Towards a Conceptual Framework for the Social Dimensions of Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Scholars generally try to make sense of complex phenomena such as sustainable development (SD) by constructing conceptual frameworks. Such frameworks are intended to reduce complexity by mapping associated issues, components, dimensions and properties. This demarcation process entails arranging variables, concepts and constructs into groups that are internally homogeneous but distinct from other groups. Conceptual frameworks are indispensable in scholarly inquiry, since they enable one to explicate the meaning of concepts by mapping out their dimensions. Inquiry into SD is generally constrained by the specific meanings ascribed to the highly polemical and multidimensional notions of sustainability and development, as well as the social, environmental and economic dimensions thereof. Contexts and applications can vary widely in terms of their objectives, scope and impact. The purpose of this article is to develop a conceptual framework for the social dimensions of SD by means of content analysis and the Delphi method. The findings confirm and accentuate the multidimensional nature of social sustainability. By providing a structured, scholarly framework for teaching and research, the novel conceptual framework might guide scholars, policymakers and practitioners to gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the social dimensions of SD than previously.

Keywords: Conceptual framework; Social, Sustainability; Sustainable development; Concept mapping

Introduction

In the pursuit of global wellbeing and prosperity, the concept of SD emphasises the interconnectedness of economic progress, environmental stewardship and social equity (Thiele, 2013). In a new paradigm that Hariram et al. (2023) refer to as "sustainalism", this emphasis is articulated in seminal documents such as the *Brundtland Report* (1987) and

subsequent initiatives and international agreements such as the Rio Earth Summit (1992) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015.

While considerable attention has been directed towards environmental considerations and economic growth, the social dimensions of SD remain an intricate and evolving domain that demands systematic exploration. Both the Human Development Index (HDI) and the SDGs accentuate the significance of social development by emphasising holistic wellbeing, empowerment, equality, global collaboration and the interconnectedness of social, economic and environmental objectives. In fact, seven of the 17 SDGs speak specifically to the human dimensions of development, namely, "No Poverty" (SDG 1), "Zero hunger" (SDG 2), "Good Health and Wellbeing" (SDG 3), "Quality Education" (SDG 4), "Gender Equality" (SDG 5), "Reduced Inequalities" (SDG 10) and "Sustainable Cities and Communities" (SDG 11). These goals serve as a guiding framework that underscores the integral role of social progress in achieving a sustainable and equitable future for humanity. As such, the social dimension of SD holds immense significance because it encompasses the wellbeing, equity and inclusivity of individuals and communities. The urgency of addressing social dimensions within SD is further underscored by the recognition that equitable and inclusive societies are fundamental to the long-term viability of any development strategy (Jabareen, 2006; Lehnert, 2007; Sovacool & Hess, 2017).

Despite the criticality of the issue, there is a dearth of research investigating the social dimensions of SD. In response, the purpose of this article is to propose a conceptual framework for scholarly inquiry into the social dimensions of SD. The need for such a conceptual framework is accentuated by Ly and Cope (2023:1), who argue that the social dimensions of sustainability "remain relatively underdefined" and Shi et al. (2019:1), who refer to "misinterpretations regarding the theory of social sustainability". Similarly, Vallance, Perkins and Dixon (2011:342) and Williams and Millington (2004:99) refer to the "diverse" and "contested meanings" of social sustainability, whereas Benaim, Collins and Raftis (2008) and Hellberg (2023) search for the meaning of "social" in the phrase "social SD". In addition, Eizenberg and Jabareen (2017:68) lament the "lack of theoretical and empirical studies regarding social sustainability". While studies like Cuthill (2010), Dempsey et al. (2011), Eizenberg and Jabareen (2017), and Hellberg (2023) laid the groundwork for understanding the social dimension of SD, this study takes a unique angle by proposing a novel multidimensional conceptual framework of social sustainability. By delineating foundational principles, pillars, key components and enablers, the aims are to holistically capture the myriad factors influencing social development and sustainability in the proposed framework, thus offering a structured lens through which to explore their interdependencies. Without such a framework, research efforts might lack coherence and direction, leading to fragmented or tangential findings.

The following design is utilised to achieve this goal: First, SD is conceptualised and contextualised. Secondly, the significance of social dimensions of SD are elucidated. Thirdly, the design and application of conceptual frameworks in scholarly inquiry are
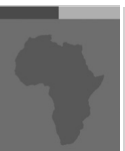
accentuated. Finally, the methodological design and approach to designing a conceptual framework for the social dimensions of SD is outlined.

