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A missing pillar? Challenges in theorizing and practicing social sustainability: introduction to the special issue

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Since publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, the notion of sustainable development has come to guide the pursuit of environmental reform by both public and private organizations and to facilitate communication among actors from different societal spheres. It is customary to characterize sustainable development in a familiar typology comprising three pillars: environmental, economic, and social. The relationships among these dimensions are generally assumed to be compatible and mutually supportive. However, previous research has found that when policy makers endorse sustainable development, the social dimension garners less attention and is particularly difficult to realize and operationalize. Recent years though have seen notable efforts among standard setters, planners, and practitioners in various sectors to address the often neglected social aspects of sustainability. Likewise, during the past decade, there have been efforts to develop theoretical frameworks to define and study social sustainability and to empirically investigate it in relation to “sustainability projects,” “sustainability practice,” and “sustainability initiatives.” This introductory article presents the topic and explains some of the challenges of incorporating social sustainability into a broad framework of sustainable development. Also considered is the potential of the social sustainability concept for sustainability projects and planning. This analysis is predicated on the work represented in this special issue and on related initiatives that explicitly discuss the social pillar of sustainable development and its relationship to the other dimensions.

KEYWORDS: human-environment relationship, environmental sociology, socioeconomics, sustainable development, public policy

Introduction: The Hope

Since publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, the notion of sustainable development has come to guide the pursuit of environmental reform by both public and private organizations and to facilitate communication among actors from different societal spheres. While there is no universal consensus on how to define the concept, its inherent vagueness and interpretative flexibility contribute to its broad appeal. It is nonetheless customary to characterize sustainable development in a familiar typology comprising three pillars: environmental, economic, and social (or sociocultural). These are also known as the three “Ps” (People, Planet, and Profit) or the three “Es” (Environment, Economy, and Equity). For both substantive and normative reasons, the relationships among these dimensions are generally assumed to be compatible and mutually supportive (Littig & Grießler, 2005). For instance, the Johannesburg Conference in 2002 further stressed the need to integrate the three dimensions, as well as to build a humane, equitable, and caring global society for present and future generations.

This broad call for a comprehensive and integrative understanding and practice of sustainability ap-

pears promising and compelling. However, a considerable amount of sustainable development research indicates that huge are involved in the realization of this hope. The obstacles are of two related kinds. The first is theoretical and concerns how we should define and understand this fluid concept of social sustainability. The other involves the practice: how are the social sustainability aspects to be operationalized and incorporated into various sustainability projects and planning? Partly due to its contested character, a number of scholars argue that the social dimension garners less attention or is dismissed altogether (Dobson, 1999; Agyeman et al. 2003; Agyeman & Evans, 2004; Lehtonen, 2004; Agyeman, 2008; Cuthill, 2009; Dillard et al. 2009). Rather, it is mainly the merging of environmental and economic dimensions that has been seen to create synergies and potentials for environmental policies and reforms (Littig & Grießler, 2005; Bluhdorn & Welsh, 2007). Furthermore, at least thus far, very little actual attention has been paid to the linkages between and integration of the social and environmental dimensions (Lehtonen, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2011a). While social policies in terms of welfare institutions have a long history in developed countries, they have been deeply embedded and reliant upon a society marked by

productivism, overconsumption, and economic growth, as well as national and short-term timescales. These are all objectives that most variants of green thinking oppose (Fitzpatrick, 2011c). Rethinking and reorganizing for green social policies and welfare—social sustainability—is thus both a crucial task and a very big challenge.

It must be acknowledged, however, that recent years have seen notable efforts to address and integrate social aspects of sustainability on the part of standard setters, planners, and practitioners. This has occurred within such diverse areas as urban and regional planning (Schlossberg & Zimmerman, 2003; Cuthill, 2009; Davidson, 2009; Dempsey et al. 2011), fair trade certification (e.g., Taylor, 2004), forest certification (e.g., Klooster, 2010; Boström, 2011), organic agriculture (e.g., Shreck et al. 2006), conventional agriculture (Nordström Källström & Ljung, 2005; Mancini et al. 2008), as well as corporate social and environmental management, reporting, and responsibility (e.g., Sharma & Ruud, 2003; Bebbington & Dillard, 2009; Brown et al. 2009). This special issue contributes to this trajectory first presenting a typology for organizing research on social sustainability (Murphy, 2012) and then featuring studies on alternative agrofood networks and practices (Psarikidou & Szerszynski, 2012), conflicts surrounding human-animal relations (Hiedanpää et al. 2012), bureaucratization of fair trade and organic food policy making (Casula Vifell & Thedvall, 2012), sustainable tourism (Klintman, 2012), access to mobility (Cucca & Tacchi, 2012), green social cooperatives (Osti, 2012), sustainable buildings (Jensen, et al. 2012), and participatory environmental monitoring of a Brazilian mining company (Devlin & Tubino, 2012).. These examples demonstrate some progress toward the realization of an integrative vision of sustainability in various sectors, but they also confirm many challenges.

