

The “Sustainable Development” Conundrum

Subjects: Social Work

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Sustainability has become a buzz word in popular discourse, especially around environmental sustainability. Sustainability indicates that a system has the ability to be maintained and renewed within a normal balance of lifecycles, not becoming depleted or extinct. Defining sustainability as merely about the natural environment is incomplete as it ignores the social systems that intertwine with the environment. These social systems are the elements that determine whether the broad ecological system is sustainable. Social systems include worldviews, culture, economics, politics, family, and community subsystems, each contributing to overall sustainability.

Keywords: ecosocial worldview ; sustainability ; sustainable development ; sustainable new normal ; degrowth

1. Envisioning a “Sustainable New Normal”

With the world in disarray and heartache, we offer an alternative, realistic vision of a “sustainable new normal”. This new normal is one that many social workers are already co-envisioning and co-creating, intentionally and mindfully, alongside those who are most impacted by factors of oppression, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic ^{[1][2]}. In today’s current context, we have an opportunity to help shape new systems and structures that redress injustices and course correct us for a trajectory that is infinitely better than the one on which we are now set. Such a new trajectory would be one that not only mitigates both the unintentional harm and blatant atrocities done to people and our ecosystem (i.e., “Web of Life”) but is also one that heals and promotes mutual flourishing. In this sustainable new normal, the mainstream of our profession, along with the world at large, would firstly recognize that it currently operates within an anthropocentric or human-centric worldview. In this worldview, humans are considered above or outside of the ecosystem in which they exist. This perpetuates structures and practices of injustice, extraction, and destruction. Once the mainstream recognizes these limitations, we can then strive to embrace an ecosocial perspective which acknowledges humans as one species within an interrelated Web of Life, thus promoting a holistic well-being ^[3]. Operating from an ecosocial worldview, many social workers are already engaging as visionaries and innovators in alternative approaches that co-create such a new normal ^[4] ^[5]. In dreaming of and co-creating our sustainable new normal, let us consider Sonya Renee Taylor’s poignant challenge:

“We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature” ^[6].

2. Growth Ideology: Why We Face Injustices and a Global Climate Crisis

One prevalent ideology embraced in many parts of the world is the “growth ideology”. Situated in a human-centric worldview, growth ideology promotes economic gain through development as if it is essential to human well-being. However, it has been proven that the opposite is true ^{[5][7]}. The growth ideology emphasizes the continual increase in the production of goods and services, despite the costs to people and planet. Within a growth ideology, the entire economic system is actually based on “affluence” and not “prosperity”.

The growth ideology, solidified during the industrial revolution, has been mainstreamed throughout much of the world and is typically coupled with neoliberalism. Neo-liberalism promotes free market capitalism in all aspects of society such as growth for development, despite the array of unsustainable consequences, undercutting environmental and social protection systems, and exacerbating oppression and atrocities ^[8]. Development within the growth ideology was, and continues to be, the primary source of the problems that we in social work fight so diligently to alleviate (e.g., economic, political prosperity for a few at the expense of others and the environment) ^[7]. There is an increased recognition that we are in a global climate crisis, and we must address unsustainable societies and the related injustices through collective action for sustainability ^[9].

In the 1970s, “sustainable development” as opposed to “development”, was heralded throughout the world as the solution to the increasing recognition of global limits and the interrelated injustices, both to humans and the planet. However, stemming from a human-centric worldview and situated in the growth ideology, sustainable development and the global framework of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are problematic on many fronts, which we will critique in greater detail below. Let us first take a moment to examine the concept of “sustainability” and the ways it has been misconceived and misconstrued.

3. Sustainability: Misconceptions and Mixed Messages

Sustainability has become a buzz word in popular discourse, especially around environmental sustainability. Sustainability indicates that a system has the ability to be maintained and renewed within a normal balance of lifecycles, not becoming depleted or extinct. Defining sustainability as merely about the natural environment is incomplete as it ignores the social systems that intertwine with the environment. These social systems are the elements that determine whether the broad ecological system is sustainable. Social systems include worldviews, culture, economics, politics, family, and community subsystems, each contributing to overall sustainability. So, efforts to move toward sustainability necessitate consideration of how to create healthy and just political, economic, family, and community systems that also support the natural environment. This is the social aspect of sustainability. The ability of the ecosystem to be maintained and renewed within normal balance of lifecycles has been and continues to be an essential element of cultures using an ecosocial worldview. For example, one concept of “seventh generation thinking” compels us to make decisions about how we live now with full consideration of how it will impact the well-being of the entire ecosystem or Web of Life at a future point in time, seven generations from now.

3.1. The “Sustainable Development” Conundrum

Sustainable development and sustainability have become wedded in popular discourse so much so that they are frequently used interchangeably. However, sustainability does not mean sustainable development. As noted above, sustainable development was originally put forth as a solution to the development model to address the growing concerns of the limits to growth and the apparent injustices that were prevalent in the growth ideology’s development model. Sustainable development can be defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs ^{[10][11]}. It contains two key concepts: the concept of “needs”, in particular, the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which priority should be given, and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs ^{[12][13]}.

