outcome document of Rio+20. Furthermore, collaborations with other NGOs that were recorded under a secular mission statement or statements of religiously oriented states are not taken into account at this point. In a second analytical step, FBAs’ submissions were compared with the conference outcome document ‘The Future We Want’ that was adopted by the General Assembly.

In the compiled sample, a majority of eleven submissions were presented by Christian groups, only four were interfaith statements, and Buddhist and Baha'í faith groups were only represented in one statement. Most of the selected 17 submissions do not represent the view of single organizations. Instead, they are joint submissions of a consortium of organizations. They may include all national subgroups of one global organization or even an alliance of groups of the same faith from different countries. Particularly Christian consortiums such as the World Council of Churches or the ACT Alliance (Alliance of Churches Together) represent far more than hundred national and

³ The analyzed submission were of the following organizations: APRODEV and ACT Alliance, Baha’i International Community, Caritas Oceania, Christian Aid, CIDSE, Coalition of Faith-based Organizations, Earth Charter International, Edmund Rice International, Holy See, Interfaith Consortium for Ecological Civilization, Interfaith Peacebuilding and Community Revitalization, Jacob Soetendorp Institute for Human Values, Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, Soka Gakkai International, United Methodist Church, World Council of Churches and Lutheran World Federation, World Vision International.
local member organizations. The submissions address very different themes and we will therefore concentrate in this paper on FBAs’ understanding of sustainable development as well as their interpretation of the concept of green economy in context of the good life.

The compiled material was analyzed in a qualitative content analysis. Codes were developed from the material (‘in-vivo’), which were organized into different thematic codes and linked to further sub-codes in the process of the analysis. For the purpose of this paper, we concentrated particularly on articulations of the good life that were reflected in discussions on sustainable development and the purpose of the green economy. In a second step, the generated thematic codes were applied to analyze the content of the Rio+20 outcome documents. Finally, the results of the analysis of FBA submission were compared with the content-analytical results of outcome document. This comparison, then, gives a first indication of the normative base of faith-based actors in the context of global sustainability governance and in which way they are able to exercise discursive power.

**Faith-based Actors, Sustainable Development and the Rio+20 Summit**

*Ideas and arguments in FBA’s submissions*

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) took place twenty years after the Earth Summit in Rio, where environmental issues were debated in relation to development within the global community for the first time. It revived the debate on sustainable development and aimed at developing new binding frameworks to pursue that goal in its meeting in 2012. Rio+20, thereby, posed a unique opportunity for civil society to take part in and exercise influence on the political debate on sustainability. Among the thousands of NGO participants, FBAs took part in the debate, too, through participation, organization of side-events and pre-conference meetings, or the submission of
reports and recommendations. The Rio+20 conference focused on two major themes that it asked the submitting parties to address: it aimed at establishing a concept of green economy in context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and at building an institutional framework for sustainable development that would facilitate the implementation of sustainability goals.

At the Rio+20 conference, FBAs took up the given themes in their submissions. They reflected on what the pursuit of a ‘good life’ means by engaging with different interpretations and practical considerations of the terms sustainable development and green economy. A focus on these concepts helps to discern FBAs’ different ideas on the good life. Particularly the approach to sustainable development touches upon some major constitutive philosophical questions that reflect a specific understanding of the meaning of the good life. Specifically, FBAs emphasize a different conception of a holistic approach to sustainable development than established at the Rio Conference of 1992. While that concept integrates economic, environmental and social dimensions of development, most of the FBAs argue for the integration of another dimension, which encompasses “moral, ethical and spiritual principles” (Baha'I International Community 2011). The Holy See argues that it is crucial to take into account “the material well-being of society and the spiritual and ethical values which give meaning to material and technological progress” (Holy See 2011), while Earth Charter International (2011) focuses on the integration of “Pneuma (spirit)”, Caritas Oceania (2011) on “ethical and spiritual questions” and the Soetendorp Institute (2011) and the ICEC (2011) emphasize “the spiritual dimension of sustainability”. These perspectives interpret a good life in a holistic understanding of sustainable development that interrelates material and immaterial values – in the words of the Earth Charter Initiative –, “when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more” (Earth Charter International 2011).
Yet, not all faith organizations refer to the broader philosophical perspective of holism and spiritual values directly. Most FBA statements analyzed base their argument on decentering the debate from structural conditions of sustainable development towards the human as such. Therewith, they re-emphasize the first principle of the Rio Declaration of 1992, which stated that “human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development” (UNCED 1992). Likewise, most statements acknowledge that “sustainable development is first and foremost about people” (CIDSE 2011). The human-centered conceptualization of sustainable development, in turn, brings forth a widely shared understanding to integrate rights-based approaches into the concept. This frames the discussion on sustainable development as a matter of human rights and therefore calls for an “integrated human rights framework” (World Council of Churches and Lutheran World Federation 2011). Linking sustainability with human rights and particularly human development emphasizes the right to development and puts the well-being, fate and dignity of the human at the center of their concern. This is presented as a way to ensure human well-being and social equity as main principles of a good life that set the bottom-line for any further political and economic action.

