SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFORMATION SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY AND SUSTAINABLE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

P. G. Vijaya Sherry Chand
Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India

Keywords: Culture, indicators, information, institutions, knowledge networks, sustainability

Contents

Summary

This article examines the social and cultural information that is likely to be supportive of long-term sustainable development. It touches upon issues relating to the content of the information as well as modes of gathering, processing, and utilizing that information at the macro and micro levels. At the macro level the development of indicators like the Human Development Index has driven the search for such information. The results can be clustered into three themes: promoting human development, ensuring human freedom, and augmenting social capital. At the same time, interpretations of cultural information have emphasized the plurality of cultures, thus generating awareness of alternative knowledge systems and ways of integrating local communities with macro systems. Knowledge itself has become an asset for sustainable development and, given the potential offered by information technologies, it is possible that knowledge networks may become viable institutional models. Such a trend, however, will have to overcome the current limitations posed by biased access to knowledge-related technologies. At the micro level, the more important aspects to be understood include organizational capacity, autonomy, leadership, use of participatory approaches to policy and program development, support provided to local knowledge, political participation, networking, supporting innovativeness of community members, and effective conflict resolution mechanisms. These are best integrated within a framework of institutional capacity development, which includes institution-building processes and measures to overcome threats to institutional sustainability. The success of this framework will depend on how

well it incorporates the cultural elements of sustainability. Some of these elements are ensuring sustainability of the spirit; developing creative culture-bound indigenous institutions of management of common property resources; developing multifunctional institutions of restraint, reciprocity and respect; and generating collective responsibility for nature and the environment. The role of educational structures in valorizing the sociocultural information that contributes to sustainability is crucial.

1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable development has been interpreted in various ways, and has sometimes been labeled slippery—something that defies definite characterization—or even an oxymoron. For the purposes of this article, we assume a working understanding of sustainable development as a sufficient level of material well-being for all that will not require actions that endanger the existence of the planet but will sustain its natural resource and social bases. Within this general context, this article seeks to examine the social and cultural building blocks that are likely to contribute to social and cultural arrangements supportive of long-term, enduring, and sustainable development. The specific focus is on those building blocks that qualify as information, understood quite simply for our purposes here as that which can be gathered and processed to provide knowledge, which in turn can contribute to strategies for sustainable development. Thus, the article will touch upon issues relating not just to the content of the information (what is collected), but on the processes of information gathering, processing. and utilizing (for instance, sites of information generation and use, means. and mechanisms used for collection, and purposes underpinning use of information). For the sake of simplicity, two levels—the micro and the macro (or the local and the central)—will be used to illustrate information-related issues.

At the macro level, the development of indicators such as the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has driven the search for social and cultural information that can be used to inform developmental strategies and the progress towards sustainability. Increasing levels of educational attainment (specifically the enrollment of girls and literacy), housing, primary health care, standard of living, security, political participation and political freedom, preservation of cultural heritage, valorization of local knowledges, and promotion of local and community-level institutions have been some of the areas seen as crucial for sustainable development. These areas of information can be clustered into the themes of promoting human development, ensuring human freedom, and augmenting social capital.

Recent trends in interpreting cultural information have emphasized the plurality of cultures (ways of life) and, therefore, a shift to recognition of the diversity of cultures. This has resulted in a greater awareness of alternative knowledge systems, community-level innovations, and strategies to cope with the environment and the manner of integration of local communities with macro-systems. It has also led to recognition of knowledge itself as an asset that can form the basis of sustainable development. The scope for building on this recognition through the use of information technologies—which appear to have great democratizing potential—seems to be immense. This may then result in the development of "knowledge networks" as the predominant

institutional models for drawing upon community-level social and cultural information and insights.

Regardless of the development of new institutional models, developing institutional capacities through appropriate institution-building initiatives will remain crucial for ensuring sustainability. The success of these initiatives will depend on how well they incorporate the cultural elements of sustainability—maintaining the spirit of sustainability, ensuring the rights of all stakeholders, promoting participation and genuine democracy, combining multiple functions like restraint and reciprocity, and maintaining diversity—into their implementation. Underpinning all institutional efforts to incorporate the sociocultural dimensions of sustainable development is the need to reform educational structures and practices in the directions of a greater awareness and stronger capacities for communicating the concept and practice of sustainability. The rest of this article deals with these issues in greater detail.

2. Information and Indicators

A good starting point is the dramatic increase in the attention being paid to indicators of sustainable development after the 1992 Rio Summit. An indicator is derived from information in order to provide a measure of movement, and so indicators that are in use also indicate what kind of sociocultural information is seen to be important. The desire to measure progress towards sustainability has led to innumerable initiatives at the micro level that involve communities and grassroots actors in the process of defining social and institutional indicators designed to capture information that people at the grassroots consider important. However, a mere aggregation of such indicators developed by communities may not capture larger social and environmental issues. Thus, a lot of attention has been focused at the macro level to derive alternatives to mathematical measures such as the much-criticized gross national product (GNP). The closest challenger has been the HDI of the UNDP. This index has been termed a "hot indicator"—something that may be challenged on theoretical grounds but may resonate well with people who need an understandable and easy-to-use figure. We shall return to it in a moment.

