

# Social Sustainability: An Ambiguous Concept, Areas of Tension and Ways Forward

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## *Abstract*

*The 50th anniversary of the Club of Rome report on The Limits of Growth is a good opportunity to think about what sustainability and particularly social sustainability mean. The introduction contextualizes the concerns that came up when the report was written by presenting some influential texts of the time. Some ideas of the way the social world is connected to the environment were formulated in the Club of Rome executive committee's commentary at the end of the scientific report, yet they were not further pursued. The report was contested by the Bariloche countermodel of Latin American researchers. These scholars included issues of power, dependent development, exploitation, poverty, and social justice into their model. It was the approach of the Brundtland Report that popularized the concept of sustainability with its three dimensions (ecological, economic, and social). However, the concept of social sustainability has remained vague. Two perspectives are discussed: the dependency of the social world on the natural environment and sustainability of the social world. This editorial concludes with a presentation of most recent publications that understand social sustainability as a transformation of society towards sustainability integrating all three dimensions.*

*Keywords: social sustainability, sustainable development, Brundtland Report, Club of Rome report*

## **Introduction**

Fifty years ago, the Club of Rome mandated a group of MIT researchers to analyze trends on the basis of the present indicators of the state of the world. By means of complex computer

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simulations and by giving an account of the world's population, its need for food, the modes of production, and natural resources, the report informed about the consequences of “five major trends of global concern – accelerating industrialization, rapid population growth, widespread malnutrition, depletion of nonrenewable resources, and a deteriorating environment” (Meadows, Meadows, Randers and Behrens III 1972: 21). It also predicted absolute limits to growth:

*If the present rate of increase in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and exploitation of natural resources continues unabated, the absolute limits to growth on Earth will be reached in the course of the next hundred years. In all likelihood, this will lead to a fairly rapid and unstoppable decline in population and industrial capacity. (Meadows et al. 1972: 23)*

This evocative and influential report, titled *The Limits of Growth*, turned out to be probably the most influential book on sustainability in the 1970s. Its results were broadly debated as groundbreaking and nonsensical (Passell, Roberts and Ross 1972). It was published after some precursors and pioneers discussed the way that societies and economies use or exploit natural resources and the environment. They both documented similar and emphasized other issues and have influenced the world until today, not least by triggering various social movements. Carl von Carlowitz (1645-1714) and Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) were among the early authors to write about the way humankind viewed the natural world and dealt with the connection between ecological sustainability and the economy (in the Global North). Carl von Carlowitz used the term *sustainability* to describe the principle of cutting only as many trees as can grow back to ensure wood for the future (Pufé 2014). This perspective laid the foundation for understanding ecological sustainability as well as a resource-economic principle. It emphasizes sustainability of environmental resources, i.e., their durability over time, by planning change processes and asking how forest resources need to be managed to reproduce themselves and persist despite being used.

Alongside other economists of his time, Malthus extended this resource-economic principle to the close interconnection of population growth and the growth of the economy within limited natural resources in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1998 [1798]). He was concerned with how demographic growth would exceed food production and lead to poverty and famine.

The discussion about the links between population, economy and nature really took off after the Second World War. In the 1960s, a time when the economy was booming, a fundamental critique of developments in the world emerged from different directions: ruptures in the economy's success, such as major industrial pollution and environmental disasters (such as the Santa Barbara oil spill), and long-term consequences of the use of pesticides became visible. The destruction of entire ecosystems was documented. There were strong concerns about geo-political tensions accompanied by nuclear armament and radiation as well as about the growing inequalities between the Global North and the Global South. The economic growth model, industrialization, modernization itself, were questioned and criticized. These ruptures found expression in various books that are considered to have laid the foundation for environmental and emancipatory movements. These books highlight the emerging economic, ecologic and social tensions at the time.

In her book *Silent Spring* (1962), Rachel Carson questions economic growth and points at its impact on the environment. She was critical of society's attitude that nature exists only to serve the economy and be useful for humankind. For Carson, nature had an inherent value of its own. Tracing the multiple and permanent damage of insecticides to the ecosystem, in particular dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), and documenting the reduction of biodiversity due to the use of pesticides in agriculture triggered international debates and eventually led to a ban on the use of DDT.

