Social Sustainability

March 2, 2011
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4. Current discussions of sustainability also include items such as: a) a clean, healthy, and appealing environment, b) meaningful and rewarding work, and c) full participation in a just and equitable society.
Three Factor Model of Sustainability
Another common approach to sustainability was first proposed by Robert Goodland\(^1\) in which he argues that sustainability is based on the interactions of three key realms: Environmental (or ecologic), Social, and Economic.

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a) individual autonomy and realization of personal potential,
b) participation in governance and rule making,
c) citizenship and service to others,
d) justice,
e) the propagation of knowledge,
f) and resource distributions that affect the ability of that society to flourish over time.
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For example, norms that are used by any group to assign relative values to such things as technological change, scientific inquiry, economic activity including profits and costs, risk, the natural world, and human and nonhuman life dramatically affect the decisions those groups take and thereby the opportunities they allow to future generations.
Social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal processes; systems; structures; and relationships \textit{actively support the capacity of current and future generations} to create healthy and liveable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected and democratic and provide a good quality of life\textsuperscript{2}.

\textsuperscript{2}Stephen McKenzie, “Social Sustainability: Towards Some Definitions”, Hawke Research Institute, Working Paper Series No 27, University of South Australia. Magill, South Australia, 2004
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Environmental, Economic, and Social Sustainability

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- **Social Sustainability**: Practices to ensure that the cohesion of society and its ability to work towards common goals are maintained. Individual needs such as those for health and well-being, nutrition, shelter, education and cultural expression should be met.
- **Environmental Sustainability**: Practices to ensure that the natural resource capital remains intact; i.e., that the “source” and “sink’ functions of the environment should not be degraded. Therefore, the extraction of renewable resource should not exceed the rate at which they are renewed, and the absorptive capacity of the environment to assimilate wastes should not be exceeded. Furthermore, the extraction of non-renewable resources should be minimized and should not exceed agreed minimum strategic levels.

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What do we really want people to have?

1.
2.
3.
4. ...
The Elephant(s) in the Room
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Has the sustainability movement been co-opted by the values and purposes of corporate and multinational interests.
The duty imposed by sustainability is to bequeath to posterity not any particular thing — with rare exceptions such as Yosemite, for example — but rather to endow them with whatever it takes to achieve a standard of living at least as good as our own and to look after their next generation similarly. We are not to consume humanity’s capital, in the broadest sense⁴.
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[It is] an obligation to conduct ourselves so that we leave to the future the option or the capacity to be as well off as we are. It is not clear [to me] that one can be more precise than that. Sustainability is an injunction not to satisfy ourselves by impoverishing our successors.\(^5\)

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You could make a good case that our ancestors, who were considerably poorer than we are, whose standard of living was considerably less than our own, were probably excessively generous in providing for us. They cut down a lot of trees, but they saved a lot and they built a lot of railroad rights-of-way. Both privately and publicly they probably did better by us than a sort of fair minded judge in thinking about the equity (whether they got their share and we got our share or whether we proted at their expense) would have required. It would have been okay for them to save a little less, to enjoy a little more and give us a little less of a start than our generation has had.
...there is wide agreement that the State should protect *the interests of the future* in some degree against the effects of our irrational discounting and of our preference for ourselves over our descendants. The whole movement for ‘conservation’ in the United States is based on this conviction. It is the clear duty of Government, which is the trustee for unborn generations as well as for its present citizens, to watch over, and, if need be, by legislative enactment, to defend, the exhaustible natural resources of the country from rash and reckless spoliation\textsuperscript{6}.

The particular approach to equality that I have explored involves judging individual advantage by the freedom to achieve, incorporating (but going beyond) actual achievements. In many contexts, particularly in the assessment of individual well-being, these conditions can, I have argued, be fruitfully seen in terms of the capability to function, incorporating (but going beyond) the actual functionings that a person can achieve.\(^7\)

Basic Capability Approach II

... there is a strong case for judging individual advantage in terms of the capabilities that a person has, that is the substantive freedoms he or she has reason to value. In this perspective, poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as low incomes, which is the standard criterion of poverty\textsuperscript{8}.

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- Is it morally permissible to imply that there are no tradeoffs in preserving a world with the same richness of possibilities that we now have when any choice we make changes the future of possibilities?