



The environmental–social interface of sustainable development: capabilities, social capital, institutions

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Abstract

The social dimension has commonly been recognised as the weakest ‘pillar’ of sustainable development, notably when it comes to its analytical and theoretical underpinnings. While increasing attention has lately been paid to social sustainability, the interaction between the ‘environmental’ and the ‘social’ still remains a largely uncharted terrain. Nevertheless, one can argue that the key challenges of sustainable development reside at the interfaces—synergies and trade-offs—between its various dimensions. This paper looks for preliminary ideas on frameworks for analysing the environmental–social interface. It first discusses the concept of sustainable development and the relations of the three dimensions of sustainability on the basis of the fundamental premises of neoinstitutional and ecological economics, and briefly presents the ‘bioeconomy model’. Based on this conceptualisation of sustainable development, it then goes on to analyse two popular ways of addressing the social dimension of sustainability, namely, the ‘capability approach’ of Amartya Sen, and the concept of social capital, and discusses the potential of these as bases for the analysis of the environment–social interaction. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Environmental Performance Review (EPR) programme is presented as an example of attempts to analyse the environmental–social interface in practice. The paper concludes by noting that a single framework for studying environmental–social interface is neither feasible nor desirable. It questions the usefulness of analysing only two dimensions of sustainability at a time; and emphasises the need to situate the analysis in its context. In particular, it stresses the need to involve the potential users, as well as to take into account the planned use of the analysis and the interactions between different levels of analysis and decision-making. Capabilities and social capital can both be useful in structuring thoughts, but are not as such directly applicable as suitable analytical frameworks. In particular, they do not provide adequate tools for examining the social preconditions for institutional change needed for environmentally sustainable development.

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1. Introduction

The social dimension has commonly been recognised as the weakest ‘pillar’ of sustainable development, notably when it comes to its analytical and

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theoretical underpinnings. Until recently, sustainable development was perceived as an essentially environmental issue, concerning the integration of environmental concerns into economic decision-making. In the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest towards the social dimensions of development, which can be attributed to the fall of communism, the ostensible difficulties of creating market institutions in transitional economies, the financial crises in Latin America, East Asia, and Russia, and the persistent problems of unemployment and social marginalisation in even the most prosperous economies (Woolcock, 2001, p. 66). The academic literature has paid increasing attention to the role of institutions, governance, and social capital in the development process. Finally, the political acceptability of sustainable development depends on its capacity to respond to the persistent social problems that seem to have to some extent surpassed the environmental issues as matters of public concern. Such a shift was clearly seen also in the negotiations at the Johannesburg summit on sustainable development in 2002, which raised the development concerns again to the forefront (see, e.g., Jollivet, 2003).

Even less attention has so far been paid to the linkages between the social and the environmental dimensions. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the essence of sustainable development lies precisely at the interfaces and trade-offs between the often conflicting objectives of economic and social development, and environmental protection. The demand for such an analytical framework is clearly present, as manifested i.a. by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Council of Ministers' call for integrating the environmental–social interface into the

OECD Environmental Performance Reviews (EPRs) (OECD, 2001a).

Given their holistic view of economy and interdisciplinary character, the neoinstitutional¹ and the ecological economics can be argued to present a 'comparative advantage' over the more conventional neoclassical approaches in integrating the social dimension of sustainability into their analytical toolbox. Among the recent approaches that at least to some extent share the critique that neoinstitutional and ecological economics direct towards the conventional economic theories are Sen's (1987, 1999) approach based on individual capabilities and the concept of 'social capital', used for addressing the social dimension of sustainable development. This paper looks at these approaches with a view to analysing their potential as foundation for analysing the environmental–social interface. After a brief description of the way in which neoinstitutional and ecological economics conceptualises sustainable development, the paper goes on to review the 'capability approach' and the theories of social capital, providing then some preliminary thoughts on their suitability in addressing the environmental–social interface. To present an example of an attempt at evaluating the environmental–social interface, the paper briefly describes the way in which the OECD Environmental Performance Reviews have dealt with the issue.

2. Sustainable development—the bioeconomy model

Although the original definition by the Brundtland Commission from 1987 does not make such a distinction, sustainable development has later become perceived as a combination of three dimensions or 'pillars', namely, the environmental (ecological), economic, and social dimensions. Since the Rio conference in 1992, this tripartite description has constituted the basis for most of the generally accepted definitions of sustainable development in international organisations (e.g., OECD, 2001b; Commission of the European Communities, 2001), called 'triple bottom line' in the business circles. The 'capitals approach'—considering sustainability as the maintenance or increase of the total stock of different

¹ The term 'neoinstitutional economics' is used here to make a distinction between scholars representing the New Institutional Economics (e.g., Coase, North, Olson, Williamson) and the authors following the American 'Old Institutionalism' of Veblen, Commons, Mitchell and Ayres. Among the contemporary neoinstitutionalists, one can mention names such as Hodgson (1988, 1999), Bromley (1991), Schmid (1978), Samuels (1971), Tool (1979) (see also Samuels and Schmid, 1981). In the field of environmental economics, one can also mention the 'Nordic school' of institutionalism, exemplified by the works of Söderbaum (2000, 2001) and Hahtola (1990), as well as Opschoor and van der Straaten (1993). For a brief review of institutionalism's roots and the present situation, see Rutherford (2001).

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