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Conceptualizing and incorporating social sustainability in the business world

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important challenges faced by business managers today is the integration of sustainability into their core functions. The contemporary enterprise is forced to leap forward from the mere adoption of green practices toward rethinking, redesigning, and redeveloping business practices in a more sustainable way. Most of the initiatives in this attempt have so far emphasized primarily the economic and environmental aspects of sustainable development and overlooked the social dimension of sustainability. As more organizations commit to sustainability, there is an increasing concern to incorporate social sustainability throughout their business operations. To conceptualize and integrate the notion, some organizations use preexisting indicators to demonstrate the value and impact of sustainability, while others look beyond the measurement of impacts by constructing their own system of indicators. This paper draws on a comprehensive literature review to determine a broadly acceptable framework of social sustainability indicators to be conceptualized and integrated into the business world. Findings suggest that economic and environmental sustainability can be driven together with core social factors including fairness and equality, poverty, health, education, delinquencies, demography, culture, and employee engagement within an organization. These results offer insight into the emerging phenomenon of formulating sustainable business strategies for organizations based on social indicators to attain the ultimate sustainable outcomes. This study is among the first to identify social sustainability indicators from societal and corporate perspectives. It offers a comprehensive social sustainability framework that may be adopted by organizations in the business world.

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Sustainability; social indicators; social sustainability; businesses; society

Introduction

The notion of sustainability achieved prominence through a report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987) that described sustainable development (SD) as ‘meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’. Since the late 1980s, much of the debate on sustainability has been dominated by environmental perspectives, despite the world commission report focused on poverty, resources, ecology, and economic factors. It has long been a practice of decision-makers to address only the economic dimension of sustainability. However, there has also been an increasing focus on the environmental dimension in the last decade. The social dimension, however, has not yet been well explained and the literature has only touched on legislative issues and health and safety (Hutchins and Sutherland 2008). The modern business world is acknowledging the significance of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which makes their operations consistent with the morals and values of society. That is, while delivering profits to its owners/shareholders, an organization is expected to support discretionary activities such as philanthropic donations,

health care, childcare, and educational opportunities (Carroll 1991).

Since last decade, with the quest of sustainability as a practical struggle instead of just a scientific or theoretical concept, the business world has recognized the importance of a trade-off among the challenging priorities of safeguarding the environment, economic development, and social justice (Casula Vifell and Soneryd 2012). Currently, the world knows that it cannot make solid progress in resolving worldwide issues including climate change and the degradation of ecosystems without addressing associated economic and social justice concerns (Nicole 2016). This new sustainability approach commends an integrated perception whereby social concerns are indistinguishable and inseparable from economic or environmental concerns and vice versa. When researchers from various disciplines gather to deliberate on the social dimensions of sustainability, they unsurprisingly encounter challenges finding applicable notions, terminology, scope, and approaches of assessment (Casula Vifell and Soneryd 2012; Åhman 2013). Additionally, SD refers to achieving a balance among the environmental, economic, and social pillars of sustainability, but the meaning and related objectives of the social pillar remain inexplicit.

Indeed, it has been pronounced as the most theoretically vague pillar so far (Dempsey et al. 2011). Moreover, the social dimensions of sustainability have not received the same treatment as the other two pillars (Cuthill 2010; Vavik and Keitsch 2010) and there are several understandings about what concerns should be addressed (Dixon and Colantonio 2008). This vagueness advocates that a better understanding of the social pillar of sustainability is necessary.

This paper aims to develop a better understanding of the concept by reviewing the social dimension of sustainability from societal and corporate perspectives and then integrating the best-suited approach in the business world by making a self-assessment available to organizations, to determine where they rank currently. This study will pinpoint the social dimension of sustainability from societal and corporate perspectives in an effort to recognize core aspects that are essential for business organizations to integrate into their business operations. The literature highlights a comparatively narrow approach toward the social pillar, as social aspects cannot be measured using the same tools upon which the other two pillars rely. This lack of explicit indicators of social sustainability in business organizations leads to the following research questions:

- (1) How do we conceptualize social sustainability in business organizations?
- (2) How can social sustainability indicators become integrated into the business world?

To answer these questions, the paper starts with a literature review of social sustainability to conceptualize and understand social sustainability indicators in business organizations. This is followed by the role of stakeholders in pushing the social sustainability agenda in business organizations. Then we discuss the association of social sustainability and SD. Later, we focus on quantifying and reporting social sustainability, followed by introducing the triple bottom line and sustainability. Afterwards, we discuss social sustainability development and the measurement indicators from both company and societal perspectives. Then, it emphasizes the essentials to integrate social sustainability at the business level. The research framework and its managerial implications for business organization are discussed in the final section before the conclusion.

