



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Cleaner Production

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jclepro

A strategic approach to social sustainability – Part 2: a principle-based definition

Merlina Missimer^{*}, Karl-Henrik Robèrt¹, Göran Broman²

Department of Strategic Sustainable Development, Blekinge Institute of Technology, 371 79, Karlskrona, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 April 2015

Received in revised form

21 March 2016

Accepted 14 April 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Strategic sustainable development

Social sustainability

Social system

Systems thinking

Sustainability principles

ABSTRACT

The vast and growing array of concepts, methods and tools in the sustainability field imply a need for a structuring and coordinating framework, including a unifying and operational definition of sustainability. One attempt at such framework began over 25 years ago and is now widely known as the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development. However, as with the larger sustainability field, the social dimension of this framework has been found to not be sufficiently science-based and operational and thus in need of further development. In this two-part series an attempt at a science-based, operational definition of social sustainability is presented. In part 1 a systems-based approach to the social system was presented, based on extensive literature studies as well as conceptual modelling sessions using the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development as the guiding structure. The focus of that study was on the essential aspects of the social system that need to be sustained, namely *trust*, *common meaning*, *diversity*, *capacity for learning* and *capacity for self-organization*. The aim of this second paper is to identify and present overriding mechanisms by which these aspects of the social system can be degraded, thereby finding exclusion criteria for re-design for sustainability. Further literature studies, conceptual modelling sessions and initial testing of this prototype with partners in academia, business and NGOs were performed. Based on the understanding of the essential aspects of the social system and the identified overriding mechanisms of degradation of these, a hypothesis for a definition of social sustainability by basic principles is presented. The proposed principles are that in a socially sustainable society, people are not subject to structural obstacles to: (1) health, (2) influence, (3) competence, (4) impartiality and (5) meaning-making. Overall, the two papers aim to provide a hypothesis for a definition of social sustainability, which is general enough to be applied irrespective of spatial and temporal constraints, but concrete enough to guide decision-making and monitoring. It is also a further development of the social dimension of the FSSD, which practitioners and researchers have requested for some time and can act as a support towards better integration of social sustainability in many other fields, e.g., sustainable product innovation, sustainable supply chain management, sustainable transport system development, and others.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development (SD) has been a prominent part of the global political discussion for almost 30 years (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; United Nations, 2015).

Today, there is a vast amount of definitions, terms, approaches, concepts, methods and tools. For overviews, see the papers by Hopwood et al. (2005), Glavič and Lukman (2007), Lozano (2008), Ben-Eli (2012), Chasin (2014), and Amini and Bienstock (2014). Yet, the field is still often criticized for its vagueness (e.g., Jacobs, 1999; McKenzie, 2004; Ben-Eli, 2012) and a clearer approach has been requested (Huesemann, 2001; Robèrt et al., 2002; Johnston et al., 2007; Marsden et al., 2010).

Paper 1 (Missimer et al., in this issue) of this two-part series started out with presenting the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) as a useful approach to dealing with this challenge. Its usefulness is due to:

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +46 455 38 56 80; fax: +46 455 38 55 07.

E-mail addresses: merlina.missimer@bth.se, mis@bth.se (M. Missimer), karl-henrik.roberrt@bth.se, khr@bth.se (K.-H. Robèrt), goran.broman@bth.se, gbr@bth.se (G. Broman).

¹ Tel.: +46 708 55 94 00; fax: +46 455 38 55 07.

² Tel.: +46 455 38 55 04; fax: +46 455 38 55 07.

- The systems approach, which helps prevent sub-optimization, where a solution to one issue may otherwise cause other issues somewhere else or later on in time.
- Its scientific basis, which utilizes the most relevant, cross-culturally reliable and up-to-date knowledge to understand systems and make decisions.
- Its principle-based definition of success, which allows for a clear definition of the goal of sustainability that is not just based on current trends, can be agreed upon even by large groups of people and still be supplemented with more context-specific goals.
- The sustainability principles being phrased as constraints for re-design, thus allowing for creativity and innovation for the systematic re-design which our human structures need; and
- The ability of the framework to strategically make use of supplementary support for sustainable development when necessary. Once the FSSD has been used to identify the big-picture gap to sustainability, and to develop an overriding strategy to bridge the gap, rational choices of more specific methods and tools for the development of indicators, monitoring, decision support, cross-sector community building, and communication can be made.

However, it has also been acknowledged that the social dimension of the FSSD needs further development (Missimer et al., 2010; Missimer, 2013). This underdevelopment of the social dimension of sustainability is also prevalent in the larger field of sustainability (Littig and Griessler, 2005; Kunz, 2006; Colantonio et al., 2009; Cuthill, 2010; Dempsey et al., 2011).