Paul Ehrlich and his wife Anne, who was not officially acknowledged as an author, published the controversial book *The Population Bomb* (1975 [1968]). In line with Malthus' concepts, the authors linked world population growth and overpopulation to the capacity for food production. They concluded that the (exponential) population increase was the major problem for humankind's coexistence and survival. They argued that overpopulation caused many of the alarming events and that the planet Earth was increasingly bereft of its natural resources. The first paragraph of the prologue to the book reads as a wake-up call: "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. [...] [H]undreds of millions of people are going to starve to death [...] [N]othing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate" (Ehrlich 1975 [1968]: xi). The book had serious and extensive consequences: it was politically translated into large sterilization campaigns targeting women in developing countries.

Some authors criticized the capitalist economy and its focus on growth at the expense of welfare, well-being and development. In his book *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, Ernst Friedrich Schumacher (1974: 72) criticized the devaluation of human beings in pursuit of profitability, the "idolatry of gigantism", and the increase or growth in all domains (mass production, mass media, etc.). Therefore, he noted, development could not consist in transposing the modern model of development to the 'less developed' countries as this did not solve the problem that the modern economy was not sustainable. He suggested a people-centered economy by down-scaling and decentralizing the economy to achieve sustainability. Only that would enable environmental and human sustainability.

Dudley Seers, in his text *The Meaning of Development* (1969), criticized that the gross domestic product is not an adequate indicator of the development of societies. He suggested alternatives that focuses on people, such as the reduction of poverty, unemployment, and social inequality.

By explaining why economic growth would not lead to development, Fred Hirsch (2005 [1976]) went beyond Seers and Schumacher, theoretically. He argued that economic growth was fetishized at the societal level. The fetishization of economic growth leads people to use and consume more resources than they actually need and therefore to overexploit limited natural resources. Distinguishing between 'necessary' basic goods and 'positional' goods (similar to Veblen's (1918 [1899]) concept of *conspicuous consumption*), he argued that necessary goods improve living conditions and quality of life for all people, whereas positional goods strengthen status and differentiation within societies. Therefore, an increase in positional goods and economic growth entrenches rather than reduces social inequalities and also leads to a greater and more rapid exploitation of the limited natural resources. This reasoning links economic growth, environmental problems, and social inequality. Hirsch's conclusion was that development

should focus on people's well-being and welfare and that development or growth of the economy are only means towards that. Sustainability is about meeting basic needs and enabling the development of the potentials and capabilities of all people.

The 50th anniversary of the Club of Rome report is a good opportunity to think about what *sustainability* and particularly *social sustainability* mean. Although the debate on sustainability emerged rather from a demographic, economic, and ecological perspective, already some key publications point toward issues of people's well-being, welfare and social justice. The rest of the editorial to this special issue is structured as follows. The next section explores the Club of Rome report in more detail. It is followed by a section on the Bariloche model, a countermodel developed by researchers from Latin America. These scholars included issues of power, dependent development, exploitation, poverty, and social justice into their model. Thereafter, we briefly present the Brundtland Report that popularized the three-dimensional concept of sustainability (ecological, economic, and social). Of the three dimensions required for sustainability, *social sustainability* has remained the vaguest. In the following section we present two perspectives on social sustainability. The necessarily incomplete framework we develop in this editorial aims at systematizing the multifaceted literature on social sustainability, including the thematic articles and Forum contributions in this special issue that explores aspects of social sustainability. We conclude with some thoughts on social sustainability as a transformation of society and present some concepts that point to possible ways forward.

### **The Club of Rome Report**

As the brief contextualization in the introduction shows, although the publication *Limits to Growth* presented a model simulating future trends that were based on the indicators available and using cutting-edge methods for its predictions, it did not fundamentally question the inequalities in power, resources and consumption in the world upon which the dominant economic model was based. Pessimistic predictions about the world's future predominate in the *Limits to Growth* model, but the authors also suggest some positive alternatives based on the help of technology and with trade-offs of freedoms in a world in an "equilibrium state". Although not

*free from pressures [...] it would require trading certain human freedoms, such as producing unlimited numbers of children or consuming uncontrolled amounts of resources for other freedoms, such as relief from pollution and crowding and the threat of collapse of the world system. [...] It is possible that new freedoms might also arise – universal and unlimited education, leisure for creativity and inventiveness, and, most important of all, the freedom from hunger and poverty enjoyed by such a small fraction of the world's population today. (Meadows et al. 1972: 179-180)*

