Social sustainability: a catchword between political pragmatism and social theory

Griessler, Erich; Littig, Beate

Social Sustainability. A Catchword between Political Pragmatism and Social Theory

Dr. Beate Littig & Dr. Erich Grießler

Contact address:
Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS), Department of Sociology, Stumpergasse 56, A-1060 Vienna, Austria, homepage: www.ihs.ac.at,
email: erich.griessler@ihs.ac.at or littig@ihs.ac.at

Erich Grießler is a sociologist and senior researcher at the IHS. His main research field is the social study of science.

Beate Littig is a sociologist and assistant professor at the IHS and lecturer at the University of Vienna. The focus of her work is the relationship between nature and society.

Abstract

The sustainability concepts of the "Brundtland-Report" and the "Rio documents" call for a combination of ecological, economic, social and institutional aspects of social development. This paper describes briefly several models of sustainability and discusses social sustainability as conceptualised in selected sustainability indicators. In an attempt to remedy the lack of sociological theory, the paper proposes a sustainability concept, which is based on the concepts of needs and work, as an activity to fulfil these needs and as the principal exchange process between society and nature. Moreover, this paper argues to recognize social sustainability as both a normative and analytical concept as well.

Key Words:

Needs, sustainable work, gender, mixed work, ecological sustainability, economic sustainability

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1. The Myth about the Three Equal Pillars of Sustainability

The sustainability concepts of the Brundtland report (WCED 1987) and the Rio documents (UN 1992) demand the combination of ecological, economic, social, and – something which is often ignored – institutional aspects of social development. In the mostly politically oriented discourse on sustainability these different areas have come to be called "dimensions" or "pillars". Accordingly, operationalizing sustainable development means that the individual pillars/dimensions ought to be related to each other and put in more concrete terms. Basically, these operationalization efforts can be categorized as one-pillar or multi-pillar models (cf. Kopfmüller et al. 2001), the basics of which will be illustrated and discussed in the following.

1.1 One-Pillar Models

The one-pillar models of sustainable development clearly give priority to the ecological dimension. Based on that, sustainable development should mainly help preserve the ecological systems and resources necessary for economic and social life – as an important prerequisite for meeting the future needs of humanity. The economy and what is rather vaguely described as "social matters" (e.g. lifestyles) are taken to be the main causes for environmental problems, which will obviously have to be improved or changed to ensure ecological sustainability.

Economic and social aspects are only relevant in this approach insofar as the ecologization of social development needs to be economically and socially compatible as well. In connection with the prevention of poverty in the southern countries, economic and social matters have also been discussed as a prerequisite for environmental protection (WCED 1987). Institutional aspects, on the other hand, play a somewhat bigger role in implementation strategies, based on which the existing or newly created institutional bodies will have to carry out the respective measures and tasks.

Ecological development that is geared to ecological sustainability therefore mainly aims to reduce the production and use of harmful substances to a minimum, so as to minimize environmental pollution, the exploitation of valuable resources as well as the so-called "use of the environment". In order to operationalize these goals, several concepts have been developed, which are all trying to identify to what extent the environment is used by different social/spatial entities (countries, regions, etc.) and to come up with sensible suggestions on how this use of the environment could be distributed more equally. Among these concepts, the "ecological footprint" (Wackernagel/Rees 1995) and the so-called "environmental space" (BUND/Misereor 1996) have come to be the most famous.

The concepts of ecological sustainability call for a politically induced shift towards a more environmentally friendly way of life (e.g. by means of a socio-ecological tax reform), which will at the same time also lead to some positive socio-political effects (e.g. reduction of working hours, gender equality). Combining ecological and social objectives will clearly make it easier to implement ecologically motivated control measures, and it will also reduce political and cultural resistance (win-win constellations). Yet even though such interventions can quite reasonably be expected to have positive socio-political effects, the main focus of this approach is still on obtaining the best possible ecological effects.

