



Methods

The joint discourse ‘reflexive sustainable development’ – From weak towards strong sustainable development

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 July 2009

Received in revised form 24 October 2009

Accepted 10 November 2009

Available online 1 December 2009

Keywords:

Sustainable development

Climate change

Reflexive approach

Discourse

Family metaphor

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to contribute towards moving the predominant situation of weak sustainable development (WSD) in the direction of strong sustainable development (SSD). More people – academics, politicians, bureaucrats and laymen alike – need to recognize SSD as an alternative to WSD. A joint discourse of WSD and SSD is suggested, called reflexive sustainable development. Here, advocates of WSD and SSD must argue for each specific case why their solution is better. This will expose, amongst other things, the ethical foundations which form part of resulting policy advice. Reflexive sustainable development is to be framed in discourse ethics, thereby remedying the power imbalance and allowing for substantial discussion. Reflexive sustainable development builds on a common theoretical base but will not lead to consensus in all matters. A family metaphor is introduced to inspire a discourse of both consensus and compromise.

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1. Introduction

Academics, politicians, bureaucrats, NGOs and journalists are continually making statements and giving opinions on which actions and policies will take us in a sustainable direction. But these statements are seldom contrasted against the backdrop of different or competing definitions of sustainable development. As a result, value foundations, implicit ontologies and paradigms are not challenged. This paper uses a reflexive approach to focus on the two most common definitions within economics, namely weak and strong sustainable development (WSD and SSD). The objective is to challenge the hegemonic position of WSD, through substantial discussions. This will bring to the forefront differences between WSD and SSD, but also their common features. A joint discourse called reflexive sustainable development is proposed, where the appropriateness of either WSD or SSD must be argued for and discussed with reference to each individual case in hand.

The paper is conceptual, but the increasingly severe situation of man-made climate change (Anderson and Bows, 2008; House et al., 2008) is used as an example of a current issue where WSD and SSD are part of the debate. The last section offers some illustrations from official Norwegian documents on climate policy – related to both WSD and SSD. These examples build upon and acknowledge the scientific reports, mainly drawn from The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which provide highly reassuring evidence that the climate change we are now facing is mainly man-made (IPCC, 2001,

2007a,b,c). The motivation of this paper is to provide a constructive input into discussions on mitigating climate change, as well as a more general contribution on cooperation between conflicting schools of thought.

2. Combining Different Perspectives

The two definitions of sustainable development in this paper belong to different schools of thought. WSD is part of neo-classical economics (Neumayer, 2003; Perman et al., 2003), whereas SSD is a premise in several more recently developed theories such as ecological economics (Costanza, 1991; Daly and Farley, 2004; Gowdy and Erickson, 2005), circulation economics (Ingebrigtsen and Jakobsen, 2006), and more radical versions of environmental management and corporate social responsibility (Bansal and Roth, 2000; Dillon and Fisher, 1992; Welford, 2000; Zadek, 2004).

The term ‘sustainable development’ became well-known through the report ‘Our Common Future’ by the Brundtland Commission. Their definition of the term is probably better known than the report itself: “Sustainable development is 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, p. 43). This is also an articulation of the goal of WSD; human utility is to be non-declining over time.¹ SSD, on the other hand, states that the economy and nature are both to be sustained as they are complementary (Daly, 1999, p. 56). The interests of humans are not to have an overriding priority over the interests of nature.

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¹ Both WSD and SSD are defined more thoroughly in later sections.

It is fair to say that the overall situation in the world today, at least in the Western societies, is a situation based on policy recommendations in line with WSD and neoclassical economics. The focus is on maximising the utility of human beings (DesJardins, 2006; Söderbaum, 2009, p. 77). The case of this paper, climate change, is a good illustration. Greenhouse gases continue to rise as a result of prioritizing human utility, despite decades of international attention to the non-reversible effects on nature. And it is getting more and more unlikely that a new international climate agreement will rise to face the increasingly severe situation (Anderson and Bows, 2008, p. 18).

This paper builds on a belief that human utility should not be the only goal, that WSD is therefore insufficient to mitigate climate change and that SSD is a better goal to strive for than a continuous situation of WSD. In the case of climate change it means that the utility or well-being of humans is not to be attained at the cost of the sustainability of nature.² There are examples of subsets in the economy similar to the ideas of SSD, such as organic food production. And, as illustrated in the last section of this paper, Norwegian policy on climate change is officially described by using both WSD and SSD. But, in practice, the Norwegian policy is predominantly WSD, a fact which is demonstrated through the continuous rise in greenhouse gases and the reliance on the non-satisfactory international regime of the Kyoto Protocol (Nilsen, 2008).