Readers of this special issue will encounter useful frameworks, understandings, and analyses of social sustainability. With this introductory article, I do not aim to provide a ready-to-use definition and schema. I rather envisage the concept of sustainable development, including social sustainability, as a “frame.” In other words, it is a conceptual tool that policy makers and practitioners can use to communicate, make decisions, and measure or assess current developments, and that scholars can very well study and even refine. My objective is primarily to seek a number of explanations for why it seems challenging to incorporate social sustainability into a robust framework of sustainable development, as well as to point out this concept’s potential for sustainability projects and planning. To accomplish this, I refer to articles included in this special issue as well as to

previous literature that explicitly discusses the social dimension, or its relationship to the other sustainability dimensions. In the next section, I describe how a selection of scholars uses and defines the concept of social sustainability, and present a table with aspects to which they commonly refer. This discussion is followed by an analysis of six challenges to integrating the social dimension into concrete sustainability projects and planning. In the concluding part, I consider some potential benefits of the frame.

What Does Social Sustainability Refer To?

Like the general concept of sustainable development (e.g., Baker, 2006), social sustainability is an open and contested concept. According to Nicola Dempsey and colleagues (2011), “social sustainability is neither an absolute nor a constant...[it] has to be considered as a dynamic concept, which will change over time (from year to year/decade to decade) in a place.”

Such conceptual imprecision and interpretative flexibility is often seen as both a strength (in that it encourages communication among different and disagreeing actors) and a weakness (in that people must constantly elaborate what they actually mean when they address social sustainability) (e.g., Davidson, 2009; Dempsey et al. 2011). Such vagueness has given rise to many efforts by scholars to suggest typologies and frameworks. Accordingly, during the past decade, a body of literature has emerged that focuses specifically on developing theoretical schemes to define and study social sustainability (Agyeman & Evans, 2004; Lehtonen, 2004; Littig & Grießler, 2005; Pawlowski, 2007; Cuthill, 2009; Dillard et al. 2009; Larsen, 2009; Magis & Shinn, 2009; Seghezze, 2009; Casula Vifell & Soneryd, 2012).

A few examples deserve specific consideration. Cuthill (2009), based on an action research approach that involved input from government managers and other stakeholders involved with social policy and community development, developed a social sustainability framework that includes 1) social justice and equity, 2) social infrastructure, 3) engaged governance, and 4) social capital. Littig & Grießler (2005) argue that social sustainability has to be guided by an analytical concept that provides a sound theory of the relationship between society and nature. Sustainability strategies and indicators should have both analytical depth and clarity, including clearly defined ideas about what kinds of social values to promote. Littig & Grießler (2005) expand on the notion of *needs*, taken from the Brundtland definition of sustainability, and introduce *work* in a very broad sense to discuss key elements of social sustainability. Georgio

Osti, in his analysis of green social cooperatives in this special issue, also emphasizes work as a basis not merely for income but for human dignity, recovery, recognition, and social integration. An anthology entitled *Understanding the Social Dimension of Sustainability* (Dillard et al. 2009) discusses a number of relevant perspectives. In one chapter, Magis & Shinn (2009) define four universal principles covering social sustainability: human well-being, equity, democratic government, and democratic civil society.

Yet another relevant tradition is found in the “environmental justice” literature (Agyeman & Evans, 2004), concerned with questions of distribution. On one hand, this work focuses on who—in terms of gender, race, and class—experiences impacts from environmental “bads” and access to environmental “goods” (e.g., natural resources, quality of life). On the other hand, research on environmental justice deals with questions of procedure and participation—what social groups have access to deliberative forums and participatory decision making. This perspective rests on the assumption that “most environmental pollution and degradation is caused by the actions of the more affluent” at the same time as “environmental problems are vested disproportionately upon the poor” (Agyeman & Evans, 2004). Agyeman & Evans (2004) coined the term “just sustainability” to emphasize the conceptual linkages between sustainable development and environmental justice, as well as to avoid a one-sided emphasis on the environmental dimension of sustainability.

The proliferation of various frameworks—and not one hegemonic theory—is constructive because sustainable development is enormously complex. Pluralism is preferable to a single common approach. As Lehtonen (2004) notes, “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.” The various approaches reflect the need for “framing” or “constructing” social sustainability (Davidson, 2009). Contributions to this special issue further theorize the concept of social sustainability and authors outline four different types of theoretical contributions.

First, several articles (including the present one) engage in a dialogue with the literature on the concept of social sustainability. For instance, Kevin Murphy (2012) provides a comprehensive literature review and outlines a framework relevant for policy development and assessment. He bases his scheme on four key dimensions: equity, awareness, participation, and social cohesion. An important element of this approach is that it links social sustainability to environmental implications and thus provides a way

to integrate a set of issues often treated disparately (see also the next section).

Second, articles in this special issue connect the notion of social sustainability to a variety of other social science perspectives, concepts, and theories including theories of scale (Klintman, 2012), notions of temporality (Devlin & Tubino, 2012; Hiedanpää et al. 2012; Psarikidou & Szerszynski, 2012), moral economy and moral taskscape (Psarikidou & Szerszynski, 2012), human-nonhuman animal relations (Hiedanpää et al. 2012), concepts of work related to green social enterprises (Osti, 2012), ecological modernization and transition theory (Jensen et al. 2012), governance through bureaucratization (Casula Vifell & Thedvall, 2012), as well as social movement theory (Devlin & Tubino, 2012).

