Introduction to the special issue on social sustainability: integration, context, and governance

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Since the late 1980s, the pursuit of sustainability as a practical effort, rather than as a purely scientific or descriptive concept, has recognized the importance of balancing the competing priorities of environmental protection, economic growth, and social equity. We now know that we cannot make meaningful progress resolving issues like climate change and the degradation of global ecosystems without also addressing associated economic and social equity concerns. As part of this realization, scholars and practitioners in diverse disciplines have adopted a "triple-bottom line" or "three pillars" approach as an expedient heuristic that understands sustainability, or sustainable development, as achieving some balance among environmental, economic, and social equity priorities, all at once. Over time, however, decision makers have earned criticism for using this triad of objectives as a policy inventory rather than a model for examining the relationships and interdependencies among environmental, economic, and social priorities in diverse places (see, in particular, Boström, 2012). Some scholars, coming to the issue from a range of disciplines, have attempted to address the shortcomings of the three-pillar model by adding more pillars (e.g., Godschalk, 2004; Bendell & Kearins, 2005; Inayatullah, 2005; Seghezzo, 2009). However, the challenge remains that forcing complex and unprecedented socio-environmental problems into three, four, or seven distinct containers represents an outdated, unduly modernist way of problem-solving that tends to approach environmental, economic, and social issues as independent, and consequently, their solutions as separate (Vanclay, 2004; Milne & Gray, 2013).

New research and practice in sustainability proposes an integrated concept whereby "social issues" are indistinguishable and inseparable from economic or environmental issues and vice versa. These approaches are based in experiences with real places and real people, pertaining to, as Krueger & Agyeman (2005) contend, "actual existing sustain-abilities." The articles in this special issue extend the effort to envision a deeply integrated approach to sustainability by rooting their analyses in local places and actual people, highlighting the importance of grounded perspectives, collaborative processes, and engaged governance that address multiple issues at once and challenge the customary multi-pillar model. While these are not new concerns in sustainability circles (see Boström, 2012; Murphy, 2012), the authors of the work presented here argue concretely for the interconnections among these elements and suggest specific ways that they can be better included in sustainability efforts.

Together, these articles suggest that an integrated approach to sustainability can be envisioned and enacted through specific kinds of governance and educational activities that encourage cooperative processes and attention to local experiences. All of the authors find separation of the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability to be superficial and impractical for communities that must reconcile these objectives every day, and they prefer instead to address overarching concerns in terms of well-being, livability, security, equity, and community engagement. For example, Malena Serrano and her colleagues assess their experiences sharing earthquake resistant building techniques in Peru and argue that integrated sustainability recognizes the need to incorporate local perspectives and values into processes of technology transfer and to account for the connections between degraded environments and social inequalities. They furthermore argue that construction techniques are deeply connected to ideas of well-being and acceptable living spaces.

The notion of well-being for effective sustainability efforts is crucial for several other authors. Sandra Santa Cruz et al. discuss the importance of security and basic services through their case study of earthquake-risk mitigation in schools in Peru concluding that both social equity and community are crucial to building sustainable resilience to hazards; ensuring student physical, psychological, and social well-being; and providing

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environmental and economic benefits. Rachelle Hollander and colleagues stress the importance of assimilating social elements like well-being into engineering curricula, echoing Serrano et al.'s and Santa Cruz et al.'s insistence that infrastructure necessarily involves an integrated vision of sustainability.

Other articles in this special issue argue that integrated sustainability is crucial given the importance of community-level coordination. Robert Boyer's research on an eco-village in the United States highlights that collective environmental and financial resource management requires interpersonal-communication and conflict-resolution skills unad-dressed by typical sustainability planning. Contrib-utions by Poonam Arora and her coauthors and Danielle Lake et al. also examine interactions and interdependencies across environmental, economic, and social concerns, showing that both environmental education and agriculture blur boundaries. Arora et al. find that Argentine agribusiness owners think about risk and the water table in relation to social responsibilities, rather than concerns simply requiring economic calculation. Lake and colleagues examine a course where students use community engagement to think through wicked problems in sustainability, highlighting the value of multiple perspectives and local concerns for associated efforts and education.