Interestingly, the executive committee of the Club of Rome was somewhat more differentiated in its views and considered social issues and sustainability in its commentary at the end of the report they had mandated (for the commentary of the executive committee of the Club of Rome, see Meadows et al. 1972: 190-195). The committee acknowledges "the cost of unrestricted material growth" and the need "to consider alternatives to its continuations" (Point 1). It calls for

a common effort by all peoples of the world yet puts the main load of responsibility on the more developed countries, as

*having propagated the growth syndrome, they are still at the fountainhead of the progress that sustains it, [and] in a world that fundamentally needs stability, their high plateaus of development can be justified or tolerated only if they serve not as springboards to reach even higher, but as staging areas from which to organize more equitable distribution of wealth and income worldwide (Point 2).*

Restricting the world's demographic and economic growth, however, should not "lead to a freezing of the *status quo* of economic development", recognizing that this could be understood as "a final act of neocolonialism" (Point 9). The committee transmits the leading role of change to the economically developed countries as they have to "encourage a deceleration in the growth of their own material output while, at the same time, assisting developing nations in their efforts to advance their economies more rapidly" (Point 9). The committee concludes:

*Only real comprehension of the human condition at this turning point in history can provide sufficient motivation for people to accept the individual sacrifices and the changes in political and economic power structures required to reach an equilibrium state. (Point 10)*

The executive committee of the Club of Rome thus looks beyond the technological report and clearly addresses issues of power, social justice and equity, yet does not explain how this can be achieved. Further reports of the same tenor followed yet received much less attention. This is true even for a revised and updated edition of the first report, which concludes that the initial results remain valid and that humankind is still dangerously close to a state of exceeding the limits, followed by drastic consequences (Meadows, Randers and Meadows 2005).

Today, about half a century after the initial report, the two lines of thought regarding economic and ecological sustainability of these influential books still remain relevant. In the sustainability debate, they are distinguished by the terms *weak* and *strong* sustainability. Mainstream economists and alternative economic-ecological models (for an introduction, see Ekins 1999; Jacobs 1995) diverge in their assessments as to whether economic growth and sustainable resource use are compatible or not. In classic economics, economic growth and sustainability "is associated with the healthy functioning of a free market economy" (Whitehead 2013: 142). The economy requires growth for a growing population and therewith more resources. In classic economics, natural capital functions in the same way as human-made capital and can be infinitely substituted by human capital. This understanding of the relationship between economic and ecologic sustainability is termed "weak sustainability" (Jacobs 1995: 61-62). This means that weak sustainability does not account for the finite character of natural resources. "Strong sustainability", by contrast, considers that natural capital cannot be infinitely substituted by human capital and thus maintains "the capacities of the natural environment" (Jacobs 1995: 62). Strong sustainability therewith accounts for the needs of present and future generations as their needs should not be negatively affected by changes in the way the natural environment is composed. Thus, strong sustainability raises social, political and ethical questions as to how to ensure that future generations' needs are not compromised.

In line with the idea of strong sustainability, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and André Gorz coined the economic concept of *décroissance* in the 1970s (Whitehead 2013: 141; Lorenz 2017;

Dengler/Strunk 2018), translated into English as *degrowth*. It refers to an economy and lifestyle without growth, so that the planet's carrying capacity is not endangered, and serves and enhances human well-being and happiness (Whitehead 2013; Daly 1996). The particularity of the concept is that "it considers the socio-ecological externalities that it produces" and contributes to "thinking about how it might be possible to imagine a downsized world" (Whitehead 2013: 142).

The recent concept of a "Green Economy" (United Nations Environmental Programme 2022: 1-2) or "Green Growth" (Ekins 1999) stands somewhat in contrast to the idea of *décroissance*. These two more recent concepts are still based on (economic) growth, have been widely received and represent rather ambiguous concepts. Not least, they have been criticized from a gender perspective (Littig 2020).

The next section describes the Latin American Bariloche model that was conceptualized as an alternative model to the Club of Rome report. Whereas the Club of Rome model focused on the connection between the economy and the environment, the Bariloche model aimed at presenting a people-centered approach as one way forward for an also environmentally sustainable future.