Literature Review

In an era characterised by unprecedented global challenges, the concept of SD has emerged as a guide for societal progress towards a more harmonious coexistence characterised by economic vitality and environmental resilience. It is a concept that transcends conventional disciplinary boundaries, encompassing a triad of interconnected scholarly perspectives (Shi et al., 2019). Its scope extends far beyond the confines of individual nations, requiring a global perspective to address shared challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss and social inequalities.

SD merges two concepts, namely "development" and "'sustainability". Development, in its broadest sense, encompasses a multidimensional process that unfolds across economic, social, political and environmental realms (Hopper, 2012). The conceptualisation of development is inherently complex, influenced by diverse historical, cultural and global perspectives, as well as ideological and theoretical contexts (Payne and Phillips, 2010). Some of the main theories that underpin the notion of development are modernisation theory, dependency theory and world-systems theory. These theories have led to the identification of universal values and principles of development, such as inclusivity, sustainability, participation, equity, fairness, justice and adaptability (Greig, Hulme & Turner, 2007; Hasna, 2007). These values and principles are applied in diverse contexts, such as in environmental, economic social and human development (Auriacombe & Van der Waldt, 2017).

Like development, sustainability is a multidimensional concept that transcends time and space, seeking to balance the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (Thiele, 2013). The Rio Summit in 1992 was a significant milestone that set a new global agenda for SD and reconstructed a new global environmental discourse. Since the Rio Summit, sustainability has increasingly been conceived of as a challenge that requires global management, with intelligent, scientific and instrumental administration of the earth perceived as one of the great challenges facing humanity. Notwithstanding the enthusiastic spirit of the attendees of the Rio summit, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg (2002) revealed deep disputes between the global North and South. The two main documents produced by the summit – the political statement of the WSSD, called the "*Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development*", and a *Plan of Implementation* stated that ''the deep fault line that divides human society between rich and poor and the ever-increasing gap between the developed and developing worlds poses a major threat to global prosperity, security and stability'' (WSSD, 2002:2). It is significant that the political declaration of the WSSD, while dealing with SD, focused on poverty eradication, changing

consumption and production patterns and managing the natural base for economic and social development rather than purely on ecological matters.

Scholars who inquire into sustainability typically apply a range of differing theoretical vantage points. In terms of strong sustainability theory, for example, natural capital is irreplaceable and should not be traded off for other forms of capital. Those who subscribe to this theory advocate for conservation, sustainable resource management and policies that prioritise ecological integrity (Wilson & Wu, 2017). In contrast, the assumption of weak sustainability theories, such as human capital theory, neoclassical economic growth theory and social capital theory, is that different forms of capital (natural, human, social and economic) are substitutable, allowing for trade-offs between them. This notion guides policies that prioritise economic growth and human development, with the belief that these can compensate for environmental degradation. Resilience theory is another perspective that concerns the capacity of systems to absorb disturbance, adapt and reorganise while maintaining essential functions and structures. Social resilience theorists, for example, explore how communities can build social and institutional capacity to cope with and recover from shocks, stresses and disturbances (Van der Waldt, 2021). They accentuate the role of local, indigenous knowledge systems, social networks and community engagement in enhancing resilience.

A further theoretical perspective that is commonly applied to sustainability is transformability or transition theory, in terms of which one explores the processes and pathways through which societies transition to more sustainable modes of development. It is underpinned by an acknowledgement of the need for deliberate efforts to navigate and guide transformations by changes in societal structures, values and practices when resilience alone is insufficient. In this regard, Abson et al. (2017:30) refer to the "leverage points" for sustainability transformation. Collectively, these theories contribute to a growing understanding of how societies can intentionally navigate transitions toward sustainability (Shi et al., 2019). These theories also led to generally-accepted principles of sustainability that include interdependence (i.e., the interconnectedness of social, economic and environmental systems), equity and justice (i.e., promoting the fair distribution of resources and benefits, ensuring that the most vulnerable are not disproportionately affected), long-term vision (i.e., emphasising foresight and consideration of the long-term consequences of present actions), diversity and resilience (i.e., recognising the value of biodiversity and diverse socio-cultural systems for overall resilience) and precaution (i.e., advocating for precautionary measures in the face of uncertain and potentially irreversible environmental or social impacts) (Mensah, 2019).

The conceptualisation of sustainability reflects a paradigm shift toward an increasingly holistic and integrated approach to social development. By understanding the theories, principles and applications that underpin sustainability, individuals, organisations and policymakers can contribute to a world in which progress is not only measured in economic terms, but also in relation to the wellbeing of societies, the health of ecosystems and the

resilience of the entire planet. SD is thus not a static goal but a dynamic and ongoing process that requires continual innovation, collaboration and a commitment to leaving a positive legacy for future generations.