Conceptualizing social sustainability

Sustainability contains environmental, economic, and social aspects. Specifically, social sustainability is a quality of society that encourages durable circumstances for human well-being, particularly for susceptible persons or groups (Rachelle et al. 2016).

Considerable research on social sustainability goes by other terms. Work includes matters of environmental or social justice, observing how the lives and status of susceptible or marginalized people can be enhanced (Boström 2012). Research to overcome food uncertainty is another example of a social justice subject. Researchers of food systems have also recognized community innovations that meet requirements for sustainability; however, these innovations have narrow applicability given the needs and conditions of humans around the globe (Hankins and Grasseni 2014; Arora et al. 2016). Towns with transport ideas that smooth the access of low-income people to facilities, education, and jobs is yet another case of attention to social-justice concerns (Fischer and Amekudzi 2011).

So far, there has been a fragmented approach in the literature to address social sustainability. A major challenge for the organizations engaging in social sustainability is to bridge the gap between their business approach to address their financial objectives and long-term social objectives (Buser and Koch 2014). Another challenge is to have a 'single-building' approach with a broader local area approach. The solutions in the literature have tended to focus on economic, environmental, and architectural solutions (Vallance et al. 2011; Boström 2012). These solutions give rise to disparities and segregation between areas. There is a broad range of definitions for social sustainability in the literature (Weingaertner and Moberg 2014). For instance, the diverse focus of social sustainability is outlined in Table 1.

Quite astonishingly, most of the social sustainability definitions that exist are frequently determined by specific criteria or study points of view, as opposed to being general. For some it is based on equity and democracy (Sachs 1999), while others lay it upon fundamental estimations of values and democracy (e.g. Barbier 1987 and Koning 2010). Littig and Grießler (2005) stressed the significance of nature and society by highlighting the fact that social sustainability would be guaranteed if tasks within the general public and the related institutional courses of action fulfill a broadened set of human needs and are formed in a way that nature and its regenerative abilities are safeguarded over a drawn-out stretch of time and the regularizing cases of social equity, human pride, and cooperation are fulfilled. The literature has proposed key subjects or themes that portray social issues pertinent to sustainability. In addition, there are Millennium Development Goals that target human needs and essential rights of every individual. For example, eliminating poverty, delivering primary education, and maintaining gender balance. The role of social sustainability has only been customary along with that of the stronger disciplines, i.e. the economy and environment. However, the recent realization of

Table 1. Scope of social sustainability.

Authors	Scope
Sachs (1999)	Basic values of equity and democracy
Marafa (2002)	Social and cultural consequences to the society
McKenzie (2004)	A life-enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition
Gilchrist and Allouche (2005)	Basic needs, capacity of individual/community
Littig and Grießler (2005)	Satisfy human needs and fulfill social justice, human dignity, and engagement
United Nations (2009)	End of extreme poverty and hunger, universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, reduced child mortality, improved maternal health, and fighting HIV/AIDS and malaria
Koning (2010)	Culture, equity, and social justice
Boström (2012)	Includes human welfare, quality of life, social justice, social cohesion, cultural diversity, democratic rights, gender issues, workers' rights, broad participation, social capital development, and individual capabilities
Juha et al. (2012)	Covers broad societal issues, such as democracy, social justice, welfare, and cultural identity
Rachelle et al. (2016)	A quality of society that promotes enduring conditions for human welfare, especially for vulnerable persons or groups
Danielle et al. (2016)	Establishing systems, products, and services designed to improve the overall health and well-being of all community members for the long term
Nicole (2016)	Attainment of basic needs (economics, engineering), the well-being of the self within a healthy social context (public health), the well-being and health of a cultural group or community (anthropology), or the larger social system itself as robust and long lasting (sociology, economics), among others

the concepts such as equity and environmental justice (Agyeman and Evans 2004) has highlighted the relevance of social aspects to a great extent. For example, CSR has recently been used more actively through various tools (Arora et al. 2016). Thus, a continuous evolution in this field has made it necessary to have newer and clearer tools and methods for assessing and reporting the social dimension of sustainability in business organizations.

Social sustainability and business organizations

Business organizations fascinated by SD should be able to take social sustainability into account in their business operations. However, their efforts are frequently unfulfilled by the vagueness of the notion, the differences in priorities of their stakeholders, and the lack of a proper consistent understating of this notion (Jones et al. 2015). Differences in priorities raise conflicts over business objectives, and organizations may not be organized to address such differences. Additionally, they often lack understanding and experience to know the social sustainability integration process. Outcome measures may be needed to move business agendas in positive directions. Mostly, among business organizations, CSR is a measure with which firms assess social sustainability. SD will involve frameworks and practices that align diverse, practice-specific indicators for social sustainability. Common conceptualization and integration of these approaches in the business world is a key task for social sustainability scholars (Rachelle et al. 2016).