### **The Bariloche Countermodel**

Shortly after the publication of the Club of Rome report, a group of South American sociologists around Amílcar O. Herrera and Hugo D. Scolnik elaborated a countermodel from a Global South perspective in their book *Catastrophe or New Society? A Latin American World Model* (1976), also known as the Bariloche model. This model is socio-political and emphasizes social participation and social justice in its projections. According to Herrera and Scolnik and their team, the Club of Rome report was a clear announcement that

*the fundamental problems currently facing humanity are those of physical limits. [...] The basic characteristic of this position is that it accepts, in a totally uncritical manner, the central values of society as it now is. The stance of the present authors is radically different: It is argued that the major problems are based on the uneven distribution of power, both between nations and within nations. The result is oppression and alienation, largely founded on exploitation. The deterioration of the physical environment is not an inevitable consequence of human progress, but the result of social organizations based largely on destructive values. (Herrera et al. 1976: 7)*

The Bariloche model contains various similarities to the Club of Rome's, e.g., it projects the development of the world into the future (by means of a mathematical model). However, the two reports also differ substantially: The Club of Rome builds on the existing world order and focuses on projecting present activities (in particular demographic dynamics and economic resources) and their consequences within a global model. It completely leaves out political and social aspects. The Bariloche model accounts for the aspects left out by the other. The general features it wants to account for, are

*the type of society-egalitarian, fully participatory, nonconsuming –, the [central role of the] concept of basic needs in the model, the use of a production function with substitution between capital and labor, the criteria with which the problems of natural resources, energy, and pollution would be treated, and the division of the world into regions, were defined. (Herrera et al. 1976: 5)*

In contrast to the Club of Rome’s model, the Bariloche model is explicitly normative and does not “pretend to be ‘objective’ in the sense of being value-free” as “[a]ny long-term forecast of the state of humanity is founded on a perception of the world that incorporates a system of values and a concrete ideology” (Herrera et al. 1976: 7). Underlying the model is the following normative stance: Its goal is “to indicate a way of reaching a final goal, the goal of a world liberated from underdevelopment and misery” (Herrera et al., 1976: 7).

The authors of the Bariloche model conclude that absolute physical limits do not exist for the foreseeable future if we assume a new society where the satisfaction of basic human needs (such as nutrition, housing, education, or health) is the main objective and everyone fully participates in their social and cultural environment. Demographic growth is not considered a problem, as it was in the Club of Rome model; moreover, the Bariloche model starts from the hypothesis that “the only truly adequate way of controlling population growth is by improving basic living conditions” (Herrera et al. 1976: 8), an assumption that proved to be correct in their calculations. Their message is that the “preservation of natural resources and the environment depends on the type of society envisaged” (Herrera et al. 1976: 36), and that more just societies and a more just novel world society would be a viable solution for sustainability. The intricate connection between the social order of society (social justice), economy, and the environment are ideas that have continued in most recent publications that bring together the organization of welfare and the environment (e.g., Büchs/Koch 2017; Hirvilammi/Koch 2020; Büchs 2021a; Kempf, Hujo and Pontecalderon 2022, this issue’s Forum; Opielka 2022, this issue’s Forum).

In contrast to the Club of Rome model – elaborated at the MIT in the US and not questioning capitalism and the values of industrialized countries by presenting ‘value-free’ scientific simulations, and doing so with rather violent and fear-inducing apocalyptic scenarios – the Bariloche countermodel was elaborated in Latin America, which belongs to the countries where natural resources are chiefly being exploited. The Latin American researchers connected socio-political issues of development and underdevelopment to social justice. They were influenced by the critical development literature as well as by various critical international reports, such as the Tinbergen Report (1970) and the Brandt Commission Report (1977). These address the large differences in economic dynamics between rich and poor countries. Decolonization revealed huge political, economic, and cultural inequalities between the opportunities of the Global North and the Global South (Webber 2017) and pointed at fundamental imbalances of trade and production in the global economic system. Scholars from both economics and sociology addressed these issues. Dependency theory explained the blocked economic development in developing countries with dependent and unequal exchange (e.g., Frank 1978). World society theory (e.g., Wallerstein 1974; Mandel 1995; Amin 1997) theorized global economic interdependence and the specific conditions for development in the Global South as well as structures that colonialism had created and that hampered development. Post-development theory criticizes development more fundamentally (for an overview, see, e.g., Ziai 2012).

