



Research Training Group  
STANDARDS OF GOVERNANCE



TECHNISCHE  
UNIVERSITÄT  
DARMSTADT

# Standards of Sustainability: Governing Labor and Nature

25–26 June 2026

*Technical University of Darmstadt*

Hosted by the DFG Research Training Group ‘Standards of Governance’

## Venue:

Residenzschloss Darmstadt

S3|12, Rooms 11 and 12 (connected; please use either entrance)

The workshop, **Standards of Sustainability: Governing Labor and Nature**, brings together scholars working on transnational regulation, environmental governance, and labor standards. Organized within the framework of the DFG Research Training Group “Standards of Governance,” the workshop explores how sustainability and labor norms are institutionalized and operationalized through public, private, and hybrid forms of standardization. The workshop is structured around two focal points. The first workshop day will address questions surrounding the governance by sustainability standards in fields such as finance, judicial decision-making, and supply chain law. It also examines the particularities of standards of governance that are conceptualized as minimum standards in human rights contexts. On the second day, contributions focus on the relationship between (global) standard-setters and their (local) addressees.

Standards interact with multiple sites of authority, including states, and delegate responsibilities across public and private actors. Whether sustainability and labor standards are effective and (democratically) legitimate are empirical questions the workshop seeks to address. This includes a discussion of their normative foundations: Standards embody and promote diverse values and rationales, from extractivist logics and growth imperatives to more robust sustainability understandings, often with implicit authoritative claims vis-à-vis other regulatory actors.

Although sustainability and labor standards are often developed far from sites of production, they travel across borders and reshape governance on the ground. Their implementation, however, remains uneven and contested. The workshop investigates how (trans)national standards are adopted, resisted, or reinterpreted in local contexts. This contestation can stem from alternative regulatory approaches grounded in community governance or indigenous rights, approaches that challenge dominant sustainability and labor regimes. Resistance, however, also comes from powerful corporate and state actors who seek to block more stringent regulation to uphold extractive or exploitative practices. Increasingly, established far-right and (semi-)authoritarian actors actively undermine environmental and social standards altogether.

The workshop gives doctoral and postdoctoral researchers an opportunity to present and discuss their own work in dialogue with Professor Tim Bartley’s contributions and within the broader research agenda of the Research Training Group.

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## Day 1 | 25 June: Courts, Politics, and Sustainability Standards

### 09:00–09:30

**Welcome & introduction** – Jens Steffek and Julia Drubel

– Introduction to the Research Training Group and the Aims of the Workshop

Prof. Dr. Jens Steffek, Speaker of the Research Training Group ‘Standards of Governance’ (RTG), Professor of Transnational Governance at the Institute for Political Science at Technical University of Darmstadt.

Dr. Julia Drubel, Postdoctoral Researcher and Scientific Coordinator of the RTG at Technical University of Darmstadt.

### 09:30–11:00

**Keynote Lecture by Professor Tim Bartley:** Rethinking Voluntary and Mandatory Standards: Due Diligence and Supply Chain Regulation in a De-regulatory Moment

Tim Bartley, Ph.D., Professor, Earth Commons and Department of Sociology, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

### 11:00–11:30 Coffee break

### 11:30–12:30

**Michael Schedelik:** Geopolitics of Green Finance: Diverging Pathways in Sustainability Reporting Standards (with Sylvain Maechler)

This article develops a novel account of the global politics of green finance by examining the divergent trajectories of sustainability reporting standards across jurisdictions. While scholarship in international political economy (IPE) has emphasized the role of norms, ideas, and reputational dynamics, and comparative political economy (CPE) has foregrounded domestic growth models, interest coalitions, and institutional configurations in shaping green transition pathways, we identify a critical yet underexplored dimension: the role of geopolitical dynamics. We argue that global power asymmetries, infrastructural interdependencies, and jurisdictional rivalries are central to understanding why green financial governance is fragmenting rather than converging. Our empirical focus is on the development and adoption of sustainability disclosure frameworks. Drawing on content analysis of policy documents, official communications, and specialized media, we ask: why do some jurisdictions adopt emerging international standards—specifically those advanced by the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) as a ‘global baseline’—while others pursue distinct regulatory pathways? We examine the contrasting, autonomous strategies of major powers—the European Union, China, and the United States—and the alignment of smaller jurisdictions such as Canada and Switzerland with the ISSB framework. We argue that large jurisdictions seek to externalize their preferred standards as instruments of geopolitical influence, while small and middle powers face strategic decisions about whether to adopt dominant frameworks or align with a ‘neutral’ baseline. By foregrounding these dynamics, the article bridges IPE and CPE perspectives on green transition policy and contributes to emerging debates on the global political economy of sustainability reporting.