Social sustainability and organizational stakeholders

As a result of the substantial socioeconomic and environmental influences in business operations, organizations globally are progressively being managed inside the framework of SD, with guiding

philosophies mostly as a reaction to the gravity received by their numerous stakeholders (Jordao 2009). Sustainability involves incorporating economic, environmental, and social performance indicators that are also defined as the triple bottom line or the dimensions of sustainability (GRI, 2006) in business management and reporting processes (Elkington 1997). According to Artiach et al. (2010), in the long term, the organization that has a powerful economic structure socially meets stakeholders' expectations and minimizes negative environmental impacts that could be sustainable. They further argue that in the short term, companies should provide competitive products and services to sustain themselves economically and protect the natural and human resources to provide continuity for the next generation's future needs. Because of the pressure from internal and external stakeholders, companies consider a variety of sustainability initiatives according to the environmental and social impacts of their operations (Koc and Durmaz 2015).

Christofi et al. (2012) argue that corporate sustainability should be regarded along with economic growth, environmental regulation, social justice, and equity. IISD (1992) outlines corporate sustainability as embracing corporate strategies and actions that meet the needs of the businesses and their stakeholders at present, whereas shielding, sustaining, and augmenting the human and natural resources that will be looked for in the future. Dyllick and Hockerts (2002) explain it as fulfilling the requirements of the organization's conventional and secondary stakeholders alike (shareholders, employees, clients, pressure groups, communities, etc.), without compromising its capability to fulfill future stakeholders' needs. Corporate sustainability is vital in realizing a company's vision without losing its competitive advantage while ensuring companywide economic growth and environmental stewardship and providing social responsibilities (Koc and Durmaz 2015).

In recent years, most leading corporations have started to provide some type of reporting on their CSR activities. Most of them referred to the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines. Though GRI's original goal was to offer mechanisms to regulate environmentally responsible behavior, over the years its conventions have been extended to also embrace social activities. In its latest edition, these guidelines provide reporting principles and standards revelations. They likewise classify the criteria that an organization should use to formulate its sustainability report, including indications of economic, environmental, employee, shareholder, and stakeholder impacts (Arora et al. 2016).

Organizations share full disclosure of their initiatives through their sustainability reports. Details on these initiatives should be gradually and widely shared in corporate sustainability or equivalent reports. However, stakeholders often struggle to make sense of the information reported (Koc and Durmaz 2015), especially the social dimension of their sustainability initiatives or activities. To help highlight businesses with prototypical sustainability performance, a number of ratings, awards, and indices have emerged (Sadowski et al. 2010). Organizations that want to highlight their contributions and inform their stakeholders about their activities and progress toward sustainability are disseminating and developing corporate sustainability reports, but still, the focus is on the environmental and economic dimension of sustainability. The social dimension does not make a clear and visible impact on sustainability reports on a consistent basis.

Social sustainability and SD

SD is typically divided into the economic, environmental, and social pillars, indicating that a practice cannot be fully sustainable until all these three dimensions are satisfied (Casula & Soneryd, 2012). Of these three facets, the social dimension is often the most challenging to incorporate into actual organizational projects and policies (Dillard et al. 2012). Steurer et al. (2005) describe SD as a societal concept. They stated it gradually being applied as a commercial notion under the heading of corporate sustainability. Each individual in a community should have access to a decent quality of life, equity, security, and medical care (Chiu 2004; Partridge 2005). The last decade has witnessed a significant increase in the importance of the social dimension of SD (Labuschagne et al. 2005). As a result, there is a growing level of interest from both public and private firms in addressing CSR (Dias-Sardinha & Reijnders, 2005).

According to Malena et al. (2016), SD is based on attaining balanced economic growth, environmental protection, and social progress (McKenzie 2004;

Adams 2006). Development should provide a satisfactory quality of life, both for individuals and communities, and preserve healthy financial markets while conserving natural resources by pledging that diminution does not occur more promptly than renewal (Fisher & Amekudzi, 2011). Harmonizing these objectives means that the numerous sustainability dimensions are not individual, but rather a combined view is maintained. For instance, social and environmental aspects of sustainability are interlinked because exploited natural resources can compound social unfairness and isolation, encounters, volatility, and disagreement (Chiu 2003). Social sustainability is crucial for SD, though there is no accord on how to combine it in practice (Cuthill 2010; Casula Vifell and Soneryd 2012). Socially sustainable societies need to pledge access to basic needs while containing unbiased outcomes, diversity, connectivity, and democratic governance to provide a high quality of life (WACSS 2013). However, despite the importance of social sustainability, the economic and environmental dimensions are prioritized in organizational planning (Woodcraft et al. 2011), and this neglect of social sustainability is dominant (Dempsey et al. 2011).