Third, a couple of articles penetrate the term “social” and by this route challenge the very pillar-oriented view of sustainability. For example, Hiedanpää and colleagues develop a pragmatically oriented socioecological perspective in which both humans and nonhuman animals take part in establishing the social. When the present social order is disturbed, such as when wolves attack sheep or when animal welfare groups politicize swine-rearing practices, “the social” (including cultural habits and customs related to the unsettled practices) becomes activated, contested, and reorganized. Psarikidou & Szerszynski (2012) also criticize the view that social sustainability should constitute a separate pillar adjacent to the “dominating dyad of the ecological and the economic.” Instead, they stress a sociomaterial perspective of sustainability in which the economy and the environment are always entangled in the social. The latter refers to social relations, practices, cultural meanings, and so forth. The material dimension would recognize “that social life is conducted by embodied beings in constant exchange with their physical environment.” A lesson from these and other contributions in the special issue is that neglect of the social dimension of sustainability not only leads to inattention to a number of social aspects, but that our understanding of environmental problems, and society-nature relationships in general, becomes fundamentally flawed.

Finally, the special issue highlights a number of concrete social aspects that are commonly referred to in empirical studies and policy debates about social sustainability. While my aim here is not to provide yet another definition and framework of social sustainability, it is instructive to map out what social sustainability often includes in such studies (Table 1). Such a map helps to visualize that social sustainability often refers to *both* the improvement of conditions for living people and future generations *and* the quality of governance of the development process.

Table 1 Examples of substantive (What) and procedural (How) aspects of social sustainability.*

Substantive aspects: What social sustainability goals to achieve?	Procedural aspects: How to achieve sustainable development?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic needs such as food, housing, and income and extended needs such as recreation, self-fulfillment • Inter- and intra-generational justice along gender, race, class, and ethnicity dimensions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fair distribution of income ○ Fair distribution of environmental “bads” and “goods” • Equality of rights, including human rights, land user and tenure rights, and indigenous people’s rights • Access to social infrastructure, mobility, local services, facilities, green areas, and so forth • Employment and other work-related issues, facilitating for local small and medium enterprises • Opportunity for learning and self-development • Community capacity for the development of civil society and social capital • Security (e.g., economic, environmental) • Health effects among workers, consumers, and communities • Social cohesion, inclusion, and interaction • Cultural diversity and traditions • Sense of community attachment, belonging, and identity • Social recognition • Attractive housing and public realm • Quality of life, happiness, and well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information about risks and the sustainability project • Access to participation and decision making in different stages of the process and over time • Proactive stakeholder communication and consultation throughout the process • Empowerment for taking part in the process (e.g., awareness, education, networking, economic compensation) • Participating in the framing of issues, including defining criteria, scope, and subjects of justice • Social monitoring of the policy, planning, and standard-setting process • Accountable governance and management of the policy, planning, and standard-setting process

* In addition to the articles in this special issue, other work along these lines includes Agyeman et al. 2003; Agyeman & Evans, 2004; Lehtonen, 2004; Littig & Grießler, 2005; Nordström Källström & Ljung, 2005; Cuthill, 2009; Davidson, 2009; Dillard et al. 2009; Magis & Shinn, 2009; Seghezze, 2009; Dempsey et al. 2011; Fitzpatrick, 2011a; Casula Vifell & Soneryd, 2012.

Accordingly, I find it instructive to distinguish between a substantive and procedural dimension, a differentiation found in the environmental justice literature (Agyeman & Evans, 2004; cf. Fitzpatrick, 2011d) and implicitly discussed more widely (including in the contributions that comprise this special issue). The social pillar of sustainable development could thus be seen as including both *procedural aspects*, such as the role of democratic representation, participation, and deliberation and *substantive aspects*, that center on “what” is to be done (i.e., the social goals of sustainable development). The procedural aspects include the “how” or the means to achieve these goals. Procedures cannot be static, but should always include a temporal dimension. Aspects overlap, and it is also not always easy to distinguish between substantive and procedural issues as they may reinforce one another. For example, by achieving certain social sustainability goals—such as providing opportunities for learning or improving the participatory capacities of local civil societies—one is simultaneously improving opportunities for actors to take part in sustainability projects and planning. While the “what” aspects specifically concern social sustainability goals and their relationship to economic and environmental dimensions, the “how” aspects may be seen as social sustainability elements

that foster sustainable development in general, that is, in all of its dimensions.¹

What Explains Challenges to Integrate Social Aspects in Sustainability Projects and Planning?

The following discussion departs from the argument, introduced by a number of scholars, that the concept of *social* sustainability is more difficult to analyze, comprehend, define, and incorporate into sustainability projects and planning than the other dimensions of sustainability (e.g., Lehtonen, 2004; Littig & Grießler, 2005; Dillard et al. 2009).² I seek to explain some of the challenges reported in the literature and the obstacles discussed in the contributions to this special issue. The first three topics relate

¹ It would, of course, be equally relevant to label this as an “institutional” or “governance” dimension, but this is just a matter of wording. My intent here is to collect and sort elements that are commonly seen as social sustainability aspects.