1.2   Three-Pillar or Multi-Pillar Models

At an international level, the sustainability discourse clearly gives priority to the so-called "three-pillar model", according to which sustainable social development should equally try to reach ecological, economic, and social goals.

The proposed equal treatment of the three pillars is based on the conclusion that human needs cannot be sufficiently met just by providing an ecologically stable and healthy environment, but that – if a society is indeed committed to sustainability – the equally legitimate social and cultural needs ought to be taken care of as well. Economic, social, and cultural conditions, efforts, and values are deemed to be resources that also need to be preserved for future generations.

Another line of argumentation presumes that ecology, economy, and social matters are three individual – albeit connected – systems, which will have to remain stable in the long term so as not to jeopardize the achievements of civilization.

Although the metaphor of the tree-pillar model – and it should indeed be understood as such – is certainly a welcome addition to a purely ecological definition of sustainability, it can also be criticized in some points. First of all, a limitation to three pillars doesn't make much sense from a theoretical point of view, despite the fact that it is based on the United Nations' instructions to the Brundtland Commission (cf. DIW et al. 2001, p.35). A cultural-aesthetic, a religious-spiritual, or a political-institutional pillar (c.f. Pfahl in this volume), for instance, could also be integrated in the definition of sustainability.[i]

The different priorities, which are in reality assigned to the three dimensions of sustainability, ought to be criticized as well. In fact, the much-hailed "win-win" constellations of sustainable development often just provide for ecological and economic, but hardly ever for social gains.[ii] The main reasons for this unequal treatment of the three pillars are, on the one hand, the fact that such equality doesn't exist in the real world, that economic arguments often tend to be more convincing, and that the equal ranking of priorities is rarely an issue in the political context. But there are also some conceptual problems, which still remain to be solved: What does "equal" mean? How can "equal importance" be assigned? What about trade-offs between the different components? So far, these questions have only produced heuristic assumptions, benchmarks, guidelines, and discursive premises.

A more detailed look at this metaphor reveals some additional conceptual shortcomings. While the idea of the "three pillars" is not really in dispute, the same cannot always be said for key objectives, operationalization, and the definition of indicators within the three pillars. Ecological objectives seem to be the least disputed, followed by economic goals, but there is clearly a lot more disagreement about the definition of the main social objectives of sustainable development (Oman/Spangenberg 2002). In case of objectives and indicators, it seems to depend on who defined them. Many times they comprise a theoretically unfounded selection of assumptions, goals, and indicators of socio-political provenance. Especially with regard to the social dimension it still appears to be rather unclear what "social matters" really means and what kind of dynamics and breaks exist therein (cf. Empacher/Wehling 1999;

Kopfmüller et al. 2001, p.67ff.; Littig/Grießler 2004). Somewhat more differentiated is the approach that tries to see sustainability as a social learning process. While in the beginning social matters were deemed to be of little important or merely a related issue like in the one-pillar models, at least the scientific community has over time come to assign equal importance to social and economic aspects as well (Grunewald et al. 2001, p.55ff; Weidner/Brandl 2001, p.41ff.). However, it is a rather long way from scientific insights to the actual implementation in national strategies, where ideas are also subject to the usual deformations and selectivity of the political process. The political process often simplifies, reduces, and changes the initial focus. Therefore it is necessary to differentiate – both analytically and conceptually – between the more scientific sustainability studies or the processes of defining indicators and the sustainability strategies developed at a political level.[iii]

2. Social Sustainability Concepts

An analysis of selected national and international social sustainability concepts shows that the selection of indicators frequently is not founded in theory but rather in a practical understanding of plausibility and current political agendas (Grießler/Littig 2004). This is also due to the fact that a clear theoretical concept of social sustainability is still missing. Many such concepts may remain implicit as they are somewhat concealed behind a seemingly random choice of common socio-political indicators. They also define social sustainability in different ways (social standards, institutional sustainability, democratic rights). Moreover, the relationships and connections between social, economic, and ecological sustainability continue to be quite unclear in many cases. The three dimensions are often given different priorities, and they are somewhat placed next to one another without being integrated into a whole. The results of the analysis confirm the frequent statements about sustainability being a rather vague concept, and there is still a lot of work to be done in defining it properly (cf. Becker et al. 1999: 4).[iv]