Consequently, to achieve social sustainability at the public scale, organizations should promote well-being and not only meet basic needs of their employees (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 1996). The conceptualization of social sustainability within contrasting fields will enable organizations to identify core themes within interdisciplinary boundaries. This understanding would also enable the stakeholders to work together more effectively. Moreover, exploring the social dimensions of sustainability might help them to understand why sustainable policies are not able to produce the expected results (Goel and Sivam 2015).

Social sustainability and different disciplines

Social sustainability has been of concern to both professionals and academia in industrial contexts such as manufacturing (Hutchins and Sutherland 2008; Labuschagne and Brent 2008). This concern must be embedded in a process during design, planning, and production (Zuo et al. 2012). It is well recognized that construction activities have significant impacts on the environment, economy, and society (Lützkendorf and Lorenz 2006). Positively, the construction industry produces a variety of buildings to satisfy different requirements, contributes toward the national GDP, and provides many employment opportunities. However, the depletion of natural resources and degradation of the environment has triggered an increasing level of public scrutiny on construction activities. Recent decades have witnessed strong efforts from both industry and academia to target the sustainability issues of the construction industry.

However, these efforts are largely environmentally oriented such as waste management, greenhouse gas emission reduction, energy efficiency, and water conservation. Impacts of construction activities that affect the surrounding society include traffic congestion and delays, disruption of economic activities, excessive generation of pollution and pollutants, damage to sensitive ecosystems, and damage to existing structures and infrastructure systems (Gilchrist and Allouche 2005). According to Abowitz and Toole (2009), construction is a social process and the social aspects of sustainability need to be paid attention to at a higher level in construction.

Social aspects of sustainability are increasingly being recognized as important, and a vast amount of literature discussing social sustainability has emerged within different fields such as sociology, urban planning, and tourism studies. Even though there have been attempts to summarize this growing quantity (McKenzie 2004; Colantonio and Dixon 2010; Koning 2010; Vallance et al. 2011), the concept of social sustainability is still, to some degree, under-theorized (Weingaertner and Moberg 2014).

Quantifying and reporting sustainability

There is an increasing trend in organizations to measure, improve, and report sustainability (Dewulf and Van Langenhove 2006), which in most cases encompasses a triple bottom line of people, planet, and profit. This enhanced concern partly originated from pressures of stakeholders that push for transparency in business operations. Thus, identification of true indicators is significant for quantifying, tracking, and reporting multiple dimensions of sustainability. Most of the indicators in current organizational practices are enforced by experts (such as scientists or policy-makers) with a focus on certain countries and/or processes (Bell and Morse 2008). Additionally, a key problem is that just revealing sustainability is often confused with actually making development toward being more sustainable (Milne and Gray 2013). While concern with sustainability is generally accompanied by measurement across the triple bottom line, merely reporting outcomes is not an indication of a positive overall impact on the environment and society (Sridhar 2012). Moreover, evidence shows that firms tend to report the chosen positive activities while overlooking aspects of their operations that have negative impacts and connotations (Cho et al. 2015).

However, an advantage of reporting is that it has brought the triple bottom line into the discussion of existing environmental and social consequences of economic decisions. Reporting has introduced new levels of transparency and changes in legislation (Wilburn, 2014). Better collaboration among different CSR rating agencies also suggests a change toward

accepting that economic growth, social well-being, and environmental quality are interdependent (Stutz 2012). However, Norman and MacDonald (2004) contend that triple bottom line accounting focuses to an excessively large degree on the economic values of sustainability, ignoring a long history in business of incorporating non-economic values into decision-making.

Littig and Grießler (2005) identified two ways to hypothesize sustainability: one-pillar and three-pillar models. The one-pillar model demonstrates how ecological resources are to be maintained to balance the social and economic needs of future generations. On the other hand, three-pillar models develop independent social and economic goals. Furthermore, these models have been enhanced with various additional categories and sub-categories over the years (Pfahl 2005). The interrelationship among these categories (subcategories) is yet to be established. The linkage between environmental (ecological), economic, and social concerns is still not well recognized (Littig and Grießler 2005). For example, the speedy production of affordable housing to ensure social sustainability may not serve the desire to have green housing (Berke and Conroy 2000). An absence of a clear definition for each category makes the problem even worse.