² I certainly do not claim that “social problems” are more difficult to solve than, for example, “environmental problems.” Considering a global issue such as climate change, for example, it would be unreasonable to suggest that the “environmental” dimension of this issue is easier to tackle than the “social” dimension, because these are inseparable.

to framing issues, while the last three concern organizational, institutional, and structural factors.

High Expectations

As seen in Table 1, notions of social sustainability often refer to such aspects as social welfare, quality of life, social justice, social cohesion, cultural diversity, democratic rights, gender issues, workers' rights, broad participation, development of social capital and individual capabilities, and so forth. It goes without saying that achieving "success" in terms of all these aspects would be an enormous task. A comment by Johan Hedrén (2009) illustrates the enormity of actually putting the world on an effective pathway to social sustainability.

In the Johannesburg documents this is definitely not just a matter of slight corrections to the current structures, but rather a creation of something *fundamentally new*: a world without chronic hunger, malnutrition, foreign occupation, armed conflict, illicit drug problems, organized crime, corruption, natural disasters, illicit arms trafficking, trafficking in persons, terrorism, intolerance and incitement to racial ethnic, religious and other hatreds, xenophobia, and endemic, communicable and chronic diseases, in particular AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis (emphasis in original).

Such goals are, of course, tremendously ambitious, especially given the extremely complex and problematic circumstances that exist today on a worldwide basis. Indeed, there is nothing wrong with high ambitions. Hedrén (2009) discussed the important political role of "utopian thought" in both abstract and concrete manifestations. The concept of sustainable development is a good example of utopian thought because it offers a formulation of alternatives with which existing societies can be compared. Visions, utopias, and aspirations are surely needed. At the same time, expressions of extremely high ambition can create unrealistic expectations and may, in the long run, lead to great disappointment and claims of major failure.

The win-win-win framing embedded in the concept of sustainable development (the positive integration of the three pillars) may conceal the fact that clashes or tradeoffs between environmental and social goals are sometimes (or even often) unavoidable (cf. Fitzpatrick, 2011c). Given this rhetoric, real-life examples of such putative tradeoffs are likely to lead to frustrations. For example, ecotaxes have often given rise to heated discussion about negative distributional effects. The case of access to mobility

(Cucca & Tachi, 2012) effectively illustrates the complex tradeoffs that arise in policy practice. Environmental problems often imply the need for restrictions on access to long- and short-range mobility. Such measures tend to affect the population asymmetrically—wealthy people still find ways to reach their intended destinations—and thus clash with social goals such as equal accessibility and integration.

Vague, Subjective, and Ideological Framing

Many scholars agree that the meaning of social sustainability remains unclear and there exists uncertainty about how it relates to both the other dimensions and wider policy issues (Littig & Grießler, 2005; Davidson, 2009; Dillard et al. 2009; Casula Vifell & Soneryd, 2012; Dempsey et al. 2011). It has been argued that environmental sustainability has more concrete objectives and is easier to measure (Davidson, 2009; Bebbington & Dillard, 2009). A related argument is that there is no evident scientific basis for measuring social sustainability. As Bebbington & Dillard (2009) observe,

[S]ocial sustainability appears to present different and more severe challenges in specification, understanding, and communication than environmental sustainability because there is no widely accepted scientific basis for analysis, unlike the ability to debate population ecology, acceptable levels of toxicity, or acceptable concentrations of green-house gases in the atmosphere. Nor is there a common unit of measure such as monetary units with the economic dimension of sustainability.

These authors referred particularly to corporate, social, and environmental accounting. In these fields, social sustainability appears to be more subjective, soft, less scientific, more ideological, and local in contrast to global (cf. Klintman, 2012), which in many instances puts it in a disadvantageous position relative to both the economic and environmental dimensions. Brown et al. (2009) develops the argument further, claiming that the "triple bottom line" concept in corporate reporting implies three separate, assessable measures. This atomistic view masks and misrepresents the complex relations among the three dimensions and neglects the fundamentally different nature of social systems.

In a broad sense, social systems differ dramatically from systems that can be maximized (or minimized)...In economic systems, maximizing wealth may be appropriate. In natural systems, maximizing (or minimiz-

ing) biological diversity (or greenhouse gas emissions) may be desirable, but does it make sense to either maximize or minimize in the realm of social sustainability (Brown et al. 2009)?

Aspects of social sustainability such as employment rates or income equality can be measured (and maximized), but the problems Brown and colleagues highlight are very relevant when it comes to such social sustainability issues as quality of life, community well-being, and social recognition. They argue that “the fundamental differences in the attributes of economic, environmental, and social sustainability illustrate the inappropriateness of measuring, reporting and conceiving of these facets in the same way” (Brown et al. 2009).