This concept of sustainable development introduces consideration for the future with two essential ideas: the priority of the needs of those who are oppressed, and the recognition of biophysical boundaries. While the first has been ignored within the mainstream, the second is already relativized in the definition itself as a matter of technological development ^{[13][14]}. The 1987 Brundtland report on sustainable development is a seminal discussion on this concept ^[14]. However, the report goes no further than qualifying the kind of growth that would be needed, instead of fundamentally rethinking “development” ^[15]. The report does not acknowledge the absolute limits in the natural environment; instead, it assumes that technology will overcome those limits. Another critical assumption that the Brundtland Report holds is that economic growth and increase in consumption paves the way for development. There is an emphasis on consumerism and excessive materials and resource use ^[16]. The measure of a growing economy, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), is a nation’s topmost priority and dominates political institutions. This priority is seminal to the assumption that affluence correlates with well-being ^[17]. An increase in GDP could lead to higher income levels and is routinely considered symptomatic to greater prosperity. However, there is a problem with this developmental philosophy. GDP growth necessitates continuous cycles of production and consumption, demanding ever-increasing environmental resources, driving degradation and contributing to the global climate crisis.

Despite the admirable idea to include sustainability (which originates in an ecosocial worldview) within contemporary approaches of “GDP fueled” development (which is based on an anthropocentric worldview) to create “sustainable development”, it ultimately just created another model that remains situated in the anthropocentric and neoliberal economic paradigm. Cycles of production and consumption undergird this growth ideology. Profit will always prevail over the aspirations of meeting the supposed competing needs of people and planet. Ultimately, this framework will only serve to further perpetuate ecological injustices and power imbalances ^{[7][18]}. Thus, sustainable development is a conundrum. It is impossible to keep developing within the existing paradigm of growth ideology and realize genuine sustainability. Below, we present further evidence of this conundrum as we discuss how sustainable development has been envisioned and implemented as the global framework of the SDGs.

3.2. United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals: Evidence of Conundrum

A response to the Brundtland Commission Report was the development of the (SDGs). These 17 SDGs are responsive to the most pressing challenges that the world is grappling with. Adopted in 2015, the SDGs have been lauded for their ability to create a common language to address complicated global issues and acknowledge the necessity of global cooperation in order to achieve well-being. The SDGs contain no mention of a need for a reduction in either consumption or production. The United Nations ^[19] writes that these goals are “an urgent call for action by all countries. [in order to] end poverty and other deprivations [that] must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth.” The last three words are exactly why these goals resist the realization of sustainability from an ecosocial worldview. The push for economic growth perpetuates production–consumption cycles. This indeed could lead to an increase in the GDP, but often exacerbates environmental degradation. Ultimately, the outcome of this framework, including its aims and measures of success, is still part of the growth ideology and thus can only take us so far in achieving some aspects of sustainability.

While the SDGs do move us beyond mere development to sustainable development, they still rely on the erroneous assumption that sustainability can be achieved through development which is based on “sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth” (SDG 8). Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) specifically calls for a 7% growth rate target, measured by GDP ^[19]. This means the propagation of routine cycles of production and consumption on the basis of which GDP growth is sustained. Goal 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), for example, focuses on efficiency and increasing sustainable energy practices. However, it does not mention the need for reduced energy consumption to help reduce throughput. From an ecosocial lens, achieving responsible forms of consumption or production is impossible without cuts in matter/energy throughput. In other words, Goal 7 is difficult to achieve if Goal 8 needs to be achieved. Furthermore, as currently, most economies rely on fossil fuels, a relentless push for at least a 7% increase in GDP could perpetuate fossil fuel use. Such reliance could inhibit transition to clean energy (Goal 7) and constrain the realization of Goal 13 on climate change. Critics have argued that supporting economic growth as conceptualized in the UN SDGs could lead to greater social inequality and cause a greater spread of unsustainable production and consumption across the globe ^[20]. Looking closely at Goal 9 (“build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation”), one can see that economic and technological growth is portrayed as central to sustainable development. However, reduction in economic activity to reach a safe operating space that is ecologically sustainable finds little traction in the SDGs ^[21].

The process to develop the SDGs represents a great accomplishment of collaboration and compromise. However, they have also been criticized, as we have briefly noted above, and though the SDGs have some strengths and benefits to humans and to the planet, they fall short of the bigger, longer-term purpose of realizing sustainability and true well-being for the Web of Life, including future generations. In light of this, alternative discourses and approaches have arisen which question an anthropocentric model of sustainable development ^{[7][22][23][24]}. They call for a paradigm shift to an ecosocial worldview, which leads to a truly sustainable path that does not keep perpetuating the unsustainable and unjust byproducts of growth, be they from mere development or “sustainable development” ^[7]. Social workers around the world have already been operating within the SDGs and beyond as they embrace an ecosocial lens. Let us now further explore this history, current roles, and our potential future as a profession.

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