One reason for that may be that this concept is expected to be able to link environmental protection with social equity, which is clearly a great challenge both from a theoretical and a practical point of view: "Sustainable development might best be characterized as a contested discursive field which allows for the articulation of political and economic differences between North and South and introduces to environmental issues a concern with social justice and

political participation" (Becker et al. 1999, p.1). This can also be problematic insofar as the people involved may assign different priorities to the environment and social equity. One example for this is Wackernagel's critical comment on the Environmental Sustainability Index by the World Economic Forum, in which he attempts to reduce sustainability to ecological sustainability: "Human health aspects are essential for the well-being of a society, but they should not be confused with environmental sustainability" (Wackernagel 2001, p.2). With reference to the UNCSD indicators (CSD 1996), however, one can certainly claim that people's health is indeed directly connected with sustainability. Hodge and Hardi also state that the sustainability of social and ecological systems should be equally important within the sustainability concept: "In general terms the idea of sustainability is the persistence of certain necessary and desired characteristics of people, their communities and organizations, and the surrounding ecosystem over a very long period of time (indefinitely). Achieving progress toward sustainability thus implies maintaining and preferably improving, both human and ecosystem wellbeing, not one at the expense of the other. The idea expresses the interdependence between people and the surrounding world" (Hodge/Hardi 1997, p.7). Yet even if the social dimension of sustainability is in fact acknowledged, it will still be necessary to define what social sustainability means. Biart, for instance, points out that long-term development only calls for a minimum of social requirements and therefore suggests a rather narrow definition: "A final point to pay attention to is the confusion which may arise between desirability and sustainability. The Brundtland objective leads indeed easily to focusing on how to increase welfare so that the various generations can meet their needs. This opens the way to discussions of policies, which may be desirable to optimize development. The sustainability approach is, however, less embracing. It aims to determine the minimal social requirements for long-term development (sometimes called critical social capital) and to identify the challenges to the very functioning of society in the long run" (Biart 2002, p.6).

The difficulties in conceptualizing social sustainability are also due to the fact that there is no clear differentiation between the analytical, normative, and political aspects thereof and that people may prioritize one over another. One reason for this problem can already be found in the broad and multi-faceted connotation of the word "social", which has an analytical as well as a normative meaning. Sustainability demands that development can no longer be seen

without its natural prerequisites, as it is inseparably connected with the reproduction thereof. And this is indeed a deeply socio-scientific subject matter, not just a question of natural sciences. It is no longer deemed sufficient to meet the standards defined by the natural sciences, but the social processes, which shape a society's interactions and relationships with "nature" need to be analyzed as well. Therefore, the socio-scientific question in this context is: How can societies regulate and change their processes and structures so as to ensure the chances for development of future generations? Sebastian Brandl, for instance, defines sustainability as the relationship between the social and ecological systems, which needs to be shaped in such a way that it won't destabilize the system as a whole: "From a system-theoretical point of view, this approach aims to uphold both the functionality and the resilience of linked sub-systems, thus keeping the whole system stable." (Brandl 2002, p.13ff, transl. by the authors). This analytical aspect of social sustainability, however, is not to be understood as an attempt to claim a justified minimum level of social rights and defend them against the primacy of neo-liberal economic policy and/or the ecological primacy originating in the social sciences. It should, on the contrary, help examine those social structures and processes, which influence the metabolic exchange between society and nature (Fischer-Kowalski/ Haberl 1993). Considering the origins of the sustainability approach, the inclusion of the ecological dimension of social processes is in fact a constitutive element. But an exclusive focus on social processes that do have an effect on the society-nature relationship may cause various other aspects to be left out. This turns out to be somewhat of a dilemma in multi-pillar models: Should the main focus continue to be placed on the environment as the dominant factor, which all research, all conceptual considerations need to be based on? Or can the idea of multi-dimensionality be adapted and extended in such a way that it will also be possible to examine social or economic processes and/or to define criteria and objectives that go beyond a purely ecological dimension? Within the scope of system-theoretical considerations or the idea that economic, ecological, and cultural factors are to be seen as resources (see 1.2), one has no choice but to question first the sustainability of the social aspects themselves before moving on to ecological or other kinds of interactions and relationships.