An observation by Osti (2012) in this special issue is relevant to address here. He remarks that green social cooperatives offer great potential both for job creation and environmental services, for example in relation to waste recycling or energy supplies. However, they face huge difficulties entering these fields due to the requirement of expertise in ecosystems or other complex systems. The majority of green social enterprises engages in more labor-intensive services such as urban sanitation. As little or no expertise is needed for such tasks, these enterprises impart only weak social recognition and negotiating power.

Because of the vague, subjective, and often more politicized nature of social sustainability, it generally appears to be more difficult to legitimize. However, state or nonstate initiated sustainability projects often refer to well-established principles such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights or the International Labour Organization’s conventions. Such global frameworks help to validate inclusion of some social aspects (cf. Tamm Hallström & Boström, 2010). Furthermore, the proliferation of social sustainability frameworks discussed earlier can be seen as an effort to clarify for both academics and practitioners how social sustainability should be delimited, what it contains, and how it relates to the other dimensions (see also Murphy’s article in this special issue). Such efforts make social sustainability more visual, measurable (also through qualitative means), and hence more legitimate.

Historical Roots: The Sustainability Framing is Better Suited to Environmental than Social Issues

Although the Brundtland Commission and Rio documents clearly stressed a social dimension, for instance through their insistence on intra- and inter-generational justice, gender equity, and calls for participatory decision making, several scholars argue

that a more systematic focus on the social dimension has been secondary to environmental and economic considerations (Marcuse, 1998; Agyeman, 2008; Bebbington & Dillard, 2009). Some scholars have discussed the risk that the concept of sustainable development tends to depoliticize matters because notions of nature and environmental sustainability often remain tied to a particular ontology.

As such, calls for sustainability, made generally or with specific reference to particular pillars, can attach themselves to certain ontological and consequently epistemological positions—most notably notions about “equilibrium,” “balance” and “stability” (Davidson, 2009).

As the sustainability framing emerges from its environmental roots, a conservative bias is potentially created. It is easy to see the many complexities involved if one tries to integrate such abstract categories as “social” and “environment” without much reflection on what constitutes the social and the environmental. As Marcuse (1998) observes, “[s]ustainability as a goal in itself, if we are to take the term’s ordinary meaning, is the preservation of the status quo. It would, taken literally, involve making only those changes that are required to maintain that status.”

While the conservation or strengthening of the environment “as it is” is usually assumed to be desirable, this is less often the case regarding the conservation of some social sustainability features. “No one who is interested in justice wants to sustain things as they are now” (Marcuse, 1998). Indeed, far-reaching social change may well be required to achieve conservation of the environment. Goals of environmental and social sustainability may be conflicting rather than compatible. For example, efforts to overcome social inequalities and develop human capabilities could easily mean increasing the use of natural resources to the detriment of the conservation or resilience of the biophysical environment. Likewise, social sustainability goals could be internally inconsistent when the interests of the present generation are confronted with those of future generations, as environmental justice theorists have observed.

A related topic is the criticism that social scientists raise in relation to the conceptual separation among the three sectors (see above), which are assumed to be on equal levels, and in relation to the corresponding lack of clarification of the connections across the sectors (Littig & Grießler, 2005). Such a division may, for example, give the wrong impression that the economy is independent of a social or institutional context and that the economy and the

social are instead independent from the environment (Lehtonen, 2004; Hopwood et al. 2005; Dillard et al. 2009). As discussed below, the conceptual separation of sectors is also reflected organizationally in institutions.

A Missing Institutional Link (Rather Than a Missing Pillar)

The division between “environment” and “social” (or “nature” and “culture”) reflects a historical dualism that has been institutionalized in administration and management. We tend to use phrases such as the “environmental sector,” which is meant to include such activities as nature protection and environmental management, while the “social sector” encompasses welfare politics, social insurance systems, and so forth.

These two sectors have very distinct and separate traditions, and are only beginning to relate to one other (cf. Fitzpatrick, 2011a). Is the sustainability discourse helpful for overcoming this dualism or should it be blamed for preserving it? Psarikidou & Szerszynski (2012) argue in their article in this special issue that the difficulty in conceptualizing and implementing social sustainability partly originates from its very conceptualization as a separate pillar.

I may take Sweden as an example that supports this latter view. In Sweden, despite all the talk about sustainable development and recognition of its three dimensions, and notwithstanding a strong emphasis on sector integration, sustainable development is seen as being covered by a huge administrative system with sixteen “environmental quality objectives,” that actually only consider the environmental dimension. No, or at best few, links to social objectives are considered. Sector integration is to be achieved by requiring that an extensive number of public agencies—including “social” agencies—on different levels integrate environmental goals and concerns, but there is no similar system for taking “social sustainability goals” into account. A previous study on sustainability planning in the areas of food production and electromagnetic fields in Sweden confirmed this picture (Casula Vifell & Soneryd, 2012). There is very little incorporation of the social dimension, regarding either the procedural (participation of actors representing social goals and concerns) or substantive elements, despite the explicit conceptual connection to the goals of sustainable development (see also Casula Vifell & Thedvall in this issue). We see the same separation in civil society. Historically, labor unions have seldom collaborated with environmental organizations (Boström, 2001) because the former have tended to defend what the latter has opposed: the productivist, growth paradigm that is believed to ensure continual “full employment.”