Significance of the Social Dimension of Sustainable Development

Cuthill (2010:362) advocates for the strengthening of the "social" in SD, whereas Bostrom (2012:3) regards "social sustainability" as the "missing" and Hellberg (2017:462) as the "forgotten" pillar of SD. Dillard, Dujon and King (2009), Manzi et al. (2010) and Partridge (2014) regard social sustainability simply as the social dimensions of sustainability derived from SD goals and strategies. The concept is generally defined in terms of indicators such as "quality of life and health, equity, inclusion, access, social cohesion and participatory processes" (Holden, 2012:527). Similarly, Ross (2013:2245) regards social sustainability as the "ideal state of wellbeing that occurs when social, economic and environmental interactions foster intergenerational equality, nonexploitative relationships and longitudinal equilibrium". In a more complex conceptualisation, Benaim, Collins and Raftis (2008:25) maintain that the meaning of "social" should be sought in the interrelationship between individuals and the collective. The individual component comprises mainly mental models and behaviour, while the collective accommodates aspects such as culture, common values and goals, social dynamics and social structures. The social dimension of SD thus refers to the positive human outcomes intended by development efforts.

The social dimension of SD is accentuated by several international bodies and indices. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) utilises the HDI, for example, as a widely applied global benchmark to facilitate cross-country comparisons, guiding nations toward policies that prioritise human development. Focusing on social dimensions, the HDI primarily aims to promote "holistic wellbeing" (i.e., considering aspects such as life expectancy, education and per capita income), the "empowerment of individuals" (i.e., utilising education indicators to measure both mean and expected years of schooling, emphasising the empowerment of individuals through access to knowledge), "health as a fundamental right" (i.e., life expectancy and good health as a fundamental human right), and "inequality awareness" (i.e., accounting for disparities in health, education and income) (UNDP, 2023).

The UN's SDGs encompass 17 goals addressing diverse aspects of SD, including poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality and more. They reflect a comprehensive understanding that social development is interconnected with environmental sustainability, economic growth, peace and prosperity. As such, they accommodate the view that social challenges are global, requiring collective effort to address issues such as poverty, inequality and climate change. The SDGs integrate the social, economic and environmental dimensions, thus highlighting a balanced and interconnected approach to development.

Apart from the HDI and SDGs, several international institutions and agencies emphasise the social dimensions of SD. They include the following:

- The World Bank's Development Indicators (WDI): The World Bank's WDI database provides a wide range of social indicators related to poverty, education, health, gender equality, labour markets and social protection. These indicators help monitor progress towards social development goals and inform policy decisions (World Bank, 2023).
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): The Better Life Index enables individuals to compare wellbeing across countries based on 11 dimensions, including income, education, health, employment, community, environment and life satisfaction. It provides a holistic view of societal progress beyond economic indicators (OECD, 2024).
- The World Health Organisation's Global Health Observatory provides a comprehensive set of health-related indicators, including mortality rates, disease prevalence, health services coverage and the social determinants of health. These indicators help one to assess the social aspects of health and wellbeing at the global, regional and national levels (WHO, 2024).
- The International Labour Organisation's *Global Wage Report* examines trends in wages, income inequality and labour market conditions worldwide (WHO, 2024). It highlights the social dimensions of labour markets and provides insights into issues such as working poverty, gender pay gaps and informal employment (Van Daele, 2008).
- The Global Reporting Initiative's Standards provide a framework for organisations to report on their sustainability performance, including social impacts and initiatives (GRI, 2023). The standards include indicators related to labour practices, human rights, diversity and inclusion, community engagement and social investment (Vigneau, Humphreys and Moon, 2013).
- Development and donor agencies such as GTZ, USAID, AUSAID and the Ford Foundation utilise reporting and accountability measures to ensure that donations and other development support are applied for the purposes they were intended for.

These international institutions and agencies play a critical role in promoting the social dimensions of SD through their data collection, analysis, advocacy and policy support efforts. Their indices and benchmarks help one to measure progress, identify gaps and inform evidence-based decision-making at local, national and global levels. Collectively, they highlight the significance of social development by emphasising holistic wellbeing, empowerment, equality, global collaboration and the interconnectedness of social, economic and environmental objectives. They serve as guiding frameworks that underscore the integral role of social progress in achieving a sustainable and equitable future for humanity.