Certainly, traditional business companies give justification only to their shareholders, although in corporate sustainability, understanding the scope of responsibility has been a lingering issue. Stakeholders should receive information about a company's social, environmental, and financial performance, whereas sustainability performance can be defined as the performance in all dimensions of a company for all-inclusive corporate sustainability drivers (Schaltegger and Wagner 2006). With sustainability reports, stakeholders can appraise a company's performance in terms of social, environmental, economic dimensions and compare results among competitors. With the aim of survival in the future, it is a prerequisite for the companies to integrate social sustainability in concert with their long-term objectives, which will make it promising for the company to have a sustainable economic progression. Companies are then motivated to redeploy their vision in terms of sustainability, which will deliver a blueprint to meet the varying needs of their communities such as climate change, exhaustion of resources, and poverty.

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2002) defined sustainability reporting well: 'public reports by companies to provide internal and external stakeholders with a picture of corporate position and activities on economic, environmental and social dimensions'. In brief, such reports attempt to pronounce the organization's involvement toward SD. Soerensen (2003) outlines sustainability reporting as the yearly assessment of an organization's economic,

environmental, and social performance and the wide-ranging exercise of business dealings related to organizational answerability and transparency that are motivated by environmental and societal demands. Though Jackson (2005) states it as a high-level strategic paper that mirrors corporate actions that touch society, economy, and natural environment, it also addresses the challenges, opportunities, and concerns of SD to the firm and its industry. In fact, during the reporting period, sustainability reporting aims to inform stakeholders with qualitative and quantitative information about the company's economic, environmental, and social improvements and the efficiency and the effectiveness of undertakings that are incorporated within the company's strategic components.

History and ways of sustainability reporting

According to Koc and Durmaz (2015), initially, companies' reporting processes were started in the 1930s with the financial reporting process. However, sustainability reporting is considered to have been started in the 1970s with social reporting. Then, from the 1980s until the middle of the 1990s the focal point for reporting has been environmental reporting. However, currently, the unfortunate focus is only given to economic and environmental dimensions. Elkington (1997) presented the triple bottom line concept for corporate reporting that not only covers the conventional bottom line (economic and financial performance) but also encompasses the environmental and social dimensions.

On the other hand, the GRI is an international non-profit organization established in 1997 by the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES) and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). The GRI Rules were primarily available in 2000 to support companies in generating sustainability reports that integrate social, environmental, and economic impacts of business with a shared method. The GRI aims to form the guidelines as an internationally recognized charter that promotes equivalent and pertinent sustainability reporting for all divisions and all sectors (Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) 2006; Sherman and DiGuilio 2010).

According to Bossel (1999), corporate sustainability should be measured by providing precise information about authentication of the whole system and each constituent the documentation of the indicators of each dimension and determining the basic subsystems. In this setting, organizations use economic, environmental, and social performance indicators in defining and measuring sustainability (Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) 2006). Thus, corporate sustainability reporting needs to contain indicators and relevant qualitative and quantitative information on environmental, social, economic dimensions. However, according to present reporting indicators, there is satisfactory detail given for economic and environmental but much less detail for social sustainability indicators.

Triple bottom line approach and social sustainability

Businesses are deliberating sustainability more than ever, frequently to understand what it means within different organizational decision-making contexts. Perhaps, the most common definition measures a firm's focus and progress along three trajectories, the so-called triple bottom line: economic well-being, environmental quality, and social justice (Arora et al. 2016). The triple bottom line has been a common tool for assessing a firm's focus on sustainability (Samajdar 2014). This assessment reflects the capability of a firm to confront several contemporary challenges in the three dimensions. Adams (2006) developed the following schematic illustration of sustainability and argued that the three pillars of sustainability are not mutually exclusive and can be mutually reinforcing (Figure 1).

Why is the social dimension of sustainability imbalanced?

The social dimension of sustainability did not emerge from 1960s' environmental movement and the 1970s' basic needs approach to economic development (Colantonio and Dixon 2010). This fact lays the foundation for an imbalance within the framework of SD (Landorf 2011). An intuitive reason for this disparity is



Figure 1. Convergence of the three pillars of sustainability.

that social aspects cannot be measured through cost-benefit analysis, gross national product, and greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, they still present definitional vagueness and discrepancies and thus lack an international framework for evaluation (Littig and Grießler 2005). Rather, the limited evidence in the literature is based on a practical understanding of plausibility and political agendas, rather than on theory and empirical evidence (Littig and Grießler 2005). This vagueness presents a huge gap in the literature about the consensus and a capability to address a balance of economic and environmental issues with social issues (Morrison-Saunders and Therivel 2006). Therefore, the question then remains: how do we conceptualize and incorporate sustainability into business activities, thus moving from the dominion of talk into action? This study helps the owner-managers of business organizations to conceptualize social sustainability from societal and corporate perspectives and to integrate it into their organizations.