Dr. Michael Schedelik, Research Associate, International Relations and International Political Economy, Goethe University Frankfurt.

Sylvain Maechler, Ph.D., Postdoctoral Researcher, Visiting Lecturer, International Relations and Political Science at Geneva Graduate Institute.

### 12:30-13:30 Lunch

13:30 – 15:30

**Andreas Corcaci:** Judicial Governance In Turbulent Times

This paper investigates how member states adapt to Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) judgments in environmental infringement cases over time, with a focus on temporal dynamics driven by turbulence. Environmental damage is intensifying amid turbulent shifts such as populist backlash against protective measures and major policy transitions like the European Green Deal's evolution into the Clean Industrial Deal. Effective environmental protection depends on functioning governance, including the European judicial system, but the judicial stage of infringement proceedings and related member state reactions remains underexplored in the implementation literature. This gap is particularly consequential given that European environmental law accounts for roughly 21% of all active infringement cases and 58% of those before the CJEU as of December 2025.

The study addresses this gap by developing an integrated theoretical framework that synthesizes enforcement and management approaches in a formalized concept structure, treating turbulence as an endogenous temporal mechanism, a 'new normal' recurrent across different periods. *What accounts for the national adaptation of CJEU judgments on environmental infringements in turbulent times?* To answer this question, the framework is operationalized through indicators from the Manifesto Project and Comparative Political Data Set, incorporating conditions from the comparative politics literature such as political attitudes and ideology, or institutional capacities and complexity, while adaptation is measured using the Commission infringement database. A key proposition is that turbulent periods facilitate or impede adaptation along political and institutional pathways, making it a configurational phenomenon subject to future temporal set-theoretical analysis.

Dr. Andreas Corcaci, Affiliated Senior Researcher at the University of Antwerp and the Research Institute of the University of Bucharest (ICUB).

**Tabea Heppner & Svea Knebel:** Minimum Standards in Contexts of Structural Injustice: Responsibility, Human Rights, and Legal Struggles

Around the world, the threshold of intolerable behaviour is under attack. From the rollback of environmental protections and labour standards in global supply chains, to the systematic disregard for asylum seekers' rights at the EU's external borders, to the open defiance of internationally agreed climate commitments, minimum standards are being challenged. This working paper will, based on this observation, take a step back to zoom in on the concept of minimum standards. While we ground our account in the state of the art of international standard research, we expand on this by situating minimum standards in contexts of structural injustice, combining political theory and legal research.

For this purpose, we proceed in four steps. First, we locate minimum standards in standards research and develop a relational understanding of minimum standards. This connects them, first, to social structures and, second, to normative questions, such as injustice. In a second step, following Iris Marion Young, we look at their role in contexts of structural injustice and their implications for responsibility and liability. In a third step,

we shift to a legal perspective by examining legal struggles and the impact of minimum standards within them. We then discuss – in connection to the previous point - limits and potential of claiming minimum standards to uncover (structural) injustice. Finally, we synthesize these strands of thought in light of our conceptualization of minimum standards.

Tabea Heppner, M.A., Doctoral Candidate at the Research Training Group 'Standards of Governance' (RTG) and Research Associate at the Chair of Political Science with a Focus on Political Theory under Prof. Dr. Sandra Seubert, Goethe University Frankfurt.

Svea Knebel, Dipl.-Jur./B.A., Doctoral Candidate at the RTG and Research Associate at the Institute for Public Law, Professor Ute Sacksofsky, M.P.A. (Harvard), Goethe University Frankfurt.