This makes sustainability quite a challenge for the social sciences, as sustainability research is not just about "natural" processes but also about understanding social processes that

concern society's interactions with nature. "Thus environmental sustainability turns out to be closely linked to supposedly 'internal' problems of social structure, such as social justice, gender equality and political participation (...) In this sense, sustainability describes a topic of research that is basically social, addressing virtually the entire 'process by which societies manage the material conditions of their reproduction, including the social, economic, political and cultural principles that guide the distribution of environmental resources'" (Becker et al. 1999: 4). Considering this, it seems to be even more important now to overcome the current lack of a theory concerning social sustainability, since without such a theory it is clearly impossible to assign priorities to social process control mechanisms: "Developing and using a clear conceptual framework for guiding the assessment process is very important. With a conceptual framework in place, indicators emerge more naturally, and can be adjusted to the needs of a given locale or set of decision makers." (Hodge/Hardi 1997, p.10). Unfortunately, this aspect of social sustainability has hitherto been widely disregarded.

While the analytical aspect is certainly significant, the normative aspect of social sustainability is truly imperative, as it is necessary to set standards on how our society ought to develop and what ideals social development should strive for: "At the same time sustainability introduces a set of normative commitments to the development problematic. A call for justices is being made on behalf of future generations." (Becker et al. 1999, p.5).

The question whether social sustainability is an analytical or a normative concept cannot be answered with one or the other but rather with "both". Socio-scientific analyses of how such important social values as participation, equal opportunities, justice, etc. can be conductive to sustainable development provide some strong arguments in the debate about sustainability and the fight for these rights. One should not forget, though, that these values are legitimate in themselves, and not because of their positive effect on sustainability. Social sustainability should furthermore be guided by an analytical concept that provides a sound theory regarding the relationship between society and nature. In any case, sustainability strategies and indicators should have both: analytical depth and clarity as well as clearly defined ideas about what kind of social values should be attained through sustainable development.

3. On the Conception of Social Sustainability: Sustainable Development and the Relationships between Society and Nature

3.1 Defining Social Sustainability

This chapter is an attempt to remedy the apparent lack of sociological theory in the conception of social sustainability. We start from the specific use of the term "needs" in the Brundtland definition of sustainability, which conceptualizes the interplay of society and nature in a rather simplistic way: Sustainable development is "development which meets the needs of the present without comprising the ability for future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987, p.43). Sustainable development should allow the satisfaction of existing needs in the long term, which means that sustainability ought to be directed towards the relationships[v] between nature and society. These relationships should not just be functional for a short period of time but also make it possible for future generations to meet their needs. Based on the concept of needs "sustainability" is a genuinely anthropocentric term.

But how broadly or narrowly can or should "needs" be defined? Within the context of nature, needs are only relevant insofar as the satisfaction thereof (production, consumption) relies on the use and exploitation of natural resources and ecological systems, which are at the same time also affected by its output (emission, waste).[vi] The ideas of what really constitutes a decent life obviously vary depending on the definition. If "needs" are primarily understood as the necessity to have food, housing, clothing, sexuality, health care, a healthy environment, access to safe drinking water and sanitary facilities, freedom from bodily harm, and protection in case of illness, old age, and social hardship, the key priority will be to ensure the material basis of people's livelihood (basic needs)[vii] for as long as possible. Yet if the definition is extended to include other needs such as education, recreation/leisure, social relationships, self-fulfillment, the satisfaction of such needs will call for a much broader scope of action and opportunities. We prefer the latter option, since only then each will individual person will be able to take responsibility for shaping a decent life for himself/herself.