The final two articles in this collection examine how integrated sustainability is enriched by consid-ering issues like access and equity, which are typically and problematically relegated to the category of social sustainability. Drawing from several short vignettes, including decisions about renewable energy and open-access publishing, Christopher Wolsko and his coauthors argue that accessibility is a critical element of sustainability, integrated across the three pillars. Rebecca Pearl-Martinez and Jennie Stephens examine how gender diversity is invaluable for sustainability efforts, reviewing how women working in energy-related fields might make that sector more competitive and sustainable, as they have in other areas.

Throughout the sustainability field, many authors find that social sustainability, as well as sustainability more broadly, remains amorphous, lacking a clear and consistent definition (Dempsey et al. 2009; Vallance et al. 2011; Boström, 2012; Murphy, 2012; Missimer et al. 2016a . Others argue that broad definitions allow for greater attention to local needs, values, and concerns (Weingaertner & Moberg, 2014; see also Sen, 2004). In the articles here, the authors' ideas about social aspects of sustainability draw on the specifics of each case study, though also

reflecting concepts developed by other researchers (e.g., Murphy, 2012; Missimer et al. 2016b). Based on their analyses, the articles in this special issue consistently assert that equity and access to resources and governance processes are critically important for sustainability. Contributors whose work focuses on structures like homes and schools shed light on how sustainable infrastructure supports (or could support) well-being, livability, security, accessibility, oppor-tunities, and basic services (Serrano et al.; Santa Cruz et al.; Hollander et al.). Other authors address sustainability as an outcome of collective resource management that includes considering both resource availability and social relationships (Arora et al.; Boyer). Finally, a third set of authors finds that sustainability is deeply enmeshed with issues of access to governance, education, resources, and opportunities (Lake et al.; Pearl-Martinez & Stephens; Wolsko et al.). While the articles discuss sustainability in slightly different ways, all address the challenges of diverse populations with varied perspectives, values, and opportunities. There are also important themes—for example, well-being, security, communication, and conflict resolution—that remain important variables for sustainability efforts more broadly. The special issue as a whole moreover emphasizes that an integrated view of sustainability is inextricably linked to local concerns and contexts, which define processes, perspectives, and even possibilities for sustainability.

Drawing more deeply on the importance of local context and meanings, virtually all of the authors argue that sustainability can be defined by the integration of diverse perspectives through new forms of community engagement. The two articles focused on earthquake preparedness in Peru advocate for participatory planning exercises to help identify community needs and relationships that can affect the success of risk-mitigation strategies. At a minimum, involving the local community can build trust and interpersonal connections to overcome reluctance to adopting new techniques. Boyer demonstrates the value of community decision-making and participatory self-governance. Hollander and her co-authors similarly advocate for citizen science as an inclusive and socially aware approach to sustainability research, and Pearl-Martinez & Stephens argue that including a variety of perspectives is needed for a successful energy transition.

A multi-perspective approach particularly makes sense if we are to take seriously the idea that context strongly influences sustainability goals and that standard models of individual behavior cannot easily account for the complexities of meanings, skills, and

relationships (a point separately made in the contributions by Arora et al., Boyer, and Pearl-Martinez & Stephens). In examining the value of community engagement for sustainability education, Lake and her colleagues succinctly describe the value of engaging local actors: "inherently context-dependent and emergent SS [sustainability science] requires broad social inclusion, demanding we continuously uncover and weigh the merit of our own and others' assumptions, values, and goals." The course described in Lake et al. models this approach through student projects that build skills for engaging diverse groups. The authors write that "[p]articipatory skills and virtues (like team building, active listening, collaboration, and integration) must be fostered in order to empower more effective and just coaction on wicked problems. In fact, we suggest a failure to foster these skills and virtues is at the core of many current social struggles." In sum, the articles presented in this special issue collectively argue that integrated sustainability must be locally engaged and engaging.