Missimer et al. (in this issue) built on this assessment of the FSSD and used conceptual modelling, i.e., modelling of concepts found in literature using the structure of the FSSD as a lens. More specifically, this means that extensive literature reviews were conducted, key concepts distilled and then the five levels of the FSSD were used to understand the relationships of these key concepts from a strategic sustainable development perspective. This approach allows the systems perspective on planning to evolve from a dynamic and iterative dialogue between the system level, which describes the system of study, and the success level, which describes the goal or purpose in the system. It is this iterative 'ping-pong' between levels that was the base of the conceptual modelling. Paper 1 presented the final version of multiple iterations of this dialogue at the systems level and presented the following aspects of the social system as essential to sustain (they cannot be systematically degraded) from a social sustainability point of view: *trust, common meaning, diversity, capacity for learning and capacity for self-organization*. The aim of this second paper is to identify and present overriding mechanisms by which these aspects of the social system can be degraded, and to formulate operational sustainability principles as exclusion criteria for redesign of society towards social sustainability.

1.1. Defining sustainability

It should be pointed out that the whole process of attempting an operational definition of sustainability starts out from a normative stance (a value statement). The Brundtland definition of sustainability – "... development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) is in this paper taken as a basis for such a normative stance. Wanting this to happen cannot be derived from scientific knowledge or proven right or wrong by scientific methods. That this is at all desirable is a normative stance that each person needs to decide for herself/himself to embrace or not.

Once this normative stance is accepted, scientific knowledge and scientific methods can be used to draw conclusions: "if this is what we want, on what conditions can it be achieved?" Given that humans are dependent on the ecological and the social system to meet our needs, what are the essential aspects of the ecological and social systems that need to be sustained (or restored) in order to not systematically undermine the capacity of people to meet their own needs, now and in the future. And, what are the overriding mechanisms by which these essential aspects can be degraded?

Sustainability is thus about the elimination of mechanisms of systematic degradation of essential aspects of both the ecological and the social system. Since thresholds in complex adaptive systems are difficult to identify, it makes sense to define sustainability this way – to not have a basic design and operation of society that implies a systematic deviation from the above-mentioned desirable state. This provides boundary conditions for redesign of our currently unsustainable basic design and operation of society, as a frame for any vision without being prescriptive at the level of detail, the scenario level, within the boundary conditions. Defining sustainability through such basic boundary conditions allows for and can even stimulate innovation.

1.2. Is a single definition appropriate?

A common argument as regards especially social sustainability is that vagueness and a pluralism of definitions are appropriate and preferable over a single definition, because of the complexity of the topic and that therefore a common definition is impossible or undesirable (McKenzie, 2005; Kunz, 2006; Dempsey et al., 2011; Boström, 2012). Proponents of this stance (e.g., Lehtonen, 2004, 211) argue that "different geographical and temporal scales as well as situational contexts require their own frameworks, which do not necessarily provide a coherent picture, but a mosaic of partly contradicting views of reality". They propose that sustainability can only be defined in a local context through participatory processes, with engagement from all stakeholders (Davidson, 2009; Dempsey et al., 2011).

The arguments can be challenged on several grounds. Jacobs' (1999) criticism, that vagueness allows unsustainable action to be couched and presented as sustainable, holds also for social sustainability. Another challenge comes up with context-specific definitions. Acknowledging that in many ways humanity has become a global network, if actions in one area of the world can have large effects in areas far away from the location of action, are then many context-dependent definitions created by smaller communities enough to ensure that larger sustainability problem are not created somewhere else?

Furthermore, similar arguments were used to discourage attempts to find a definition of ecological sustainability to support structuring of analyses and planning. Counter to these arguments, the existing definition of ecological sustainability of the FSSD has shown to be operational at any scale, irrespective of the specifics of activities in different organizations and regions (e.g. Broman and Robèrt, 2016).

The sustainability principles of the FSSD are designed to be generally applicable and at the same time concrete enough to guide analyses, planning, innovation and selection, design and a coordinated use of supplementary concepts, methods and tools. The approach to define success in a complex system in this way, i.e., by basic principles or 'boundary conditions for redesign', effectively addresses also the conservative bias that is sometimes levelled at the social sustainability field (e.g. Marcuse, 1998). As the state of sustainability is defined by principles rather than the specifics of a scenario, it is not in fact a conservative state to maintain a certain configuration; nor does it exclude a participatory approach to

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5480634>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5480634>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)