Societal perspective on social sustainability

Despite the considerable academic and political attention paid to broad concepts of SD, there is some feeling that the 'social' aspect has been neglected and is not seen to be equal to or as important as either the economic or environmental aspects of SD (Davidson 2009; Cuthill 2010). As a result of this neglect, social sustainability is the least conceptually developed of the three pillars (Littig and Grießler 2005; Partridge 2005; Kunz 2006). For example, it is only over the last 7–8 years that we have seen some limited reporting focusing specifically on social sustainability theory and policy (Becker et al. 1999; Polèse and Stren 2000; Barron and Gauntlet 2002; Becker; Empacher and Wehling 2002; McKenzie 2004; Kunz 2006; Koning 2010).

However, extensive community-based research, while not always explicitly linked to the sustainability discussion, provides a strong 'practice' perspective of what social sustainability might encompass (Partridge 2005). This theoretical paper provides useful direction for exploring concepts of social sustainability by highlighting its important indicators (Figure 2). Learning from this research has the potential to broaden current understandings of the social dimension of sustainability, as there has been little effort to encompass this effort into a broader conceptual framework, unlike economic and environmental sustainability.

Companies' perspective on social sustainability

Viewing and focusing on social sustainability from companies' perspectives, it is clear that environmental

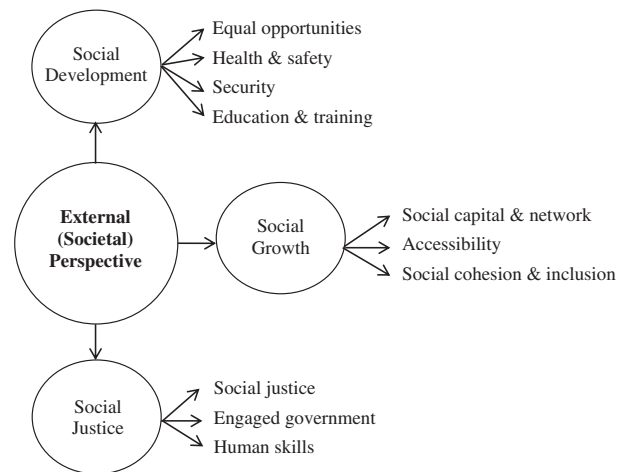


Figure 2. Social sustainability indicators from the societal perspective.

and economic aspects have been on their agenda for some time and are even used for the marketing of products and companies, but social sustainability aspects have only recently been introduced more broadly – perhaps because of the increasing demand and pressure from society for them to address the negative social impacts related to their activities and products (Weingaertner and Moberg 2014). Figure 3 elaborates how companies perceive social sustainability. It is evident in the literature that most of the measures and indicators designed to evaluate the social performance of a firm are limited to the operational level of the company.

According to perspectives summarized above, social sustainability can be classified as social equity and the sustainability of a society itself. An equitable society is one with no exclusionary or prejudiced practices hindering individuals from participating economically and socially (Bramley and Power 2009). Within the business context, social equity is related to the job opportunities, health and safety, training and learning, and professional growth. Community



Figure 3. Social sustainability indicators from companies' perspective.

sustainability involves social interaction among community members, and the opportunity to contribute in civic affairs, the existence of formal and informal organizations, in addition to the existence of interpersonal trust, a sense of security, and a positive sense of recognition (Santa-Cruz et al. 2016). Education is a critical component of social sustainability, alongside health care (Cuthill 2010).

Improvement work for a balanced sustainability index

Sustainability metrics for the measurement of sustainability performance should be based on the idea that sustainable industrial development requires a comprehensive approach toward sustainability, encompassing all its intertwined dimensions and elements. In addition, integrating the concept of sustainability to the companies' decision-making process enables industry to overcome present and emerging sustainability challenges within operational environments. This means that companies can address their sustainability challenges at the business level through the application of a balanced sustainability index by encompassing environmental, economic, and social indicators with legal aspects as a part of each indicator set. According to Husgafvel et al. (2015), sustainability of all operations is the key element of long-term success in any business industry. Sustainability management requires focusing on all dimensions of sustainability covering the linkages between sustainable industrial development and broader goals associated with sustainable societies and the economy. The current indicators of industrial sustainability often satisfy primarily the needs of corporate management and global investors. The provided information is often broad and non-specific and might occasionally even give a false impression of sustainable performance. In general, global indicators tend to highlight one sustainability dimension over another and ignore local-level sustainability performance. Thus, a more balanced sustainability index is needed covering environmental, economic, and social performance and impacts, supported by legal aspects of each dimension of sustainability (Husgafvel et al. 2015).