The social dimension of SD has immense significance because it encompasses the wellbeing, equity and inclusivity of individuals and communities. Recognising the centrality of social factors is crucial, since it highlights the fundamental importance of improving the quality of life for all individuals, ensuring their basic needs are met and promoting social justice. It also promotes development that is inclusive and leaves no one behind, addressing disparities based on gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and other factors. Its focus is on empowering communities to actively participate in decision-making processes, thus fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for SD initiatives. It also values and preserves cultural diversity, heritage and indigenous knowledge, ensuring that development efforts respect and incorporate local customs and traditions. Furthermore, the social dimension of SD caters for the importance of strong social networks, trust and collaboration within communities, contributing to social cohesion and stability, as well as prioritising the health and wellbeing of individuals and ensuring access to quality healthcare, education and social services. It also integrates ethical considerations into development practices, addressing issues of fairness, justice and human rights.

The Use of Conceptual Frameworks in Scholarly Inquiry

Conceptual frameworks "confer organisation and stability on our thoughts about reality" (Marradi, 1990:147). They usually involve defining an object field and then categorising these objects according to dividing attributes, known formally as *fundamenta divisionis* (Jabareen, 2009; Swaen, 2015).

A conceptual framework in social science research provides a structured outline or model that helps researchers to organise, define and understand the key concepts and relationships within a study (Maxwell, 2012). It serves as a theoretical foundation that guides the research process, shaping how researchers conceptualise and design their studies and interpret their data (Sinclair, 2007).

A conceptual framework structures the study by defining key variables, concepts and relationships. This clarity in variable definition ensures precision and consistency in the study, reducing ambiguity in the interpretation of the results. It also provides a contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, with reference to the broader social, cultural and historical factors (Green, 2014; Imenda, 2014). This contextualisation enhances the richness of the study, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the findings within the broader societal context. A conceptual framework positions the study within the existing body of knowledge. This helps researchers to identify gaps in the literature and articulate how their study contributes to the advancement of knowledge in the field (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

Conceptual frameworks also provide a clear roadmap, helping researchers to organise their thoughts and understand how various elements are connected. It establishes the theoretical underpinning of the study, grounding research in existing theories or developing new theoretical perspectives. A strong theoretical foundation enhances the

study's credibility, helping researchers build on existing knowledge and contribute to the academic discourse. The conceptual framework informs the development of research questions and hypotheses by identifying key variables and their potential relationships. This ensures that the research questions are relevant and aligned with theoretical expectations, guiding the formulation of hypotheses for empirical testing (Van der Waldt, 2020).

SD inherently involves multiple disciplines, including sociology, economics, political science and anthropology. A conceptual framework helps one to integrate insights from these diverse fields, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between social factors and sustainability. SD involves value judgments about what constitutes a desirable future and whose interests should be prioritised. A conceptual framework helps to bring to the surface and critically examine underlying assumptions and values, fostering a transparent and inclusive decision-making process.

The conceptual framework influences the selection of variables and the design of the data collection methods. It ensures that the data collected are relevant to the research questions and facilitates the identification of key factors that might influence the study's outcomes. It also guides the choice of statistical or analytical methods for data analysis. Researchers can select appropriate tools that align with the conceptual framework, allowing for a meaningful interpretation of the results within the theoretical context.

Methodology

A thematic analysis was conducted within an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative research design. A literature review and a Delphi were used as data collection methods. The literature review was undertaken to identify existing theories, models, normative principles, concepts and constructs related to SD in general and its social dimensions in particular. To identify potential typology and classification schemes, a search for scholarly articles and books with the subjects (keywords) of "sustainable development", "social development" and "social sustainability" was conducted using Google Scholar and EBSCO host. The results were then examined for value and relevance, with those regarded as most seminal due to either the insight apparent in their abstracts or the number of citations they had attracted being subjected to deeper analysis. Peer reviewed articles that were moderately impactful (i.e., more than 100 citations) were sampled ($n = 211$) for the application of a deductive, qualitative, open and flexible coding technique. In cases where themes were non-existent or did not match the original established themes, the themes were re-categorised and renamed to accommodate the variation using a selective coding technique. For example, a similar study conducted by Ly and Cope (2023) identified "safety and security" as a key dimension of social sustainability. This dimension was absorbed under the theme "social stability and cohesion" to also accommodate risks associated with the heterogeneous composition of societies. The thematic analysis of the literature continued until a complete classification scheme (refer to A – J in figure 1) emerged. This

thematic analysis provided a foundation for applying the Delphi method for data collection and verification of the main themes and their focused content.