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development emerged out of this tradition of thought. It was founded by 77 countries of the Global South that disagreed with the policies of the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. This tradition of thought considers the world trade order and modes of production as unacceptable and politically dangerous, and therefore unsustainable regarding the development of the world.

### **The Brundtland Report**

The rather pessimistic and alarming publications mentioned so far were published in “a time of optimism and progress” in the 1960s and early 1970s, “when there was greater hope for a braver new world and for progressive international ideas” (Brundtland 1987: Chairman’s Foreword, page 2). At that time, “new social movements” (Rucht 1992) emerged bottom-up, for example reviving critical societal perspectives (based on anti-capitalism, focusing on the working class as a revolutionary player and comprehensive democratization), with new and old emancipatory claims (feminist and anti-colonial movements), focusing on a better (social) world (human rights movements, the movements for peace and disarmament, for self-managed forms of life and work, or against hunger and misery in the Third World) or on sustainability issues (ecological degradation, pollution by traffic, reduction of biodiversity or radioactive contamination). Some of them transformed into political parties (for an overview, see, e.g., della Porta/Kriesi 1999).

At the same time, similar topics were discussed top-down at international conferences and in subsequent reports and conventions. The first major conference was the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment. This so-called *Stockholm Conference* aimed at well-being and basic human rights in a healthy natural environment, to be achieved through knowledge, management, technology, and international cooperation (United Nations Conference on the Human Environment 1972). The conference formulated principles for the preservation and improvement of the human environment in the Stockholm Declaration and Plan of Action and created the United Nations Environment Programme specifically dedicated to environmental issues. A string of meetings on specific topics followed. The next milestone was the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, titled *Our Common Future* (Brundtland 1987) but generally referred to as the Brundtland Report, after the chair of the commission, Gro Harlem Brundtland. It was followed by the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (“Earth Summit”) in Rio de Janeiro (United Nations 1993) and the subsequent 1997 Rio+5 conference in New York; the 2002 UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, and the 2012 Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro. During all of these conferences, the North-led understanding was challenged by actors from the South that helped to shape the Sustainable Development Goals (Fukuda-Parr/Muchhala 2020). These were developed after the Rio+20 conference and the following report, *The Future We Want* (United Nations 2012).

The Brundtland Report is probably the most widely cited reference and starting point for further reflections on sustainability in general and social sustainability in particular. It depicts uneven development, poverty and population growth as critical issues for survival and that put pressure on natural resources in the Global North as well as in the Global South. The report

defines sustainable development as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" and adds:

*The concept of sustainable development does imply limits – not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organization can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth. The Commission believes that widespread poverty is no longer inevitable. Poverty is not only an evil in itself, but sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations for a better life. A world in which poverty is endemic will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes. (Brundtland 1987: 6)*

The Brundtland Report thus

*advanced the view that environmental challenges lie at the heart of economic development, social problems and even international peace and security. Accordingly, its major lesson was that environmental concerns need to be integrated in economic policy and in mainstream decision-making (Happaerts/Bruyninckx 2014: 302).*

Sustainability depends on the integration and balance of environmental concerns to ensure that everyone – including the following generations – can meet their basic needs and aspire to and realize 'a better life' and well-being. Thus for the first time, sustainability was understood as conceptually linking social, environmental, and development or economic policy and institutional aspects of social development were received by a broad range of actors. Since then, it been used as a guiding political principle in political agendas of states, global organizations, non-profit organizations, and even social movements (Murphy 2012).

The Brundtland Report's concept of sustainability is often illustrated as having three dimensions, pillars or concentric circles representing the environmental, economic and social goals which exist side by side. Depending on the discipline, sustainability is discussed as the interaction between three *Ps* (people, plants, and profit) or three *Es* (environment, economy, and equity) (see Littig/Griessler 2005; Rogge 2001). Sustainability refers to a development in which the three components (social, economic, and environmental goals and activities) are equal in importance and somehow balanced (Happaerts/Bruyninckx 2014: 302). Yet, as many sustainability authors observe, in contrast to the ecologic and economic dimensions, the social dimension has been neglected in the scientific and political debate.