These processes of deriving indicators have been influenced by the need to guard against sidelining local perspectives. Another influence has been the need of macro institutions to possess tools that will explain social and political choices made at their level. But the processes themselves have been affected by the difficulties experienced in arriving at a broadly acceptable understanding of sustainable development. In response to such difficulties, researchers have attempted to focus on clusters of themes of sustainable development: for instance, education, health, housing, political participation, cultural goals, and environmental safety. The New Economics Foundation in the United Kingdom proposed 11 areas on which information needs to be collected: population density, housing, standard of living, health, education, culture, tranquility, community, transport, environment, and security. A specific study of Mexico listed the following positive areas about which information needs to be collected: cultural heritage, natural resources, economic reforms, geographical location, industry, management transformation, nationalism, personal characteristics, and indigenous population. The negative areas included wealth distribution (poverty), present developmental models,

agriculture and natural resources, unemployment, lack of education, lack of awareness and effective leadership, and "foreign is better." Many of these themes can be summarized by the three areas cited by Lord Meghnad Desai as being of greatest importance given their "galvanizing potential": human development, political freedom, and environmental quality.

To return to the macro-level social information that would indicate progress towards sustainability. The HDI noted above originally drew upon per capita income, life expectancy, and educational attainment. Later, human freedom and human security, and new partnerships between developed and developing countries were added as supplements. These took the form of global proposals for allocations for basic education, health care, safe drinking water and sanitation, basic family planning packages; for allocations to counter drug trafficking, international terrorism, communicable diseases, natural disasters, and ethnic conflicts; and proposals for eliminating gender disparities through a framework such as the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Information on these social dimensions has helped assess progress towards sustainability; but new challenges have emerged. For instance, life expectancy of more than 70 years was evident in 84 countries in 1997, up from 55 years in 1990; but the number of people infected with HIV/AIDS doubled in the same period. Such challenges reinforce the importance of focusing on the areas of social information mentioned above, such as communicable diseases, if sustainable human development is to remain a valid goal.

The other areas of social information that would help assess macro-level trends towards sustainable development would include the following: adult literacy levels in society as a whole, gross basic education enrollment levels (children enrolled in basic education—grade levels one to five—as a proportion of children in the relevant age group of six to 11 years), per capita daily provision of calories and protein, infant mortality rates by sex (to assess the reduction of prejudice against female infants), immunization ratios, and the proportion of people living under democratic political dispensations. At a broader level, researchers list the following social information-related areas that need to be monitored: decline in proportion of rural people below the absolute poverty line, decline in income inequality over time, decline in rural unemployment, improvement in public educational and health services, enhancement of group and individual esteem, expansion of range of choices available to rural people, securing safety and public health, and improving access to nature and social diversity.

The concept of social capital has also been discussed in literature as contributing to sustainable development. This concept refers to norms of behavior, networks between people and institutions, and relationships among people based on trust. Pierre Bourdieu's wider understanding of social capital covers these elements, but also emphasizes the combination of social and cultural capital with economic capital as possessions of a particular class in capitalist societies. It is the positive valuation of particular norms, relationships, and processes by the possessing class that identifies these norms and relationships as social and/or cultural capital. The benefits of such social capital include: better flow of market-related information; reducing transaction costs of searching for information; reducing the need for overt public control; reducing externalities; resolving the risks arising from common property; and inhibiting

antisocial behavior.

After this brief introduction to the social information that is considered at the macro level important in assessing progress towards sustainability, we turn to understandings of culture and cultural information that will help us assess micro-level information that will support sustainability.

-
-
-

Bibliography

Bauman Z. (1999). *Culture as Praxis*, 148 pp. London: Sage. [Examines culture as a concept, as a structure, and as a praxis, seeing it as a living aspect of human interaction that must be understood as an integral part of human life.]

Bourdieu P. and Passeron J.C. (1990). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, 254 pp. London: Sage. [An important study showing how education reproduces culture, which in turn plays a key part in the reproduction of the structural characteristics of a society.]

Cernea M. (1993). The sociologist's approach to sustainable development. *Finance & Development* December, 11–13. [This article refers to the concepts of organizational intensity and organizational density that help in generating information about structures for sustainability.]

Fischer F. and Haajer M.A. (1999). *Living with Nature: Environmental Politics as Cultural Discourse*, 269 pp. New York: Oxford University Press. [Critically assesses the ways contemporary economic and political institutions handle environmental policy and focuses on the sociocultural dimensions of the environmental debate.]

Gupta A. (1995). Sustainable institutions for natural resource management: how do we participate in people's plans? *People's Initiatives for Sustainable Development: Lessons of Experience* (ed. S.A. Samad, T. Watanabe, and S. Kim), pp. 341–373. Kuala Lumpur: Asia and Pacific Development Centre. [This chapter presents an interesting framework of dimensions of sustainability that focuses on the relationship among culture, institutions, technologies, and nature.]