The Delphi method involves collecting input from a panel of experts in answer to a series of semi-structured questions (Niederberger & Spranger, 2020). The iterative nature of this method facilitated the development of a draft conceptual framework through consensus building among a group of knowledgeable individuals (Beiderbeck et al., 2021). The Delphi is especially useful when dealing with complex concepts such as social development and when input from diverse perspectives is essential. The steps involved in the application of the Delphi method were as follows:

Step 1: Composition of a panel of experts
The Focus Area: Social Transformation is situated in the Faculty of Humanities at the North-West University, South Africa. The faculty comprises several schools, namely Social Sciences, Government Studies, Communication, Languages and Philosophy. Members of these schools are also members of the Focus Area (N = 106). Convenience sampling was used to select the Focus Area due to its accessibility and proximity to the author. The Focus Area encompasses various research programs, including the 'Social Sustainability' program, from which members were purposively selected for this study. In total, 12 participants (senior academics) served as the panel of experts, representing 11.3% of the total target population. A colloquium with these 12 participants was conducted online and in person on 9 May 2024 to deliberate and finalise the draft conceptual framework. Inclusion criteria for participants included seniority in academia (specifically, senior lecturers holding a PhD with a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience), substantial expertise in social sustainability (demonstrated by at least three scholarly publications in the field), and membership in the Social Sustainability program within the Focus Area. Their collective input enabled the author to refine and validate the proposed conceptual framework.

Step 2: Generation of ideas
The first round of deliberations began with the author posing open-ended questions to the panel of experts. These questions were based on the thematic analysis of the literature survey and were designed to elicit a range of opinions and insights regarding the draft conceptual framework. The experts then independently provided their responses, which were recorded.

Step 3: Feedback and refinement
The aggregated responses from the first round were then shared with the experts. Each expert reviewed the responses and revised or refined their initial opinions based on the collective feedback. The participants also had the opportunity to respond to the feedback from the other experts, leading to a refined set of opinions. This process continued iteratively until a satisfactory level of consensus was reached among the experts. This method was found to be highly conducive to refining the draft conceptual framework,

since it minimised the influence of dominant personalities and encouraged independent thought.

Step 4: Consensus building and finalisation

The aim of utilising the Delphi method was to reach consensus or a convergence of diverse opinions among the experts. The final results, including the areas of consensus and divergence, were reported to the panel. The author summarised the findings and then presented a refined conceptual framework based on the experts who were asked to validate its content.

Results

During the Delphi it became apparent that the conceptual framework should make provision for both the *content* concepts and the *process* conceptualisation of sustainable social development. The content concepts alluded to the aspects that should be considered variables in social research and the process conceptualisations referred to foundational scholarly perspectives, input dimensions (i.e., enablers), intermediate and long-term outcomes, as well as impact measurement. A framework in the conventions of a logical framework (LOGFRAME) was thus proposed to visually portray the conceptual framework (figure 1). Within these broader LOGFRAME dimensions, the input of the expert panel was used to refine and further populate each theme, numbered from A to J in figure 1.

Below is the proposed conceptual framework that highlights key conceptual themes and their interconnections.
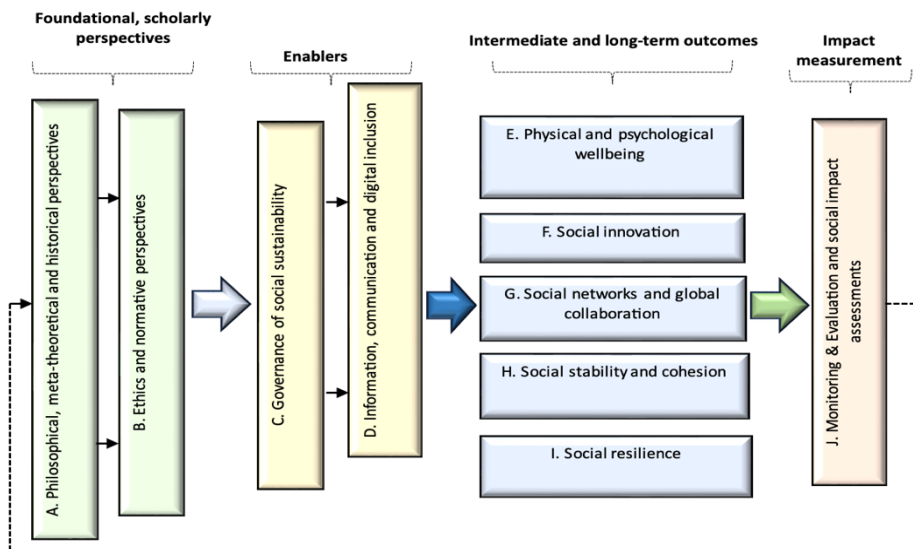

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the social dimensions of sustainable development
Source: Author's own construction based on Delphi input

Each dimension of the conceptual framework is subdivided into one or more themes that emerged based on the thematic content analysis of scholarly articles. These themes are numbered A to J and are briefly outlined below. The input obtained during the Delphi is indicated with an Asterix (*).