### **The Social Dimension of Sustainability: Concepts, Characteristics and Tensions**

The *social dimension* of sustainability refers to the social world. It consists both of material and of constructed features. It consists of social practices as well as perceptions that transpose into the way people act, and also includes values of how the world should be developed. As values and forms of societal organization are negotiated and realized in conflicts, the social world has an abstract and changing character. This has led some scholars to consider the social pillar as

elusive (Boyer, Peterson, Arora and Caldwell 2016: 1) or a vague and difficult to grasp concept (McGuinn et al. 2020). As Brulé (2022, this issue's Forum) argues, different scientific paradigms perceive 'the world out there' in different ways that lead to different conclusions. Social sustainability is dealt with from different perspectives: the analytical, the normative and the operative. The analytical perspective identifies and central aspects of social sustainability and their relationship to each other. The normative perspective on the social dimension deliberates about the goals societies and the world should pursue and in which ways. The operative perspective is interested in how to measure or implement sustainability (Littig/Griessler 2005). Social sustainability is dealt with on different analytical levels (micro, meso, and macro). The micro level refers to individual choices, attitudes and feelings, for example on social justice, and the macro level deals with issues such as which population groups are affected by ecological, economic or social aspects, how societies deal with vulnerable social groups or how societies protect individuals from contingencies throughout their life course or further their capabilities.

Empacher and Wehling (2002), for example, focus on the sustainability of the social world from a macro perspective. They derive five core characteristics:

*securing the existence of all members of society, the ability of social (sub-) systems and structures to develop, preservation and further development of social resources, equal opportunities in access to resources, and participation in social decision-making processes" (Empacher/Wehling 2002: 46, our translation).*

When conceptualizing social sustainability on the micro level, core characteristics usually refer to human development or well-being, whether people are able to fulfill their basic needs and to "exercise human freedoms including political rights, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security". Human development "expands social, economic, cultural, and political choices" (Magis/Shinn 2009: 19). All levels and entities constitute parts of the social world.

Analytically, the distinctions have implications for the social dimension of sustainability: norms and values differ according to entity or level and contested issues. There are various cultural and qualitative aspects of social life that "cannot be expressed in economic terms" (Herrera et al. 1976: 19). This contributes to the complexity of the social dimension and to conflicts and tensions, a topic that will be discussed in the next subsection.

### *Conflicts and tensions*

As mentioned above, the concept of sustainability is referred to as having three dimensions, depicted as pillars, circles or connected in a triangle. The illustrations depict the role and relevance of the economic, ecologic, and social dimension (Boyer et al. 2016). Tensions exist between all three dimensions. Boyer, Peterson, Arora and Caldwell (2016) identify different constellations in their review, among them the constellation that the social dimension is considered to be a constraint for economic and environmental imperatives.

Frequently, the literature focuses on tensions between two of the three dimensions. The tensions between the economic and the environmental dimensions have been spelled out in greater detail in the ongoing debates on technological development and green technology as well as by

authors dealing with *décroissance*. The relationship between the economic and the social dimension is thematized, e.g., in the valuation of work, working conditions and issues of care (Littig 2016), or as the use-value of care for societies in the growth-oriented economy (Dengler/Strunk 2018; Littig 2020). As Büchs states:

*Designing sustainable welfare systems will only be possible if we acknowledge the mutual and complex dependencies between welfare states and economic growth and if we seek to reduce the mutual dependencies between them. (2021a: 323)*

Neckel (2018), for example, deals with the social tensions and challenges produced when changes in social practices towards environmental sustainability turn into moral and social status conflicts over lifestyles. Another challenge according to Selwyn's contribution (2022, this issue's Forum) is to establish a productive dialogue between consumer-driven veganism and the Right to Food campaign to achieve a sustainable food system in the UK.

Regarding conflicts in the social dimension, distributional conflicts, e.g., regarding the use of natural resources and the effects of ecological burdens, such as pollution or climate change, exist within countries and between countries, in particular of the Global North and the Global South (see, e.g., Institute for Economics and Peace 2021), between rich and poor, or more generally between different social groups. These tensions play out not only on the micro level for individuals but can also spur organization, protests or upheavals (e.g., the French Yellow Vests).