In contrast to an overarching focus on human rights in FBAs’ submissions, only few statements argue for an equal consideration of nature’s intrinsic rights in the form of Earth rights. The United Methodist Church, for instance, argues for a planetary vision in which humans and earth are in a balanced and inclusive relationship as “earth rights are human rights” (United Methodist Church 2011) and Maryknoll Sisters maintain to broaden “human rights to include earth rights” (Maryknoll Sisters 2011). Yet, in most submissions the focus is clearly human-centered and securing human rights presides in dealings with the environment. This is also represented in denominations such as the “human family” (Holy See 2011; Maryknoll Sisters 2011; Jacob Soetendorp Institute for Human Values 2011) “one human family” (CIDSE 2011), “community of life”
or “Earth community” (Earth Charter International 2011), which show the importance of a basic communitarian sense of belonging to a human family in ideas on the good life.

This sense of belonging leads to a shared responsibility of human kind and the international community for taking action. Yet, the imperative to take responsibility derives from different forms of reasoning: Some statements clearly present a religious reasoning by referring to a religious system of order and a religious conscience such as the principle of compassion, the “sacred duty to lead through example” (Jacob Soetendorp Institute for Human Values 2011) or human stewardship to take care of God’s creation (Coalition of Faith-based Organizations). Yet, other statements reference to responsibility is reasoned with a moral imperative based on a non-religious conviction to preserve human dignity and strive for justice and fairness in development. Though providing different reasoning, the human is put at the center of sustainable development discourses. This enables focusing on other, related ethical issues of concern such as questions of justice and fairness, options for the disadvantaged and their empowerment, which all play an important role in the submissions. FBAs particularly want the issue of equity in sustainable development to be practically addressed by the international community.

The discussions on green economy, which was one of the major themes to be addressed in the preparatory inputs, reflects these different understandings of sustainable development. While some FBAs questioned the concept of green economy as such, others discussed its applicability based on their ethical perspective. The main suggestions on green economy found in the submissions are related to its social objectives based on the proposed rights-based approaches. FBAs particularly relate green economy to issues of justice and fairness and make the establishment of a just and fair economy a major concern. Accordingly, “economic justice must be at the foundation of discussions of the economy” (United Methodist Church 2011), which “requires
the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty” (Baha’I International Community 2011) in a green economy. Particularly Christian organizations argue “that a green and just economy has to be measured according to the well-being of all and not just a few” (World Council of Churches and Lutheran World Federation 2011) and that it needs to improve “human well-being and social equity” (APRODEV and ACT Alliance 2011). Most of the submissions proceed from the ethical point-of-view that an economy also has to pursue social objectives and cannot be seen as divorced from human wellbeing.

Interestingly, while clearly subscribing to the pursuit of a just economy, many submissions do not reflect a questioning of the economic system that rests on economic growth as such. The Coalition of faith-based NGOs, for instance, stipulates that “economic growth is not the problem. The economy needs to generate benefits. The concern is about equity and shared benefits” (Coalition of Faith-based Organizations 2011). Similarly the United Methodist Church sees economic justice as the consideration of the well-being of the poor and vulnerable in any notion of economic growth (United Methodist Church 2011). Most of the organizations look for ways how “pillars of sustainable development can be successfully integrated” in the green economy (World Vision International 2011). However, some groups contest the concept as such. The Catholic alliance CIDSE, for instance, warns that “a focus on ‘Green Economy’ should not become a substitute for the objective of Sustainable Development” (CIDSE 2011). It questions its function as the main tool towards sustainable development and argues instead that “a true reflection on Sustainable Development should include a questioning of existing economic trends and shouldn’t be equated with the notion of sustainable growth” (ibid.). Other organizations similarly argue that the themes of green economy and sustainable development seem to lack coherence and warn against the replacement of one term with the other (Edmund Rice International 2011).
These different dealings with the concept of green economy are reflected in the suggested political interventions. Some FBAs bring forth the more general objective of an “equitable and just global trade system” (Holy See 2011) or “economic sufficiency” (Jacob Soetendorp Institute for Human Values 2011) that are based on human-centered conceptions of the good life and not on the paradigm of economic growth. At the same time, other submissions suggest more concrete instruments to make the economy more just such as through changes in international taxation system (Christian Aid 2011) or governance of multilateral financing mechanisms (APRODEV and ACT Alliance 2011) that are articulated within the limits of the present economic system. This also manifests in demands to keep the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities that was adopted already in the 1992 declaration. This principle brings along an equitable distribution of the costs of ecological sustainability among the developed and the developing world as well as the development of new indicators to measure national wealth and human development besides GDP (‘GDP+’).