A. Philosophical, Meta-theoretical and Historical Perspectives

Several philosophical, meta-theoretical and historical perspectives provide frameworks for understanding and addressing the social dimensions of SD. These perspectives offer insights into the underlying values, principles and ethical considerations that guide SD efforts. Some of the most pertinent perspectives are informed by:

- Ecological Ethics
- Environmental Justice
- Capabilities Approach
- Feminist Ethics of Care
- Post-Development Theory
- Social Ecology
- Deep Ecology
- Critical Social Theory
- Development Theories such as Modernisation Theory, Dependency Theory, World-Systems Theory, Stewardship Theory, Social Contract Theory and Growth Theory
- Social sustainability and development theories such as Human Capital Theory, Social Capital Theory, Behavioural Theory and Game Theory
- Weak and strong sustainability theories
- Transition or transformability sustainability theory
- Participatory approaches
- Communicative traditions
- Corporate Social Responsibility theory and shared value

These philosophical and meta-theoretical perspectives contribute to a nuanced conceptualisation of the social dimensions of SD, guiding efforts toward ethical, inclusive and socially just practices. Combining these conceptual perspectives can offer a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to addressing the complex challenges associated with social sustainability.

B. Ethical Considerations and Normative Principles

Examining the ethical implications of development interventions are essential to ensure that actions uphold normative principles, such as:

- Equity and social justice
- Inclusivity
- Intergenerational equity

- Human rights protection
- Climate justice
- Interconnectedness by recognising the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental systems
- Precautionary principle by advocating for preventive action in the face of uncertainty and potential risks.

The normative dimension could further be aided by existing indices that could help analyse the extent to which governments comply with internationally-accepted criteria, standards and conventions. Some of the most significant indices include:

- The Environmental Performance Index
- The Sustainable Societies Index
- The Happy Planet Index
- The Ecological Footprint Analysis
- The Sustainable Development Goals.

C. Governance of Social Sustainability

A key theme identified under the "enabler" dimension is the governance of social sustainability. This involves mainly the development and implementation of policies, practices and structures that contribute to the wellbeing of society. It encompasses the ways in which public institutions, development organisations and governing bodies make decisions, allocate resources and collaboratively address social issues to foster equitable, inclusive and resilient societies. Some of the key elements and considerations related to the governance of social sustainability include the following:

- Global governance agendas for SD (e.g., Agenda 2030) and good governance frameworks (e.g., World Bank Governance Surveys, the World Governance Index, Sustainable Governance Indicators, Mo Ibrahim Foundation's Ibrahim Index, the Global Reporting Initiative* and the African Peer Review Mechanism).
- International cooperation and multilateralism (e.g., emphasising the importance of collaborative efforts among nations through international organisations such as the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund and regional bodies, as well as partnerships between governments, non-governmental organisations, the private sector and other stakeholders to address cross-cutting issues).
- Focused governance interventions, treaties and agreements. Examples of these include the Paris Agreement on Climate Action, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the World Health Organisation's collaborative efforts to address global health challenges, including the control and prevention of diseases, improving healthcare systems and promoting access to essential medicines and vaccines.

The conceptual framework should also make provision for national or domestic governance perspectives such as the inclusivity of national legislation; participatory decision-making and stakeholder involvement; social inclusion and equity; the capacity and performance of public services and infrastructure; data and information management; and the monitoring and evaluation of social and community development programmes. There should, furthermore, be a focus on peripheral issues such as fair labour practices, the assessment of the powers and authority of various branches of government agencies and institutions, and a functional-institutional dimension, considering the role of government in SD by focusing on the executive branches in the various spheres or levels of government, depending on the system of governance in a particular country (Gillett, 2013:162).

D. Information, Communication and Digital Inclusion

Information, communication and digital inclusion are themes that are integral to the conceptual framework for the social dimensions of SD for several reasons. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the internet, mobile networks, social media and digital devices, provide access to a wealth of knowledge and educational resources, fostering SD-related learning opportunities for individuals across diverse backgrounds. Digital inclusion, furthermore, empowers marginalised and vulnerable groups by providing them with a platform to voice their concerns, access information and participate in decision-making processes. Access to digital platforms also enables communities to engage in civic activities, advocate for their rights and contribute to social and political discussions (Santinha & Castro, 2010). In addition, digital inclusion facilitates economic participation by providing opportunities for online entrepreneurship, e-commerce and access to job markets. Individuals in underserved areas can leverage digital platforms to start businesses, access markets and participate in the global economy, contributing to economic sustainability.

