

Unit 11: Sustainability and Social Innovation

The concept of sustainability

Sustainability was introduced as a means for handling the type of problems concerning the deteriorating relationship between our global ecology and an ongoing economic development (Chiesa et al., 1999). However, there are contradictory thoughts on sustainability as well. It is ill – defined, not defined, or contradictorily defined (Phills and Andriantiatsaholiniaina, 2001).

Sustainability indicates a relationship between a (sustainable) artefact and its environment that exists indefinitely. It also refers to equilibrium between an artefact and its supporting environment. Sustainability, however, is not only studied as an artefact but also as a predicate. That is one of the reasons more precise analysis is necessary about the characteristics of the artefact.

Sustainability is not a new concept. The evolution of sustainability is affected by different ‘intellectual and political streams of thoughts that have molded concepts of sustainability’ (Kidd, 1992). These thoughts have led to sustainability being studied from different streams of thoughts namely: environmental, social, and business.

The environmental discourse is concerned with the relationship between human and nature, and it is used widely in relation to environmental problems. This came around during the UN conference on Human Environment in 1972. During the conference 26 principles were addressed. Of the 26 principles, most of the principles addressed environmental concerns.

These however later was a carrying concept (Riddell, 1981; WRI/ IIED, 1986). It was also considered a vehicle for creation of UN environmental programme.

The other discourse we can investigate is social. The key determinants for social discourse are:

- Social justice
- Distributive justice
- Equality of conditions

This discourse is also associated with the notion of social responsibility in the context of corporations.

Then there is business discourse. This discourse is also looked upon because capitalism and its destructive tendencies are manifest through its greatest creation – the corporation (Gray, 2010). The focus of this discourse is not only eco – efficiency but eco – effectiveness as well (Braungart and McDonough, 1998) and sufficiency (Schumacher, 1973).

In terms of profitability, productivity, and financial performance and in terms of managing environmental and social assets the business discourse plays a major role. This discourse helps understand meeting the needs of a firms' direct and indirect stakeholders without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well (Dyllick and Hockerts).

Within the business discourse we can look at corporate social responsibility (CSR) as well. CSR refers to businessperson's decisions and actions taken for reasons at least partially beyond the firm's direct economic or technical aspect (Davis, 1980).

Social responsibility in the final analysis implies a public posture toward society's economic and human resources, as a willingness to see that those resources are used for broad social ends and not simply for the narrowly circumscribed interests of private persons and firms' (Frederick, 1960).

Sustainable development is also defined as a 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Sustainability is also defined as a properly designed environmental standards that triggers innovations and can lower the cost of a product or improve its value.

Such innovation allows companies to use a range of inputs more productively – from raw materials to energy to labor thus offsetting the costs of improving environmental impact and ending its stalemate. Ultimately this enhanced resource productivity makes companies more competitive, not less (Porter and Van der Linde, 1995).

Aspects of Sustainability

The three aspects of sustainability are: artefact, goal orientation and behavioral interaction. The artefact is concerned about the tangibility of the artefact to which sustainability is attributed. An example of artefact is sustainable health care where the distinction is between entity and construct.

Goal orientation is either absolute or relative and anything in between. It is used a point of reference to determine whether an artefact is sustainable or not. The continuum is between two extremes, non-sustainable and sustainable.

Behavioral interaction deals with the link between dynamics of the artefact and the environment and is between static and dynamic.

The Kyoto conference on climate change came about in 1997 and was represented by millennium development goals. The millennium development goals were established in 2000 for the period 2000 to 2015 and focused on a set of rights and needs mainly in relation to poverty and health and discrimination.

There are certain challenges that sustainability faces as well. They are:

- Integrated sustainability advocated by academics, institutions, and cross-country initiatives
- Implications and challenges involved in implementing this integration have received little attention
- Sustainability is not only a complex and elusive notion, but one which is fraught with potential contradictions (Gray, 2010)
- Example: financial and social dimensions of sustainability from the company perspective against addressing social performance is good for financial performance (Boyd et al, 2009; Orlitzky et al., 2003)

Sustainable Development Goals

SDGs was adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015. This is also known as the 2030 agenda for sustainable development and consists of 17 goals and 169 targets. It is a call for action by all countries both developed and developing. The seventeen goals of SDGs are:

1. No poverty
2. Zero hunger
3. Good health and well being
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequalities
11. Sustainable cities and communities
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action
14. Life below water
15. Life on land
16. Peace, justice, and strong institutions
17. Partnerships for the goals

Adoption of major agreements before, during and after are:

- March 2015: Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk reduction
- July 2015: Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development
- September 2015: Adoption of 17 Sustainable Development Goals
- December 2015: Paris Agreement on Climate Change

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