Sustainable business development – the need to integrate social aspects

Sustainable industrial development and sustainable use of all resources are globally recognized priorities (ESCAP 2015). This includes the establishment of industry–society–environment interactions to ensure responsible approaches to industrial activities (Graedel and Allenby 2010) and paying significantly more attention to long-term oriented systems that recognize limits of resources,

the closure of material cycles and economic recycling of materials (Jackson, 2005; Reuter et al. 2005). In addition, social indicators, life cycle methodologies, and redefinition of system boundaries are becoming more important (Dewulf and Van Langenhove 2006). The need for more informed decision-making and more sustainable policies and practices including sustainable use and good governance of natural resources, resource efficiency, and above all, socially inclusive development, should be prioritized.

Mostly, sustainability indicators are increasingly important tools providing information on corporate performance (Singh et al. 2009). In addition, globally competitive companies are increasingly committed to reporting sustainability performance (Labuschagne and Brent 2008). Baumgartner (2008) noted that companies also need to assess their sustainability performance because they are important societal actors that play a major role in the implementation of SD. Dreyer et al. (2010) noted that social aspects and impact should become a major focus area with an aim to support management-level decision-making, i.e. concerning socially responsible business practices. Roome (1998) recognized that modernization of industrial management requires focusing on social and environmental consequences of industrial activities and on sustainable resource use including a contribution to overall SD and a more sustainable society. Sustainable industrial organization is based on the idea that industry is part of an open system linked with other systems such as social systems and economic relationships (Roome 1998).

According to Laszlo (2003), companies need to take into account the limits of resources and address long-term sustainability challenges including the potential and limits of technological aspects. He stated that forward-looking companies should focus on long-term sustainable performance with special emphasis on sustainable resource use and the proactive management of social impacts to reduce risks and costs. Creation of sustainable value is equally based on economic, social, and environmental performance (Laszlo 2003). Rendtorff (2009) presented CSR as an integrated part of value-driven management and business ethics and noted that this concept relates to the responsibility of corporations toward their internal and external stakeholders and constituencies. Specifically, as indicated in Figure 4, overall sustainability cannot be achieved unless the business world properly focuses on the social dimension of sustainability because the social aspect is virtuously related to people and forms the foundation for the entire conceptual structure of sustainability.

Discussion and practical implications

This paper draws on a comprehensive literature review to determine a broadly acceptable framework

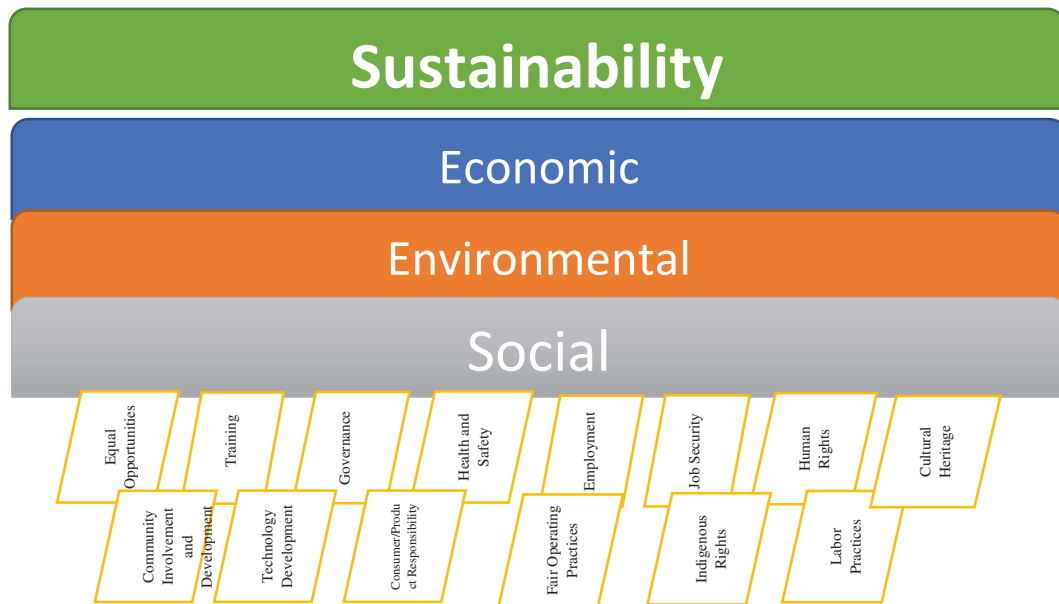


Figure 4. Foundations of sustainability.

of social sustainability indicators. The results offer insights into the emerging phenomenon of formulating organizational sustainable business strategies based on social indicators to attain the ultimate organizational sustainable outcomes. Our findings suggest that core social factors including fairness and equality, poverty, health, education, delinquencies, demography, culture, and employee engagement within an organization drive its economic and environmental sustainability.