A further reason for which digital communication is an essential conceptual variable in social sustainability is that social connectivity bridges geographical and social distances, fostering engagement and interaction among individuals, communities, civil society organisations, government institutions and development agencies. Such communication typically leads to social cohesion, collaborative efforts and the sharing of ideas, resources and best practices, fostering a sense of belonging and connection in communities.

Scholarly inquiry into the social dimensions of sustainability development should factor in the context and application domain for ICTs. Such applications include:

- Health information and access to basic health care
- Environmental awareness and advocacy
- Cultural preservation and expression
- Skills development and employment opportunities
- Government transparency and stakeholder engagement

- National crises and resilience of communities
- * e-Governance
- * Mobile governance
- * Broadcasting (media, radio, etc.)

Scholars conducting SD-related research should, furthermore, consider typical challenges associated with information, communication, digital inclusion and connectivity. Such challenges include disparities in access to digital technologies that might lead to a digital divide, limiting the benefits of social networks and connectivity for certain populations; privacy and security concerns; as well as and digital literacy to empower individuals to effectively navigate and utilise digital tools for social development.

Information, communication and digital inclusion are essential enablers of social sustainability, fostering inclusive, informed and connected societies. These aspects empower individuals, bridge social gaps and enhance the collective capacity to address complex challenges in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

E. Physical and Psychological Wellbeing

The first theme listed under the intermediate and long-term outcomes dimension (figure 1) is the physical and psychological wellbeing of individuals and communities. As far as a conceptual framework is concerned, this theme entails identifying social and environmental factors and the assessment of their impact on the life satisfaction, happiness, mental health and psychological wellbeing of communities. Conceptual clarity should be gained regarding factors such as access to healthcare, education, housing, social services and the prevalence of social networks, trust and collaboration within communities. Due cognisance should also be taken of cultural empowerment and preservation of heritage, traditions, indigenous knowledge systems and identities within communities. The conceptual framework should also include sustainable lifestyles and the promotion of consumption patterns and production that are environmentally sustainable and socially responsible. This could include the design of green urban and rural recreational spaces that are safe, accessible and available to all community members.

F. Social Innovation

The second theme is the promotion and adoption of innovative solutions that address social challenges, empower communities and contribute to SD. Collectively these solutions are conceptualised as "social innovation". Key concepts that should be clarified in this regard include the following:

- Collaborative problem-solving by encouraging the collaboration of diverse stakeholders, including government, businesses, non-governmental organisations and communities, to find innovative solutions to social challenges.
- Technological and digital solutions by harnessing technology and digital tools to address social issues, enhance access to information and empower communities.

- Community-led initiatives that support and amplify projects that originate within communities, ensuring that solutions are context-specific and driven by local knowledge.
- Entrepreneurship for social impact that seeks not only financial returns but also positive social and environmental outcomes.
- Education and capacity building by promoting initiatives that nurture creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving skills within communities.
- Policy innovation by encouraging the development of innovative policies that address emerging social challenges and contribute to SD.

By incorporating social stability and social innovation dimensions into the conceptual framework, SD efforts can better address the dynamic and evolving nature of societal challenges and opportunities. Both dimensions contribute to building resilient, adaptive, and inclusive societies that can thrive in the face of change.

G. Social Networks and Collaboration

The third theme to be considered for inclusion in a conceptual framework is the nature, scope and prevalence of social networks and collaboration. Social networks generally refer to the relationships and connections that individuals have with others, both in person and, increasingly, online. Strong social networks and relationships typically foster a sense of belonging and community, and provide emotional and informational support. This support is essential for individuals facing challenges and contributes to mental and emotional wellbeing. Social networks often serve as pathways to various opportunities, such as employment, education and community involvement. Diverse social networks facilitate cultural exchange, fostering understanding and appreciation among people from differing backgrounds.

Collaboration on local, national and international levels should also be conceptualised by considering cooperation and collaboration between nations, donor and development agencies, non-governmental organisations and communities to address global social challenges collectively.

H. Social Stability and Cohesion

Social stability and cohesion were identified as the fourth theme, with a focus on the root causes of social instability. One should consider issues such as fostering peaceful societies through conflict resolution, risk assessments and instability reduction. Instability is usually the result of a lack of social cohesion brought about by cultural intolerance, migration and the displacement of people, political turmoil, unemployment and food insecurity. The conceptual framework should outline factors that might contribute to peaceful coexistence, social harmony and stability. The nature and presence of social safety nets should also be considered to evaluate the successes of support systems to protect vulnerable populations during times of social and economic instability. The Delphi panel recommended that issues pertaining to gender-based violence also be included.