Similarly, measurement and monitoring of economic development, social welfare, and environmental conditions are usually institutionally distinct practices. For example, Lehtonen (2004), on the basis of an investigation of the environmental performance reviews carried out by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, argues that interaction (synergies and tradeoffs) between the social and environmental dimensions is the least developed aspect of sustainability analysis and measurement. Similar results were reported in a case study of statewide sustainability indices in Oregon (Schlossberg & Zimmerman, 2003). The authors of this study, however, argue that the development of sustainability indicators itself is an area with the potential to bridge the gap between previously separated activities.

Sometimes, as Davidson (2009) has observed, the term social sustainability is simply used to describe the current system of social welfare and policy. Particularly in urban studies, social sustainability has been discussed only in terms of social relations—or socially sustainable communities—thereby excluding social-environmental relationships. Such usage of the social sustainability frame achieves nothing more than further perpetuating the institutional separation between social and environmental sectors.

The article by Kevin Murphy in this special issue explicitly aims to develop a framework that should help analysts and policy makers to connect social and environmental sustainability. The book edited by Tony Fitzpatrick (2011a), which is the subject of a review symposium in this issue, also fills a very important role in this regard. And other articles featured here by Katerina Psarikidou & Bronislaw Szerszynski; Juha Hiedanpää, Ari Jokinen, & Pekka Jokinen; and John Devlin & Denise Tubino show how the “social” and the “environmental” are in reality inseparable. And they could also be deliberately integrated. For example, Jensen, Jørgensen, Elle, & Hagelskjær Lauridsen (2012) demonstrate that the sustainability concept applied in ecovillages in Denmark reveals a close relationship between the environmental and social dimensions (community-building, local empowerment, shared facilities) in contrast with the new wave of “sustainable” buildings that rely more exclusively on an environmental dimension. It should be mentioned, however, that integrating the “social” and the “environmental” in policy, administration, and management is not something done overnight, but will require a long-term learning process, and careful attention to the procedural dimension including participatory aspects (discussed further below).

Global Capitalism for Sustainable Development?

Several novel sustainability projects are embedded within local and/or global capitalist structures, and this special issue highlights cases such as sustainable buildings (Jensen et al. 2012), certification of sustainable tourism (Klintman, 2012), fair trade, and organic food (Casula Vifell & Thedvall, 2012). These and other sustainability initiatives—framed as corporate social responsibility or the triple bottom line—are often seen as concrete attempts to integrate all three dimensions of sustainability. To date, scholars have discussed the inherent contradictions and limitations of using market-based governance and political action to foster sustainable production and consumption (e.g., Guthman, 2009; Shaw & Black, 2010). Klooster (2010), who focuses on forest certification, claims,

Certification cannot make the current model of insatiable demands for goods from all over the world either environmentally sustainable or socially equitable. This reflects the contradiction of using a market-based, consumption-dependent strategy to leverage sustainable development in a world where markets and consumption patterns are fundamentally inequitable.

Hopwood et al. (2005) argue that the interpretative flexibility and ambiguity of the sustainability concept “allows business and governments to be in favour of sustainability without any fundamental challenge to their present course.” In this way, the concept helps to legitimize (or greenwash) the status quo which means further expansion of capitalism, more economic growth, increasing social inequalities and more environmental destruction (Lehtonen, 2004). In other words, it helps to “sustain the unsustainable” (Bluhdorn & Welsh, 2007).

The literature reminds us that fundamental contradictions in such market-based strategies need to be acknowledged. Contradictions are not solved, only handled. On the whole, market-based solutions cannot avoid a general compromise between market pragmatist/expansionist goals, on one hand, and ambitious environmental and social goals on the other (Taylor, 2004; Boström & Klintman, 2008). To fulfill its objectives, market-based systems such as product certification and labeling must enter into the mainstream market. Overly stringent social and environmental criteria would imply huge costs and prevent a substantial market impact. Approaches originally identified as “alternative” face challenges maintaining their “outsider” political identity as they move toward the mainstream. At the same time, as they become more influential, such products are exposed

to the pressures of resourceful and powerful actors. Thus, dilemmas stem “not so much from an oppositional strategy as from their significant success in the market” (Taylor, 2004).

Studies reported in this special issue confirm these situations. Jensen et al. (2012) demonstrate how mainstreaming in the area of sustainable buildings implies a narrow/technical sustainability framing in which social sustainability goals came to be excluded. Klintman (2012) shows how the movement toward international harmonization of criteria for sustainable tourism elicited protracted debate. Moreover, important tradeoffs are involved in finding a balance between overly strict and excessively lax criteria. For instance, very exacting sustainability criteria may induce negative effects in terms of social sustainability because they undermine the ability of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to attain certification.

A related topic is that a market-based approach has great difficulty dealing with *structural* issues such as poverty reduction, capacity building in developing country contexts, or equitable wealth distribution (Klooster, 2010; Boström, 2011); prerequisites that may be a necessary if one is to work for all dimensions of sustainability.