### *The sustainability of the social world vs. its dependency on the natural environment*

Senghaas-Knobloch (2009: 570, our translation) elaborates social sustainability in terms of “the use of limited natural resources” and “durability” as “planned processes of change”. She distinguishes between the bodily existence of people and their social organization. In this vein, her understanding of the social dimension regards two distinct aspects: the “dependency of the social world on the natural environment” on the one hand, and the “duration and the quality” of the social world with its intrinsic value and logic on the other hand (Senghaas-Knobloch 2009: 570, our translation). The intrinsic value and logic of the social world refer to the variability that humankind has to organize its common life in communities and larger collectives. Social sustainability therefore means “looking at the future durability of social units (entities), especially regarding the social cohesion of such social units (entities)” (Senghaas-Knobloch 2009: 570, our translation) at different analytical levels and accounting for their particularities. In other words, some scholars understand the social dimension as referring to sustainability uniquely of the social world, whereas other scholars have an indirect understanding *the social world as dependent on the natural environment*.

The dependency of the social world on the natural environment is expressed in the analysis of the social dimension in relation to the ecological dimension, e.g., by analyzing if behaviors are conducive for ecological sustainability or not. In this understanding, many scholarly publications since Hirsch (2005 [1976]), the Club of Rome report (Meadows et al. 1972), the Bariloche model (Herrera et al. 1976) and the Brundtland Report (Brundtland 1987) imply that behaviors and institutions need to be changed. A particular focus is on the capitalist market economy and the ecologically unsustainable consumption that overproportionately takes place in the Global North. In this vein, the widely cited Brundtland Report has set the normative goal of

connecting ecologic, economic, and social sustainability and ensuring social solidarity between and within generations (Brundtland 1987: page 4 in its introduction).

Scholars focusing on this aspect consider social justice and equity important aspects of social sustainability, address inequalities between the rich and the poor, the Global North and the Global South, men and women, and the varied vulnerabilities of different population groups (Murphy 2012; Happaerts/Bruyninckx 2014). They connect the social dimension to ecological issues, such as social policies and environmental policies to combat natural disasters or enhance ecological sustainability that affects different population groups in different ways (e.g., Murphy 2012), or they focus on how socially sustainable behavior can be achieved to allow for ecological sustainability (e.g., Boström 2012, 2020, in this issue; Boyer et al. 2016; Dillard, Dujon and King 2009; Eizenberg/Jabareen 2017; Shove 2003; Selwyn 2022, this issue's Forum).

Murphy (2012) suggests the concept of public awareness to sensitize people for alternative behaviors and consumption patterns so that they become persuaded to support more restrictive environmental policies. Various authors analyzing social practices and their embeddedness in social structures and institutions (e.g., Boström 2012; Boström et al. 2018; Shove 2003) doubt that this is sufficient for social change towards ecological sustainability. Boström (2022, in this issue) argues that awareness, facts and theoretical knowledge are important yet do not suffice to change social practices. To change lifestyles and behaviors towards a less consumption-oriented *transformative learning* is necessary. Beyond awareness, transformative learning includes practical and physical learning, personal and emotional learning, social relational learning, and critical learning. It is necessarily self-reflective as it requires questioning one's own worldview, one's assumptions, one's ways of thinking and acting (and that of others). This is challenging and unsettling and requires time (Kerton/Sinclair 2010: 411). Other authors such as Selwyn (2022, this issue's Forum) point to the limits of consumer-driven change and contradictions between behaviors and moral values regarding sustainability (on the latter, see also Neckel 2020). Joseph/McAllister (2020), more fundamentally even, criticize trying to solve societal problems by changing the behavior of individuals. Brulé (2022, this issue's Forum) points to epistemological and methodological barriers that lead to apparently opposite narratives of a positive relation between individual well-being and environmental protection on the one hand and happy people in high-income countries polluting more than unhappy people from low-income countries on the other.

The second aspect of social sustainability – “duration and the quality” (Senghaas-Knobloch 2009: 570, our translation) – considers it to be an independent stand-alone pillar focusing on institutions, welfare, and well-being. This understanding deals with both the socially constructed, abstract and immaterial social world and its institutions, such as the quality of social relationships, well-being or social justice, access to and distribution of resources from regional, national and global perspectives.