Gupta A. (1997). The Honey Bee Network: linking knowledge-rich grassroots innovations. *Development* **40**(4), 36–40. [This article is a case study of the creation of a "knowledge network" that links grassroots innovations, enterprises, and investments.]

Halsey A.H., Lauder H., Brown P., and Wells A.S., eds. (1997). *Education: Culture, Economy, Society*, 819 pp. New York: Oxford University Press. [A reader comprising 52 papers focusing on the social study of education and examining major changes that have taken place in the late twentieth century in relation to longstanding debates within educational sociology and cultural studies.]

Lele S.M. (1991). Sustainable development: a critical review. *World Development* **19**(6), 607–621. [This article is a good introduction to the argument that in understanding the concept of sustainable development, politically expedient fuzziness needs to be given up in favor of intellectual rigor and clarity.]

Nandy A. (1983). *The Intimate Enemy*, 121 pp. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. [A study that explains the psychology of the encounter between two cultures—British and Indian—within a context of colonization.]

Pastakia A.R. (2001). Health, wealth and sustainable prosperity: a compilation of indicators of

institutional sustainability. *Criteria and Indicators of Sustainability in Rural Development: A Natural Resource Perspective* (ed. A.K. Gupta), pp. 227–233. New Delhi: Oxford & IBH. [This paper presents a framework for assessing the threats to institutional sustainability.]

Pearce D. and Atkinson G. (1998). *The Concept of Sustainable Development: An Evaluation of its Usefulness Ten Years after Brundtland* (CSERGE Working Paper PA 98–02), 24 pp. London: Centre for Social and Economic Research on the Global Environment, University College, London and University of East Anglia. [This paper discusses sustainable national incomes in terms of "genuine savings"—the value of the aggregate change in the portfolio of assets held by an economy. Declining stocks of critical natural assets and genuine savings rates are indicators of unsustainability.]

Posey D.A., ed. (1999). *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, 731 pp. London: Intermediate Technology Publications for UNEP. [Collection of articles that stress the need for science and industry to respond to local diversity—linguistic, cultural, and social—in order to support sustainability.]

Ramakrishnan P.S., Saxena K.G., and Chandrashekara U.M., eds. (1998). *Conserving the Sacred for Biodiversity Management*, 480 pp. New Delhi: UNESCO and Oxford & IBH. [Case studies of natural ecosystems maintained as sacred landscapes, with a focus on the social and cultural attributes of such spaces. These attributes when combined with economic incentives contribute to the development of feasible sustainable development management plans.]

Rao P.K. (2000). *Sustainable Development: Economics and Policy*, 393 pp. Oxford: Blackwell. [A textbook that uses an interdisciplinary perspective for economic analyses of global sustainable development policies. Though the focus is on economic aspects (including net national product as an indicator of sustainability), critical insights into social information supporting sustainability are provided.]

Titi V. and Singh N., eds. (1995). *Empowerment for Sustainable Development: Toward Operational Strategies* (Workshop Papers and Discussions, International Institute for Sustainable Development, Toronto, November 1993), 198 pp. London: Zed Books. [This book presents a framework for incorporating empowerment in policy formulation and for reinforcing community level information and effort for development.]

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (1999). *Human Development Report*, 262 pp. New York: UNDP and Oxford University Press. [Part of an excellent series of annual reports that present a wealth of socioeconomic information on the countries of the world.]

Wickramasinghe A. (2001). Habitat security: a composite index of sustainability of rural development. *Criteria and Indicators of Sustainability in Rural Development: A Natural Resource Perspective* (ed. A.K. Gupta), pp. 311–327. New Delhi: Oxford & IBH. [This document presents a set of indicators of sustainability derived from the Sri Lankan experience.]

Williams R. (1981). *Culture*, 248 pp. London: Fontana. [This book outlines a historical sociology of cultural institutions and provides a cultural materialist view of the means of cultural production.]

Williams R. (1989). *Resources of Hope*, 334 pp. London: Verso. [A collection of early essays on central themes like the nature of a democratic culture, the value of community, and green socialism based on a revaluation of principles fundamental to socialist democracy.]

Biographical sketch

P.G. Vijaya Sherry Chand is on the faculty of the Ravi J. Matthai Centre for Educational Innovation (RJMCEI) of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India. After obtaining a postgraduate diploma in management from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, in 1982, Vijaya Sherry Chand worked for 11 years in development action, joined the RJMCEI as a fellow in 1993, and obtained a Ph.D. in education from Gujarat University in 1996. Dr. Vijaya Sherry Chand's research interests lie in areas of education and sustainable development, including strategies for sustainable rural development, management of natural resources and knowledge, conservation and use of biodiversity, and farmers' innovations. With Sasi Misra, Dr. Vijaya Sherry Chand was coeditor of *Institution Building: An International Perspective on Management Education* (New Delhi: Macmillan India, 1999).