These discussion of the concept sustainable development and green economy give us a first idea what a good life means in this context. FBAs put the human at the center of development and the economy. Therewith, proceeding from the human ability to pursue a good life, a focal concern is providing them with the necessary material and immaterial abilities to do so. Ensuring human rights is part of the purpose of a good life and this also enables to reveal the moral limits of the economic system. While all FBAs see justice as necessary to ensure a good life, differences show in claims of economic justice by means of empowerment and deliberation or instrumental measures and redistribution. In sum, FBAs sustainable development communications reflect an understanding of the good life that centers on the material and spiritual development of the human, yet, they differ in ideas on its realization.
FBA’s views and arguments in the outcome document

The outcome document of Rio+20, *The Future We Want*, is a 53-page document that summarizes the conference’s vision and political commitment to action to ensure sustainable development. A reaffirmation of the principles of the 1992 document and other international agreements takes up most of its space. It reflects some of the concerns and claims of FBAs particularly in its more general visionary part. It calls for “holistic and integrated approaches to sustainable development” *(UN Conference on Sustainable Development 2012, B.40)* and argues that people are at the center of sustainable development. Therewith it reasons “to strive for a world that is just, equitable and inclusive, [...] and to promote sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development and environmental protection” *(ibid, I.6)*. A rights-based approach is reflected in “respect for all human rights, including the right to development and the right to an adequate standard of living” *(ibid, I.8)*. Furthermore, the theme of equity is acknowledged in reaffirming the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities *(ibid, II.15)*. These issues are also reflected in the section on green economy that is seen as driving empowerment, respect for all human rights and equitable economic growth.

Although the outcome document represents some of the themes that were addressed by FBAs, yet, it only reaffirms the main principles of sustainable development already agreed upon in 1992. Actually, many major issues such as an ethical perspective and reframing of the green economy debate were not taken up. For instance, the entire document does not use the words spirit, religion, moral or ethics that may indicate that the three-pillar holistic understanding of sustainable development may be broadened to another dimension. Furthermore, while acknowledging “broader measures of progress to complement GDP” or “the rights of nature”, the wording at this point is indefinite and only ‘recognizes’ or ‘notes’ without taking any concrete measures. In light of differing state interests, where the acknowledgment of the principle
of equity may have consequences for environmental and financial engagement of industrialized states, some observers found the inscription of equity in the affirmation of the ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ principle already a success. From an FBA perspective, however, only the bottom-line claims were adopted without making any substantial progress on implementing a rights-based approach to sustainable development and a fair economic system.

An analysis of the outcome document indicates that the discursive influence of FBAs seems marginal. While reflecting some of the main approaches that FBAs see as necessary to ensure every human’s ability to pursue the good life, they are mainly a re-affirmation of the 1992 principles. Yet, it is difficult to assess in which way their inclusion can be traced back to the discursive influence of FBAs or to the influence of other stakeholders. Furthermore, more progressive ideas on the good life that were directed at reimaging the economic system and broadening our general understanding of sustainable development were not taken up. However, the analysis shows that there are articulations of the religious represented within the sustainable development discourse in the international arena and it provides us with a first idea of the potential direction of this its normative foundations.

**Conclusion**

Civil society increasingly takes part in global sustainability governance and so do FBAs. In this paper, we looked at how FBAs contribute to global sustainability governance by providing ideas on sustainable development that reflect distinct visions of the good life. We were particularly interested how they discursively constructed sustainable development via discursive power. A content-analysis of the submission of FBAs to Rio+20 and the outcome document analyzed the normative basis of FBAs engagement and tried to assess their discursive power.
In their submissions to Rio+20, a majority of FBAs showed an ethically grounded rights-based perspective by bringing the human into the center of the sustainable development and green economy debate. The good life was reflected in ideas on equity and human well-being that instructed claims for a just economy. However, FBAs submissions diverged on how to enable humans to pursue a good life within a just economy. While some emphasized the inclusion of more general social and ethical objectives into the economy, other FBAs tried to shape governance arrangements by suggesting concrete policy instruments in context of the green economy. Though some of the themes are reflected in the outcome document, many more progressive ideas on a just green economy or other ethical assumptions were not taken up. In many respects, the Rio+20 document only reaffirms old principles and it is difficult to say whether these are the result of the discursive shaping of FBA submissions. Still, the representation of the religious or ethical within the official discourse supports the claim that religion and politics are not separate, but that they are interrelated.

Our analysis shows that FBAs stress the ethical challenges of the ecological crisis and provide a normative discourse based on religious practices that fills an important gap in global sustainability governance. However, whether FBAs are agents of change and able to transform norms within the global discourse on sustainable development is difficult to answer, at this point. Particularly, the difference to other environmental or development NGOs, their collaboration with other civil society actors or the representation of the religious within sustainable development discourses of states, needs to be further examined. This paper only attempted to take a first step in this endeavor and further research could bring more insights on the role of FBAs and ethics within global sustainability discourse.
References