### **15:30–16:00 Coffee break**

### **16:00-17:00**

**Lena Gigerl:** The Green Deal's 'Flagship Project' as a 'Symbol of Red Tape': On the Politicisation of the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive

The EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) was one of the most politicised files in the last term. As 'flagship project' of the Green Deal, the CSDDD signalled the EU's taking of responsibility for the protection of human rights and the environment both domestically and abroad. Yet, the CSDDD was increasingly contested as 'symbol of red tape', as the negotiations thereover went on. How did these dynamics impact its adoption? Analysing the 2022-2024 negotiations, this paper finds both detrimental and productive aspects of the CSDDD's politicisation, and argues that while the CSDDD's contestation resulted in an overall lower policy ambition, its high salience explains why it was adopted at all, after a previously reached agreement between the co-legislators had failed. This contribution adds a more nuanced perspective to existing accounts on the effects of politicisation, and might also help in understanding the recent developments surrounding 'Omnibus I'.

Lena Gigerl, M.A., Doctoral Candidate at the DFG Research Training Group 'Standards of Governance' and Research Associate at the Chair of Transnational Governance headed by Prof. Dr. Jens Steffek, Technical University of Darmstadt.

### **End of day 1 / from 19:00 onwards Workshop Dinner (informal)**

**09:00–11:00**

**Imge Akaslan:** Human Rights Due Diligence and Norm Translators

Human rights due diligence (HRDD) has taken center stage within the business and human rights (BHR) regime but research on the process of HRDD and the responsibilities of various actors within the BHR context in terms of regulation and conducting due diligence remains rare. This research explores one of the vital but hidden actors' roles: sourcing agents, their responsibilities, and their potential contribution to HRDD mechanisms in global supply chains. Sourcing agents are intermediaries between global buyers and suppliers in supply chains. They receive orders from multinational buyers, find suppliers, and organize all the steps of the production process in the local context, including social compliance process. Therefore, those agents act as norm translators, as they translate global human rights norms to local settings. Through 37 in-depth interviews with the various actors in the Turkish garment and textile industries between 2018 and 2022, this article shows that corporations need to collaborate with various actors and stake holders at the domestic level to 'know and show' their respect for human rights through the use of due diligence mechanisms. Thus, involvement of domestic level actors in due diligence mechanisms is essential for corporations. This article argues that a key policy priority for better labor rights standards in global supply chains should be including sourcing agents in the design of human rights due diligence processes.

Imge Akaslan, Ph.D., Senior Research Fellow at Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, Heidelberg.

**Aarti Gupta:** Rule Taker or Rule Maker? How South Africa Engages with Global Climate Transparency Standards (with Max van Deursen)

We examine how countries engage domestically with multilateral climate transparency guidelines and standards, which we conceptualize here as a site wherein dominant global understandings of how to address climate change and who needs to act are negotiated, selected, and operationalized. These dominant understandings privilege quantitatively assessable mitigation-focused climate actions, as being at the core of a collective global response to climate change. Using South Africa as a case, we examine the nature of engagement with and uptake of this approach domestically, as channelled through elaborate transparency (reporting and review) guidelines and obligations (seen here as 'transparency standards'). Our analysis reveals a typology of forms of engagement by South Africa, from resistance to domestication to separation, with implications for how global transparency standards exercise steering effects domestically on climate priorities and actions. In concluding, we reflect on whether and to what extent developing countries are rule makers or rule takers in global climate governance, as illustrated by this case.

Prof. Dr. Aarti Gupta, Professor of Global Environmental Governance with the Environmental Policy Group, Department of Social Sciences, Wageningen University.

Max van Deursen, M.Sc., Managing Director of the Secretariat of the International Panel on Earth System Governance (IPESG), Hosted at Utrecht University.

