



Sustainable Development: Capabilities, Needs, and Well-Being

<i>Executive Summary</i>

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‘Sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’ (WCED 1987)¹

Sustainable Development (SD) is most prominently defined with respect to the needs of current and future generations. Political and scientific discussion, though, refrains from this concept, even though much can be gained by referring to needs. This book brings together chapters that clarify the concept of needs directly or relate it to other scientific approaches. On the one hand, there is the capability approach which is widely used by human development studies and politics and can thus be utilized for bringing the Brundtland definition of SD into practice. On the other hand, meeting needs is intrinsically linked to well-being which is the main driver for human action.

This edited volume takes a new look at the links between needs, capabilities, well-being and SD. Its *conceptual aim* is to propose and critically discuss these links from different disciplinary backgrounds (economics, philosophy, sociology, and psychology). Its *political aim* is to re-stimulate the discussion about sustainable development.

It is our impression that the discussion about SD does not touch citizens and decision makers (anymore?). The discretionary use of the term ‘sustainable development’ or ‘sustainability’ by politicians and lobby groups discredit the political aim; very technical scientific discussions (e.g. about substitutability of natural capital) remove the conceptual discussion on SD from its central goal and from implementation problems alike. In his preface, Max-Neef pleads for reshaping economics training and research away from questions of ‘how to maximize utility’ towards the Aristotelian origin of economics, i.e. *oikonomia* as the art of living and living well, herewith embracing values, ethics and aesthetics. The discussions in this book can be understood in this perspective.

This book links current attempts that all aim at orienting policy more towards what really matters:

- Needs approaches take universal human needs as the central criterion for human flourishing (chapters 1, 2, 6);
- The capability approach accentuates human agency freedom for developmental policy (chapters 3 and 4);

- Research on well-being and life courses aims at a better and fuller understanding of the relationship between SD and human well-being and life course (chapters 4 and 5).

These approaches are presented together with proposed links on their capacity to address the central societal challenge of sustainable development: intra- and intergenerational justice. Whereas more emotions-considering approaches (well-being / happiness and needs) have the potential to touch and appeal to citizens and decision-makers, their focus on individuals pose challenges for societal decision-making, necessarily involving institutions and organisations. These challenges might require more integrative institutions and forms of science and of scientific policy advice (chapters 6-8).

The first chapter of this book opens the discussion and proposes an overarching framework for the concepts dealt with in the subsequent chapters. These discuss the different approaches more in detail (chapters 2-5) and move the discussion towards policy or research implications (chapters 6-8). Chronologically, the first chapter (written by the three editors) was the starting point for the book; chapters 2-7 have been written following the editors' invitation, and chapter 8 is – at least for two of the editors – the end of a first learning experience, having read and refereed all earlier chapters². We hope that our work stimulates critique and discussion and that you, the reader, will therefore support us to move further in the direction of conceptual clarity and progress towards SD and human flourishing.

The following gives brief summaries of all eight chapters.

Needs, capabilities, and quality of life. Refocusing sustainable development

Felix Rauschmayer, Ines Omann, Johannes Frühmann

This chapter explains why refocusing on needs, capabilities, and quality of life can make SD more appealing to politicians, scholars and citizens alike. The authors develop a framework, according to which capabilities are crucial to meeting needs, which in turn triggers well-being. Capabilities and well-being are the main constituents of quality of life. The framework links the main topics of the book and is the starting point for the journey of linking sustainable development, capabilities, needs, well-being, and quality of life. Human flourishing emerges by an ongoing process, focussing more on the eudaimonic aspects of well-being than its hedonic components.

SD policy is reformulated as an expression of particular values aimed at encouraging people and societies to develop specific capabilities. Those will enable people to select certain strategies over others for meeting their needs so that *all* people – both those living now and in the future – can have a decent quality of life. Conception of SD policy should be based on

capabilities, needs and quality of life rather than on the frameworks currently used, which usually relate to the three dimensions environment, economy, and society. This provides important points of reference for the methods used in designing and evaluating SD policies. Refocusing SD policies on needs comes closer to what really matters to people and can even be a starting point on how to approach intergenerational justice.