I. Social Resilience

The conceptual framework should include aspects and concepts associated with social resilience as the final theme under the intermediate and long-term outcomes dimension. "Social resilience" can be regarded as a broad, umbrella term that generally refers to the ability of individuals, communities and societies to withstand, adapt to and recover from various challenges, stresses, shocks or disturbances while maintaining or enhancing their wellbeing. It involves fostering the strength of social systems, networks and institutions to support individuals and communities in times of adversity. Key concepts include the following:

- adaptive capacity
- flexibility
- engagement
- equity and inclusivity
- inclusivity and equity
- ownership and shared responsibility
- participation

- response strategies
- risks
- social capital
- social cohesion
- social networks
- stressors
- vulnerability

Scholars should appreciate the fact that fostering social resilience involves recognising the interconnectedness of social, economic, cultural and environmental factors. It requires collaborative efforts from individuals, communities, institutions and policymakers to build and sustain resilience in the face of diverse challenges.

J. Monitoring, Evaluation and Social Impact Assessments

The final theme under the impact measurement dimension is monitoring, evaluation and social impact assessments. Indicators and metrics play a crucial role in assessing and monitoring progress towards social sustainability within the conceptual framework. They provide a quantitative and qualitative basis for evaluating the impact of policies, projects and initiatives on various social sustainability dimensions. Provision should be made in the conceptual framework for the nature, types and application of measurable indicators and metrics for social impact assessments to monitor and evaluate progress in achieving social sustainability goals. Community feedback mechanisms are also required to inform decision-making and policy adjustments. Quantitative and qualitative measures should be tailored to the specific socio-cultural, economic and environmental context of the region or community under scholarly investigation. A combination of indicators covering various aspects of social sustainability ensures a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected social dimensions (Van der Waldt, 2012). These include environmental and social performance indicators, composite indicators such as the HDI, gender-related indicators and inequality metrics (e.g. Gini coefficient). These indicators and metrics serve as essential tools for assessing, guiding and communicating progress in achieving social sustainability within the conceptual framework. Their nature, type and application ensure a comprehensive and adaptable approach to understanding the complex interplay of social

dimensions in SD. The panellists also recommended that social performance, change management and transformation theory be included as framework dimensions.

Discussion

It is evident that social sustainability relates to the long-term wellbeing and development of individuals and communities within a society. The social dimensions of SD indicate the importance of fostering social equity, justice, inclusivity and cohesion to ensure that the benefits of development are shared by all members of a community, with reference to both present and future generations. Designing a conceptual framework that accentuates the social dimensions of SD involves integrating various elements that contribute to social wellbeing, equity and inclusivity. By incorporating dimensions and themes (figure 1) into a conceptual framework, a holistic and context-specific understanding of the social dimensions of SD can be achieved. The framework should be flexible and adaptable to address the diverse and evolving challenges faced by communities globally.

The interdisciplinary nature of SD necessitates a holistic understanding, which requires expertise from diverse fields to ensure an inclusive and comprehensive approach. The latter demands collaboration among scholars, policymakers, practitioners and communities to encourage cross-disciplinary dialogues and collective intelligence to address the intricacies of interconnected challenges. The scholarly attempt to design a conceptual framework for social sustainability reveals a tapestry of challenges and opportunities that beckon further scholarly inquiry. It is thus recommended that similar conceptual frameworks be constructed for the environmental and economic dimensions of SD and that alignment and interconnections between this (social) conceptual framework and the other two be established. This will promote a more holistic and integrated perspective on the intricacies of SD.

Conclusion

The design of a conceptual framework for the social dimensions of SD presented in this article underscores the necessity of considering societal wellbeing as a central tenet in the broader discourse on sustainability. A conceptual framework serves as a foundational tool for guiding scholarly inquiry, informing policy and practice and promoting a holistic and inclusive approach to addressing the world's most pressing challenges. The synthesised theoretical perspectives, combined with the structured framework (LOGFRAME), provide a lens through which researchers, policymakers and practitioners can comprehensively explore and address the intricate interplay of social dynamics within sustainability efforts. By highlighting the foundational concepts associated with key themes and dimensions, the framework captures the richness and diversity inherent in the social fabric of SD.

While this conceptual framework serves as a structured guide, it also accommodates the evolving nature of SD. Future researchers, in light of practical applications, should continue

to refine and adapt the framework to address emerging challenges, ensuring its relevance across diverse contexts. Moreover, the framework should stimulate further interdisciplinary dialogue, encouraging collaboration between scholars, policymakers and communities in the pursuit of socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable futures.

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