However, pessimism should not be exaggerated. Researchers are recognizing that companies at times do shoulder responsibilities and develop proactive strategies to prevent harmful social and environmental side effects from their production. The corporate sector can play a key role in achieving social goals, such as improving conditions for workers and local communities. Although based on compromises as discussed above, labeling and certification have at least potential to go a few steps beyond status quo.

As an example, in a recent study of how the Forest Stewardship Council has pursued social sustainability, Boström (2011) found tangible benefits regarding some substantive social goals (for example, related to labor issues such as safe and humane working conditions, and respect of local communities’ right for other uses of forest resources) as well as procedural goals related to local organization, empowerment, and stakeholder communication. Nevertheless, many problems were unresolved and the difficulties accomplishing these benefits were not insignificant. Moreover, Klooster (2010) argues that we should acknowledge various instantiations of “neoliberal environmental governance,” as some may contain elements of questioning current practices, “especially when certification institutions were constructed with the participation of social movements promoting social and environmental goals that seem to counter neoliberal tendencies.” Accordingly, he emphasizes the importance of the procedural (partici-

patory) dimension of social sustainability, which I elaborate in the next section.

Relation Between the Procedural (How) and Substantive (What) Dimension of Social Sustainability

Allow me to turn back to Table 1 and to suggest that many challenges to fully incorporate social sustainability have to do with insufficient attention to the relationship between procedural and substantive dimensions. A number of scholars indeed assume positive internal linkage between these dimensions of social sustainability (e.g., Agyeman & Evans, 2004; Dillard et al. 2009). The way a sustainability project is organized, which entails, for example, participatory aspects (who is allowed to contribute) and the way that leaders frame the issues that participants discuss, may affect if and how substantive sustainability aspects are considered. As Casula Vifell & Soneryd (2010) remark, “[I]f no actors explicitly addressing the social dimension are invited, this pillar is likely to remain weak.” And merely providing opportunities for participation is not sufficient. “Social recognition” is important for participants’ motivation and confidence (Nordström Källström & Ljung, 2005) and it is also essential to consider individual stakeholders’ capabilities (e.g., financial, cognitive, organizational) to play effective roles in sustainability projects (Boström & Tamm Hallström, 2010; Boström, 2011). If one fails to develop a system in which procedural aspects are taken into account (effective participation of social stakeholders), then one can expect few incentives to include goals and concerns that run counter to leaders’ framing of the issue (Casula Vifell & Soneryd, 2012). The organizing process itself may lead to bureaucratization, as seen in the cases of fair trade and organic food policy making (Casula Vifell & Thedvall, 2012), that can obscure power struggles and the political aspects of negotiations, as well as create obstacles to participation, particularly for weak social stakeholders (see also Tamm Hallström & Boström, 2010).

Klintman considers scale-related participatory and representational challenges, including the distance between the global actors that dominate the definition and regulation of sustainable tourism and the local communities and SMEs that are targets for such activity. This case is an echo of the common social sustainability call for local empowerment and participation in planning accreditation/certification. It also reveals the difficulties involved in deciding who are legitimate participants/representatives. Who should represent social sustainability? This difficult question is, according to Klintman, related to the vagueness of the scale entity “local”—and what the

local community is and who is supposed to represent it (often a local elite).

A focus on how procedures affect substance ought to take into account a longitudinal perspective. Devlin & Tubino (2012) highlight instances of both success and failure in the very same case, but at different stages. The authors demonstrate how rising public mobilization/participation, in connection with certain enabling conditions, could bring about change in the environmental plan of a Brazilian mining company. Yet, the initial victory turned to failure during implementation due to the firm’s strategic moves and changing conditions (such as less vigilant attention by the state). As public mobilization is episodic, a powerful company has considerable flexibility to behave as it wants. The case under study reveals that the firm in question could reach out directly to communities and introduce new programs to deflect attention from past agreements. In light of these challenges, Devlin & Tubino (2012) argue that continuous supervision and participation need to be institutionalized. Deliberative democracy cannot be restricted to public participation only during the planning process.

What is the Potential Benefit of the Concept?

The inherent vagueness and interpretative flexibility of both the sustainability concept in general and social sustainability in particular cannot be fully overcome. And indeed, it is precisely this feature that explains why it has played an extraordinarily important historical role in facilitating communication among actors with colliding interests (Hajer, 1995; Jacobs, 1999). Similarly, Fitzpatrick (2011b) argues that sustainability can be “thought of as a ‘portal,’ and entrance into a series of debates.” Before Brundtland, few such conceptual tools were in place that could bring various actors together.

The consequence is that (social) sustainable development needs to be framed, filled with content, and interpreted from time to time and place to place. In the absence of active engagement, it is merely an empty conceptual space (Davidson, 2009). Greenwashing will always be a risk, as will the possibility that the sustainability framing just helps to cement the institutional separation of “the environment” and “the social” in policy, administration, and management. Yet, the various frameworks, such as those briefly discussed here, or the one suggested by Murphy in his contribution to this special issue, as well as the various aspects listed in Table 1, shed light on topics that ought to be considered in policies and planning.