The overshadowing of needs

John O'Neill

Discussions of sustainability in economics have shifted from the needs-based formulation of the concept in the Brundtland report to the preference-based formulation that is standard in welfare economics. This chapter contrasts the logical features of the concepts of need and preference and suggests that the characterisation of the concept of sustainability in terms of needs has both theoretical and practical virtues which disappear in the shift to the language of preferences. A needs-based approach captures the plurality of different constituents of well-being, and the limits to the substitutability between different kinds of goods that current generation must pass on to future generations if human welfare is to be maintained. It offers a better account of the nature and seriousness of the ethical obligations that are owed both to the poor in current generations and to future generations. It provides a more adequate starting point for the acknowledgement of forms of human dependence and vulnerability that informs basic concerns with sustainability. In developing these arguments this chapter also addresses the questions of the relative merits of needs-based and capabilities-based approaches to welfare and sustainability, and examine how far they can be reconciled.

Sustainability as a challenge to the capability approach

Ortrud Leßmann

The Capability Approach (CA) was developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum as an approach to the evaluation of individual well-being and social welfare. The chapter shows some difficulties of conceptualizing SD in the CA which has not been a priority for CA scholars so far. It does so in three steps.

The chapter first outlines the basic concepts employed by the CA which defines a person's well-being in terms of the beings and doings (the functionings) a person achieves and her capability to choose among different combinations of such functionings. Capability reflects the freedom to lead one way of life or the other and achieve well-being whereas the achievements are represented by the functionings achieved. Since people may have objectives other than personal well-being, the CA distinguishes between well-being goals and agency goals.

The chapter then hints at some problems for conceptualizing sustainability within the CA. First, the CA is not opposed to the understanding of well-being in terms of needs, but capabilities provide an understanding that goes further in important ways. Secondly, the CA focuses on intragenerational justice and has to be augmented with a longer time horizon in order to analyse intergenerational justice. Thirdly, the CA has not taken up the discussion on ecosystem services yet, nor outlined the process of how functionings are produced in much detail.

Finally, sustainability is defined on the social level and demands immediate political action, whereas the CA provides foremost a measure for the evaluation of well-being on the individual level. This part of the chapter argues that since the CA conceives individuals as social beings it has the potential to overcome these contrasts and meet the challenge of SD. The last part concludes by summarizing which questions are the most pressing when striving for a conception of SD within the CA.

From individual well-being to sustainable development - A path where psychologists and economist meet

Sophie Spillemaeckers, Luc Van Ootegem, Gerben J. Westerhof

SD aims at meeting the needs of current and future generations. Although there is an international consensus that well-being is a right for all and that future generations are to be considered, many see SD as too complex, or too threatening for their own well-being. In this chapter economic and psychological theories are brought together to unveil some of this complexity and to find some explanations for this recalcitrance.

To analyse the well-being of a population indicators are needed. This chapter addresses shortcomings of utilitarian indicators, such as those based on income, resources, or happiness, describes alternatives proposed by economic and psychological sciences, and discusses where these converge.

From an economic perspective, a *capabilities model of well-being* was developed making use of the capabilities approach and current research on basic needs. The challenge remains to use and adapt this model such that it can be used for those aspects of SD that go beyond individual well-being.

From a psychological perspective, the approach of *eudaimonic approach of flourishing* is promising. It also goes beyond the hedonic fixation on happiness and takes into account the individual's self-realization as well as social integration in defining a good life. The challenge remains to integrate this psychological perspective into the capabilities and SD approaches.

The life-chances concept: a sociological perspective on equity and sustainable development

Paul-Marie Boulanger

This chapter is mainly devoted to the exploration and discussion of the encompassing concept of life chances as a more sociological way to look at well-being, justice and SD. The dominant discourses on well-being in terms of welfare, capability or needs generally adopt a somewhat individualistic and static perspective, probably because of the influence exerted by economists in the public and political debate. It is argued that *life-chances* and *life-course* approaches bring additional information with respect to what both the capability-functioning and the needs-satisfaction perspectives carry. In particular, they draw our attention to the impact of the totally contingent circumstances of birth on individual prospects in terms of longevity, health, career opportunities, income, wealth, power, autonomy, etc. Indeed, the life-chances and life-course approaches insist on two fundamental interdependent characteristics of human life: its social structural embedding and its sequencing in well-differentiated periods correspond to different roles and status and therefore to different needs and capabilities.