How do we move from WSD towards SSD? One pathway is to work within the sphere of SSD, pursuing or contributing to this school of thought. Through this work, SSD will hopefully become more visible both within academia and within practical politics. Another pathway is to engage in scientific and public discourses with proponents of WSD, such as the joint discourse proposed in this paper. Why, when WSD and SSD are perceived as competing ways of understanding sustainable development (Kallio et al., 2007, p. 42)? Communicating and arguing with the majority of academics, politicians and bureaucrats working within the sphere of WSD is an opportunity to engage and influence. To challenge the current predominance of WSD with the ideas and goals of SSD requires that more people – researchers, politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, and people in the street – know of and understand SSD. It requires that more people recognize that there is an alternative to WSD, and that the situation of WSD can be moved in a direction towards SSD. “Audiences outside academia can influence the reputation of the individual researcher, as most ecological economists consider it important to actually influence the political agenda.” (Røpke, 2005, p. 287).

This paper does not contribute to building an exclusive or delimited regime of ecological economics or of SSD, nor does it alienate neoclassical economics. “Actually, a general critique of neoclassical economics is sometimes seen as outright counterproductive, because it tends to isolate ecological economics as a marginalized sect and to scare away both the influential economists and the large number of potential members who could fill the ranks of the society.” (Røpke, 2005, p. 281) This approach is based on the belief that rational arguments have a strong persuasive power. To influence advocates of WSD, proponents of SSD also need to understand how advocates of WSD argue. Hence there is the possibility that proponents of SSD may be influenced by WSD. Mutual understanding is a key ingredient for successful interdisciplinary collaboration, more specifically understanding the ontological, epistemological and methodological orientations of colleagues (Castán Broto et al., 2009, p. 9).

The last but by no means the least reason to open the way for discussions with WSD is that there is already a commitment to

communication contained within some theories of SSD, such as circulation economics (Ingebrigtsen and Jakobsen, 2007). Circulation economics offers a holistic alternative to mainstream economic criteria, and the third out of its four basic principles is “(3) incorporating a communicative arena for cooperative interaction” (Ingebrigtsen and Jakobsen, 2006, p. 581). This arena is to include all stakeholders within economy and nature. The most well known and principal contributor to the theory of communicative action and a democratic participating process where all voices and arguments should be present, is Jürgen Habermas (1990, 2006). The communicative arena is an argument for communication between proponents of WSD and SSD, and a commitment to initiate such a communication.

3. Reflexive Methodology

Reflexivity offers the possibility to be able to see what a theory cannot say, or does not say. A reflexive approach – in contrast to a single framework – does not offer one privileged understanding. Solid theoretical consistency is not an ideal, and likewise, nor is expanding a theory to capture ever occurring elements. Reflexivity is an approach which enables a broader theoretical and conceptual clarification. Several theories and meta-theories can be introduced to make a methodology reflexive, and some theories are reflexive in themselves; such as theories on discourse (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2005). Discourse is here used as a reflexive tool to mediate between, compare and contrast WSD and SSD.

Communication between WSD and SSD is rare, and they can be defined as separate discourses: “It is obvious that the advocates of both weak and strong sustainable development have their own hermeneutic discursive universe from which the opposing party is consciously excluded, while any opposing interpretations are rejected as invalid, non-rational and inferior.” (Kallio et al., 2007, p. 45) The reflexive approach taken here is to consider WSD and SSD as separate discourses within each school of thought, and then to search for and construct a joint theoretical discourse. The joint discourse of this paper, reflexive sustainable development, is named after this reflexive approach.

4. Paradigms Constraining Communication

Neo-classical economics is often described as a paradigm as defined by Kuhn (Kuhn, 1996). Kuhn divided scientific progress into three phases; a pre-science, normal science and revolutionary science phase. Normal science is the organised, progressive, everyday work of gathering evidence and testing hypotheses. The researchers are in this phase often intolerant of data that are incompatible with the basic assumptions of the paradigm: “No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomena; indeed those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all.” (Kuhn, 1996, p. 24) Kuhn says that, although it may be a defect to not see those that will not fit the box, that this is, nevertheless, a necessity for scientific development. Without making a commitment of this nature to a paradigm, the detail and depth of the research would otherwise be unimaginable.

This is a description of scientific progress that fits neo-classical economics well. Seeing WSD as part of a paradigm implies that there is no obligation to justify the framework of WSD. The justification and methodological clarification of a paradigm is implicit within the paradigm. Mutual understanding among practitioners of different paradigms is not encouraged.

WSD is a good *description* of the situation in the world of today exemplified by climate change. SSD, as stated, is a *normative* goal of this paper. Moreover, lack of communication between WSD and SSD is a good *description* of the situation today, and communication and mutual understanding are *normative* goals of this paper. No paradigmatic approach supports these normative goals, although cross-paradigm developments and mutual understanding have been

² This paper has a general global approach and does not differentiate between needs and wants. If differentiating between needs and wants, it is consistent with SSD to recommend short term solutions prioritizing human *needs* at the expense of nature – primarily in developing countries. This implies that human *wants*, based on the use of natural resources, must be reduced accordingly elsewhere.

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