Finally, Wolsko et al. push for a transformation in how we think about engagement. The examples in their article coalesce around a concept of "access" (building on Amartya Sen's work on this topic) and push for a form of engagement that recognizes the multi-scalar nature of sustainability, relations of power, and inequalities. The authors find that sustainability is inhibited by both access, often understood as an individual attribute, and vulnerability at larger scales. This is particularly evident in their decision-making case study where power relations and legitimacy claims determine access to decisions. Through their analysis, access becomes a way to consider sustainability as a process that engages with diverse ideas and activities. Yet access also signals the potential for lack of access, often tied to inequalities in resources, education, or political connections. This shift in frame encourages a focus on identifying and removing barriers to access, and similarly raises the issue of how to ensure this process through governance strategies.

The authors assembled in this special issue thus largely agree on a vision of sustainability that is integrated and engaged with diverse participants and their local perspectives and practices. These elements push us toward a process-focused idea of sustainability, in that how we engage with a system of relations (involving sustainability ideas, practices, activities, and outcomes) depends not just on the identification of these elements, but how they are arranged and how they can mutually influence one another. The students at the center of the contribution by Lake et al. go beyond identifying environmental

"wicked problems" to comprehending how they are understood, how they affect different people, and how they are tied up in decisions and institutions. Arora et al.'s study of Argentine agribusinesses also suggests that the processes underlying decisions are not just the result of considering risks and outcomes, but are engendered by goals tied to relationships with family and farmers alike. How these interpersonal connections are built is key. It needs to be done through trust (Serrano et al.), cooperation, and empathy (Boyer), cultivation of which can improve through practice (Lake et al.; Boyer). Yet, as Hollander and her colleagues warn, process can be harder to operationalize as a gauge of success than outcomes, which can be counted and assessed. They suggest that interdisciplinary approaches can help, and the variety of strategies in this special issue suggests specific ways that process can be appraised: through commitments (Serrano et al.), access (Wolsko et al.), reflection (Lake et al.), and inclusion (Pearl-Martinez & Stephens).

This introduction builds on previous work on social sustainability, particularly the special issue of *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy* edited by Magnus Boström in 2012, which articulated many of the challenges to addressing social aspects of sustainable development. In his introduction, Boström outlined the challenge of defining and operationalizing social sustainability. He argued that sustainable development, including ideas of social sustainability, is best understood as a frame that can be used to communicate, make decisions, and evaluate progress. This frame can be dynamic over time and place and encompass a variety of elements such as well-being, governance, and equity. This special issue uses case studies, examples, and overviews to further refine Boström's sustainability framework.

Part of any organizational scheme is the underlying model of how parts of a frame intersect and interact. In advocating for integration, context spec-ificity, and governance issues, these articles suggest that important hallmarks identified in previous work on social sustainability emerge from considering local governance and community engagement. This collection also highlights that truly integrated sustainability is not just an issue to address through governance and decision-making; sustainability underlies and makes governance possible. In this way, the framework moves beyond environmental, eco-nomic, and social issues to realize that good governance is sustainability and vice versa. Yet, overlaying sustainability with governance potentially clouds both of these pursuits. Are these ideas too broad and abstract? The cases

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here, in their specific details, suggest not. Integrating governance into sustainability reveals how sustainability can be achieved. It requires recognizing and responding to local contexts and concerns and can only be achieved through local governance mechanisms. Within these cases, we see concern for well-being, access, and inclusion as ways to implement sustainability. But how these concerns are defined and negotiated depends on local per-spectives and governance structures that can engage with concerns and help break down barriers (Shiroyama et al. 2012; Magee et al. 2013; Mutisya & Yarime, 2014; Donevska, 2015; Milan, 2015).

The contributions here suggest that sustainability efforts can encourage good governance by making it part of the model and framework, and thus process and practice. They suggest that important characteristics of governance processes might include an integrated vision of sustainability (rather than separate spheres), attention to local contexts and ideas, assurance of access to necessary resources, and engagement of citizens in decision-making. The concept of sustainability as governance can also open the possibility of stronger joint efforts with governments and social movements to work toward a shared objective of good governance. Broadening sus-tainability in this way thus encourages specific governance processes while creating the possibility for broader coalitions. The holistic view explored in this special issue is the next logical step in furthering the conversation for sustainable development. We suggest that social implications and social issues are the cornerstone for such a discussion, and an integrated approach is necessary if true progress is to be made.

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