SD is then looked at in a life-chances perspective and presented as a global justice endeavour aiming at guaranteeing sufficient life chances to all, irrespective of the contingent spatial-temporal circumstances of birth. The notion of sufficient life chances is interpreted in a twofold way: as a minimum set of options and opportunities in terms of livelihoods, and as options and opportunities guaranteeing the satisfaction of an extended Rawlsian set of basic needs.

Human needs frameworks and their contribution as analytical instruments in sustainable development policy-making

Ivonne Cruz

The conclusions and recommendations of the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) gained broad acceptance as it described the urgent need for humanity to make development sustainable ensuring that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Meeting essential human needs however requires not only political systems aiming to promote participation in decision making but the acknowledgement of people's values in the building of a new society coherent with its aspirations.

This chapter presents some of the challenges faced in SD policy-making processes as to how they include different valuable aspects of natural and human systems. The *Human-Scale Development approach* is proposed as a resourceful framework to incorporate human needs

debates in sustainable policy-making. Due to the particular way this approach defines well-being dimensions and how needs and satisfiers interrelate with each other, it provides a holistic setting and therefore a proposal for SD policy consideration. The chapter describes a methodology to guide policy processes pursuing holistic sustainability outcomes, herewith developing an innovative feature to guide integrated SD policy for present and future generations.

A plea for the self-aware sustainability researcher. Learning from business transformation processes for transitions to sustainable development.

Felix Rauschmayer, Tell Muenzing, Johannes Frühmann

This chapter looks at transition processes towards SD from the perspective of the researcher. It relies on experiences in business and distinguishes the internal context of the individual (such as knowledge, beliefs, values, priorities, and needs) from the external context (such as resources, regulation, infrastructure or culture). Both, the deeper internal *roots* of behaviour and their *interplay* with the external context should be more considered in designing and implementing transition processes towards SD.

In order to analyse behaviour and its contextual factors in more detail the chapter introduces a 4-quadrant model differentiating between two complementary dimensions: inside/outside and individual/collective. If behaviour transformation is meant to be sustainable, change has to happen in the internal-individual perspective – as deep-seated needs and values are the main motivational factors for human behaviour and the working material for behavioural transformation.

With an example from the business sector the chapter shows how behavioural transformation can be achieved and sustained and how the new emerging (and more sustainable) system can be aligned better through such a multi-perspective approach. Furthermore, the example highlights which capabilities and skills are necessary for the facilitator to work with concepts such as needs and values in the process. The facilitator (often replaced by the researcher in cases of SD transition processes) has to be able to access and focus on the deeper layers of consciousness, and s/he needs high levels of emotional intelligence, deep listening skills, and to be able to work with empathy. Transformation does not come from intellect.

In order to develop research methods further, researchers will therefore have to gain the experience of personal transformation processes and ability to understand, lead and facilitate such processes. This requires new forms of training and personal engagement.

Transition towards SD. Which tensions emerge? How do deal with them?

Ines Omann and Felix Rauschmayer

‘I want to bring my children (6 and 10) safely to school. It is raining outside, we are late. They could go there by public transport, which means a walk of five minutes, a tram for 10 minutes and a bus for 8 minutes. There is the car, today I have got time, because I am not working in the morning. What shall I – as a person who wants to live a sustainable lifestyle and be a role model for my kids – do?’

The case just described shows a typical situation in our Western societies faced by people, who see sustainable development as an important value. The current chapter describes three possible classes of such tensions, (1) intra-individual, (2) intra-societal, and (3) intergenerational ones. They only arise if a transition towards SD is wanted. The authors explain in the beginning of the chapter why they want such a transition. Reasons are found in culture, socialization, belief systems, values and emotions.

The next section goes deeper into the three classes of tensions and brings real life examples of those. The reasons behind action (beliefs, valuesneeds) are usually not seen; only the behaviour is obvious. We therefore suggest dealing with these tensions by looking exactly to the issues that are not easily seen.

This can be done in a four-step process, which starts by recognizing the tension(s), followed by a reflection upon the possible reasons for these tensions (beliefs, values, needs). The result of this reflection can be communicated and discussed between the persons concerned or with the public. These steps prepare for the last step, the creativity process for finding solutions.

In the last section we refer to the framework of the first chapter of this book and show where the tensions can be placed and which leverage points are given for measures and activities to overcome these tensions.

¹ WCED, United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development 1987. Our Common Future, <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm> [03. April 2010].

² Each chapter has been refereed by at least two peers.