Sustainable development is, as I see it, not a very useful theoretical concept for social scientists for

understanding the relationship between society and nature, or for studying environmental governance, management, and communication, and so forth. This criticism is, for example, echoed in the articles by Juhu Hiedanpää and colleagues and Katerina Psarikidou & Bronislaw Szerszynski. Neither should we treat “social sustainability” as the best theoretical tool for studying social-environmental relations in general, although parts of the referenced literature clearly provide useful analytical tools for understanding and investigating sustainability projects and planning, as well as normative tools for improving them. In its very broadest sense, the “social” has to do with the entire relationship between society and nature, which thereby includes economic, cultural, political, and institutional structures and processes. From a social constructionist perspective, there is nothing in principle—including nature—that cannot be labeled as “social.” Environmental sociology challenges the dualism between society and nature, and economic sociology teaches us that the economy is socially embedded. However, the aim in this introductory article is not to carry out a sociological analysis—or deconstruction—of the sustainability discourse.

If we take this discourse as given (in the sense of having a robust place in the public debate), we can ask if and how social sustainability, viewed as frame (discourse), enables policy makers to take into account, integrate, and simultaneously work for social, economic, and environmental goals. This article has presented six challenges for operationalizing and integrating social sustainability: 1) high expectations; 2) vague, subjective, and ideological framing; 3) historical roots (sustainability framing is better suited to environmental than social issues); 4) missing institutional linkage (rather than a missing pillar); 5) global capitalism for sustainable development? 6) the relation between the procedural (how) and substantive (what) dimensions of social sustainability.

This discussion of the challenges has also indicated some opportunities. First, both scholars and policy makers should acknowledge the potential of the social sustainability framing for sustainability projects and planning. For example, although Davidson (2009) expressed concerns about the ontological and epistemological roots of sustainable development, which may end up in a depoliticized notion of the concept (see third challenge in the previous section), he still envisioned potential in another version that endorses its political dimension. The debate surrounding social sustainability may still offer a useful site for politics. Within the question “what type of society do we want to sustain?” resides latent political potential. The very framing of what (social) sustainability is should be part of the broadly

participatory process of working toward sustainability (cf., Dillard et al. 2009). Furthermore, Cuthill (2009) showed how the social sustainability concept worked well as a communicative platform among academics and planners.

[A] focus on the concept of “Social sustainability” was seen to provide a meeting place, which drew together participants’ diverse perspectives around a relatively new concept that did not carry any political or academic baggage from previous use. This concept provided an umbrella under which existing disciplinary and operational perspectives, relating to the social dimension of sustainable development, could be sheltered. Social sustainability appeared to have a “low profile,” among both researchers and bureaucrats.

Second, opportunities are to be found in the systematic focus on the very process of defining social sustainability goals and criteria. If certain “social stakeholders,” such as labor unions or community groups, are both given access and empowered (economic, education, social capital) to take part in sustainability planning and projects, it is unlikely that social sustainability will be defined as all or nothing. The effective participation of such social stakeholders should prevent very narrow or unbalanced framings. As Cuthill (2009) argued, there is “an interdependent and self-reinforcing relationship” between the different social sustainability dimensions. By seriously taking into account both the substantive (what) and procedural (how) dimensions, while acknowledging structural limitations and inherent contradictions, there could be a strong potential role for social sustainability projects. He observes, “A strong marketing point for social sustainability lies in its strategic, preventive approach to social issues, addressing the ‘causes’ rather than just treating the ‘symptoms.’”

Third, while the win-win-win framing of the sustainability concept may lead to unrealistic expectations, it is also fair to say that the frame of *social* sustainability has, during the past decade, assisted in focusing attention on many new issues among academics, policy makers, and practitioners. It has triggered several new debates about the connections, including the synergies and tradeoffs, between social and environmental issues. Learning about tradeoffs in, for example, the use of policy instruments or access to mobility is a first step toward formulating integrated sustainable transportation policies.

Finally, the related frame of “environmental justice” has resulted in “the environment” being rede-

fined so that “the dominant wilderness, greening and natural resource focus now includes urban disinvestment, racism, homes, jobs, neighborhoods and communities” (Agyeman, 2008). Similarly, initiatives such as alternative agrofood networks, fair trade, the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council, and the Forest Stewardship Council provide regulatory frameworks and organizational and discursive platforms that enable actors to demonstrate alternatives, to work hard on the topic of social sustainability, and to make room for serious debate on the challenges.

In closing, I do not think social sustainability is the best concept for studying all of the complexities in the social-environment relationship, but it certainly has potential as a frame to assist and improve local and transnational sustainability projects. For social scientists, it has proven to be easily and fruitfully linked to a number of other social scientific concepts such as social capital, moral economy, identity, work, participation, democracy, and civil society. Social sustainability provides social scientists with a promising channel for communicating more broadly and playing a constructive part in wider sustainability debates, both locally and transnationally. The readers of this special issue will hopefully find both critical perspectives and well-founded frameworks useful for understanding, investigating, and assessing sustainability projects and planning.

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