The present paper is among the first studies to identify social sustainability indicators from societal and corporate perspectives, offering a comprehensive social sustainability framework to be adopted in the business world.

While Figures 2 and 3 represent the main themes of social sustainability and their indicators from the companies' (internal) and societal (external) perspectives, our framework (presented in Figure 5) provides business organizations with the ability to measure their performance in six major social sustainability areas. While the first three (social development, social

growth, and social justice) reflect what the society wants from organizations, the other three (learning and growth, community development, and safety and security) mirrors how organizations perceive their role in the social sustainability agenda.

The framework constructed in this study includes three zones, labeled in three colors (green, yellow, and red). Social practices have an abrupt and far-reaching impact, which means that working on one factor would not only impact social sustainability, but it would also extend to other factors. Each zone is meant for helping organizations make priorities as prompted by the indicator. Indicators that are linked to the green zone reflect the ones that the company has already addressed and is strong at, whereas those in the yellow zone represent the indicators where the organization is doing well but needs further initiatives to be in the green zone. Red zone indicators, on the other hand, are those where the company is, obviously, lagging behind and needs to emphasize making major improvements to reach an acceptable level of performance in that indicator.

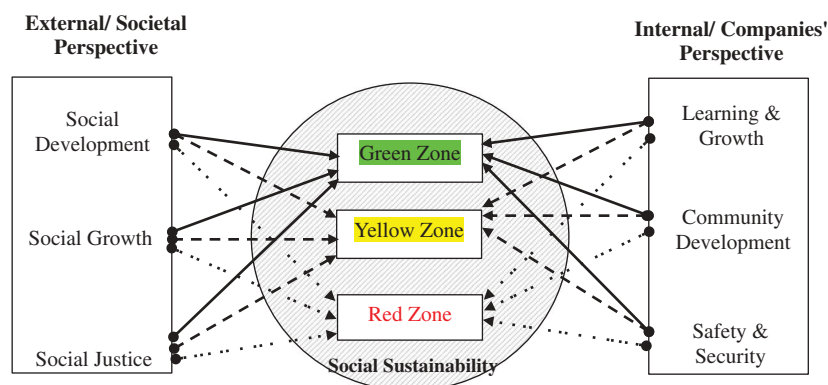


Figure 5. Social sustainability indicators and organizations.

We argue that classifying indicators into three zones, green, yellow, and red, would help decision-makers within the business organization set priorities of the areas of social sustainability in which to focus. Priority setting would help management allocate more resources and efforts to the red-zone indicators while monitoring the indicators in the green zone to make sure they do not fall to a zone below. Moreover, using colors is an easy way to communicate the priorities by visualization.

For the framework to be effective, business organizations have to run a comprehensive analysis of their business strategies and sustainability initiatives to determine their current level of achievement for each of the social sustainability areas. Once they do so, it will be easy for them to determine which indicator is in the green zone and which are in the yellow and red zones. Afterwards, it becomes easier to spot areas of improvement in business strategy and to generate the resources needed to address the top priority indicators. Changing or adjusting a business strategy is an essential part of the whole process, to ensure that social sustainability is at the heart of the business and not just set aside.

Conclusion

In conclusion, of the three components of sustainability, social sustainability is the least studied. Business organizations pursuing sustainability needs to comprehend all three aspects: economic, environmental, and social. Understanding the multi-faceted indicators of sustainability that may not be adequately comprehended or determined is a vigorous next step. This research demonstrates that business organizations already view the various dimensions as more integrated than the conventional separation suggests. However, there are many challenges in how we handle the integrated considerations. Moreover, if the final choice, due to metrics or timescales, places one dimension above others, then the value derived from an integrated approach is reduced. Perhaps the insight of losses gives us a window into how the triple bottom line and other circumstantial variables are currently integrated by business organizations.

The interdependencies among environmental, economic, and social goals have implications for how business organizations might visualize and pursue sustainability at various scales for SD, or sustainability more broadly. Although sustainability is best conceptualized at the level of the collective (be it organizations or communities), decision-makers are frequently individuals making choices that have interdependent consequences. This lesson probably applies to various businesses, balancing their own sets of associated variables. Understanding business decisions concerning sustainability requires a focus on how goals are

understood within precise settings of uncertainties, potential losses, and obligations.

Sustainability studies have always relied on economic and environmental approaches, but when the subject matter relates to society and individuals, it becomes important to approach the issues from a social perspective. Social sustainability notion is vital in order to have an equal standard of life within communities, particularly those communities of the less fortunate. The business world has started realizing that their actions have an impact on society, including the world at large. Thus, social sustainability caters to a worldview in the context of globalization, communities, and culture. Being concerned about social sustainability would be expected to make a business reputable, respectable, and less vulnerable to risk.

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