**11:00–11:30 Coffee break**

**11:30–12:30**

**Verena Lasso Mena:** Governing Resource Extraction, Producing Violence: Unpacking Attacks on Environmental Defenders in Colombia

Violence against environmental and land defenders is a global phenomenon, with mining and land conflicts associated with particularly high levels of violence. In Colombia, such violence is especially pronounced, with social leaders opposing extractive projects and land dispossession, as well as those defending Indigenous rights and broader socio-ecological relations, frequently targeted. This is particularly evident in gold mining regions, where formal, informal, and criminal forms of resource extraction overlap. This article examines the violence-extraction nexus in Antioquia, a major gold-producing region marked by overlapping forms of extraction and authority. It asks: (1) how does the coexistence of formal, informal, and criminal gold mining shape violence against environmental defenders? and (2) what forms of violence emerge in this constellation — and how do they differ? The article argues that violence cannot be explained by state absence or illegality alone. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of formal, informal, and criminal forms of mining within hybrid gold frontiers. The state is unevenly present, privileging large-scale extraction while selectively repressing informal mining and interacting with armed non-state actors over territorial control. These actors are deeply embedded in and exercise coercive control over resource extraction, while the criminalization of highly heterogeneous artisanal and small-scale mining legitimizes state intervention alongside the promotion of large-scale extraction. These dynamics generate multiple forms of harm against defenders, from structural marginalization to direct attacks. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and field research in the Bajo Cauca subregion of Antioquia, a key gold mining frontier, the article shows that violence is multi-scalar and produced through interactions among multiple and contested forms of authority. It contributes to debates on extractivism and violence by demonstrating that violence is intensified through the entanglement of formal and informal extraction, rather than merely resulting from their coexistence.

Verena Lasso Mena, M.A., Research Associate at the Chair of International Relations headed by Prof. Dr. Markus Lederer; Research Fellow in the Cooperative Project of the Regional Research Center 'Transformations of Political Violence (TraCe).'

**12:30-13:30 Lunch****13:30-15:30**

**Andrea Heigl:** Contestation of Sustainability Standards in EU Free-Trade Agreements

Over the past two decades, sustainability standards relating to environmental protection and labor rights have increasingly been incorporated into free trade agreements (FTAs) that the EU has concluded with third countries. However, ongoing crises and geopolitical considerations have recently called for stronger resilience and diversification strategies. Furthermore, there has been an increase in political movements favoring national and economic interests, protectionist policies, and deregulation. In this context, sustainability standards in EU trade policy are subject to an ongoing process of contestation and dismantling.

Firstly, to provide participants with an introduction to this topic and an overview, this contribution will examine which environmental protection and labor rights standards are incorporated in the EU's FTAs, how these standards are expressed in legal texts, and how they are embedded in the broader context of sustainability standards in EU trade policy.

Secondly, this contribution will map the actors involved in contesting sustainability standards in FTAs, particularly during the negotiation and re-negotiation phases. Therefore, the recently concluded EU-Mercosur Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is employed as an empirical case. In addition, actors will be investigated in the context of integration in and dependencies on global supply chains. Furthermore, the strategies and narratives that actors employ to advance their agendas will be examined and the potential coalitions that actors might form to this end be discussed.

Andrea Heigl, M.A., doctoral candidate at the DFG Research Training Group “Standards of Governance” and Research Associate at the Chair of “Transnational Governance” of Prof. Dr. Jens Steffek, Technical University of Darmstadt.

### **Julia Drubel:** The Contestation of EU Sustainability Standards in Ontario’s Forest Sector

The EU Regulation on deforestation-free products (EUDR) is widely regarded as a key instrument for disciplining global forest-risk supply chains. By linking market access to due diligence obligations and risk-based sustainability standards, it seeks to reorganize forest-based production networks beyond EU borders. Yet this paper shows how the regulation is discursively reworked into a framework that largely preserves established modes of industrial forestry.

Drawing on a qualitative case study of Canada, with a focus on Ontario, the paper examines how EUDR standards are not simply implemented, but actively contested by state, industry, and civil-society actors. Contestation proceeds through three techniques: promoting rival definitions of forest degradation, challenging measurement and verification systems epistemically, and mobilizing competing normative claims around employment, industrial policy, and Indigenous rights.

The findings suggest that the transformative potential of supply chain regulation depends less on formal legal design than on how sustainability standards are negotiated within existing governance systems. These contestations tend to accommodate industrial forestry, enabling formal compliance while limiting substantive change. The paper contributes to debates on transnational environmental governance by conceptualizing standardization as a contested process with significant distributional effects.

**15:30 End of the workshop**