Early publications (in the Global North) focused on social protection systems and social security in particular. These publications did not explicitly link social to ecological sustainability but focused on societies' sustainability. Interestingly, Flora (1986) published two edited volumes with the title *Growth to the Limits* just before the Brundtland Report (1987) was published that linked ecologic, economic, and social sustainability. In these two volumes, twelve country contributions discussing the state and sustainability of the respective welfare state as regards

social expenditures were presented. Social sustainability from this perspective can be interpreted as maintaining (and improving) standards of social protection to counter people's contingencies over the life course, and therewith contributing to social cohesion, reducing social problems and enhancing welfare and well-being. Flora (1986) "anticipated" (Kangas/Saloniemi 2013: 63) that the social sustainability of welfare states would be challenged by the growing, aging population as well as by growing expectations towards the welfare state (Flora 1986; as regards security, see Kaufmann 2003).

As the perceived 'normal way of life' and their expectations are marked by the material and social contexts people live in, Birnbaum, Ferrarini, Nelson and Palme (2017) discuss meeting the present needs without compromising the needs of future generations by focusing on the generational welfare. In this vein, with regard to the sustainability of societies, Kangas and Karonen (2022, in this issue) ask to what extent immigrants and people with disabilities are excluded from labor markets in 26 European countries. Another example is the link between gender-based violence and sustainability that Bigler (2022, in this issue) explores. She concludes that gender-based violence directly or indirectly affects the path to sustainability as it reduces a person's potential, capabilities and well-being and therewith hinders sustainable development.

According to Harris (2003: 1) the social dimension corresponds to "a socially sustainable system" that consists in achieving "fairness in distribution and opportunity, adequate provision of social services including health and education, gender equity, and political accountability and participation", democracy and human development (Harris 2003: 6). This was also the starting point in the UN/EU visions on sustainability (McGuinn et al. 2020).

### **Social Sustainability as Transformation of Society: Which Way Forward?**

As has been briefly outlined, social, economic, and ecological goals often contradict each other (Koch/Fritz 2014). These constraints, disputes and conflicts but also opportunities are regulated by states and welfare regimes. Senghaas-Knobloch (2009) warns that disputes and conflicts are often resolved by power politics, particularly on the international level.

International endeavors such as international conferences, reports, conventions, and goals (such as the Sustainable Development Goals) seek consensual ways to further welfare and well-being whilst accounting for the environment. Scholarly authors discuss primary policy principles for social sustainability, e.g., human well-being, equity, democratic government, and democratic civil society (Magis/Shinn 2009; for the latter two, see also Büchs 2021b). Regarding well-being, Joseph and McGregor (2020) point to the importance of a social conception of human well-being as opposed to a individual conception. Recent publications deliberate on challenges that welfare states face when integrating environmental sustainability. For example, the recent special issue on *Sustainable Welfare beyond Growth*, edited by Hirvilammi and Koch (2020), asks whether some welfare states are better prepared to account for environmental sustainability than others. Schøyen and Hvinden (2017) deliberate on the challenges climate change poses for sustainable European Welfare states.

How can social sustainability be achieved? There are a number of proposals for transformative welfare regimes in the literature. Some of them are presented in the following as an outlook. Büchs (2021b) discusses the Universal Basic Income and Universal Basic Services as complementary approaches to support sustainable welfare. Opielka (2022, this issue's Forum) argues for a "guarantist" regime that is essentially based on human rights. Nullmeier (2021) in contrast suggests to develop solutions based on social insurance principles. Littig (2020) has yet another and more gender-sensitive focus when she proposes the creation of socio-ecologically sustainable post-growth societies based on an extended concept of work that re-evaluates and redistributes work. A number of other proposals are more similarly titled than they actually are. Gough (2017) describes three transitions needed for eco-social policy in the rich world: ramping up eco-efficiency, recomposing consumption and reducing consumption in a post-growth perspective. To mitigate the human impact of climate change, Laurent (2021) suggests the creation of a European social-ecological state based on strategies of progressive social-ecological taxation and social savings induced by environmental policy.

While the proposals so far focus on Europe or rich countries, Kempf et al. (2022, this issue's Forum) call for a global new eco-social contract that combines social and climate justice. The academic discussion on possible transformative welfare regimes is still far from a consensus and will continue. Most likely, the most recent social movements related to sustainability, Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, will continue to push for change, without necessarily hitting upon much consensus. Other movements are likely to emerge. We shall see to what extent they include social sustainability in their focus.

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