Work – in the broadest sense (paid and unpaid labour, care work) – plays a central role for sustainability, since the satisfaction of needs - and thus the exchange between society and

nature - involves mainly some sort of work. [viii] It is also the foremost organizational and structural principle of society, which is also subject to historical transformation processes.

A major driving force behind society and societization seems to be – in the broadest sense – the creation of opportunities to meet one's needs (cf. e.g. Malinowski 1944/1988). For that purpose, societies have come up with a number of different functional systems and institutions. Among them, economy, politics and culture have come to play a special role in the sustainability discourse, even though this may not be all reasonable from a systematic point of view (cf. also Becker et al. 1999). These three interdependent functional systems and their particular institutions, which can only be separated from each other at an analytical level, are essential for shaping and controlling the relationships between society and nature. Social coherence within societies, which is both their condition and outcome, is vital for the creation and working of these systems. With regard to content, these three systems are mainly differentiated by their functionality (Parsons 1966):

• Economy includes all services, institutions and infrastructures in the agricultural, industrial and service sectors that are used for (material) reproduction. Economy as a functional system consists of formal, monetary and informal economic activities as well as the consumption of the produced goods and services.

• The functional system of politics comprises the formation of political attitudes, opinions, orientations and decisions as well as the implementation thereof by means of specific activities, measures and institutions.

• The cultural system includes all cultural practices and interpretation patterns of a society, which find expression in lifestyles and life forms, social orders and the legitimacy thereof (e.g. gender order, dealing with otherness), moral concepts, religion, etc. The cultural practices and interpretation patterns inherent to different societies are highly divergent and subject to change over time. They represent the framework within which economic and political processes are formed and legitimized.

Modern societies are working societies, whose exchanges with nature, i.e. the measurable material flows, are many times more and/or higher than they were in earlier forms of society (Fischer-Kowalski/Haberl 1993). However, work in modern working societies is not just a

means to use nature and to ensure people's livelihood and the satisfaction of their needs, but rather – especially in the case of gainful employment – the primary means to stratify and structure society and organize individual lives (Senghass-Knoblauch 1998). Working society is a product of the modern era, and it stands out for the fact that it ranks paid work higher than many reproductive activities that are part of people's lives (Littig 2001, p.68ff). The gender-based division of labour, with the resulting gender arrangement in families as well as the form of welfare provided by the government, is one of the main characteristics of modern working societies and their position and interactions at a global level (Pfau-Effinger 2000).

However, social sustainability is not only an analytical but also a normative concept, since the idea of sustainability contains three essential normative social principles, which were initially mentioned in the documents agreed upon at the UN Conference for Environment and Development (UNCED) 1992 in Rio: everyone has the right to lead a decent life, social justice (inter-generational, intra-generational and international), participation of all relevant stakeholders.

Summarizing our arguments we suggest defining social sustainability as follows: Social sustainability is a quality of societies. It signifies the nature-society relationships, mediated by work, as well as relationships within society. Social sustainability is given, if work within a society and the related institutional arrangements (1) satisfy an extended set of human needs and (2) are shaped in a way that nature and its reproductive capabilities are preserved over long period of time and the normative claims of social justice, human dignity and participation are fulfilled.

The aforesaid considerations are illustrated in Figure 1

Figure 1: Schematic Portrayal of Sustainable Development and the Relationships between Society and Nature

3.2   Work as a key concept of social sustainability

Clearly, sustainability as a normative principle for the regulation of socio-ecological processes initially focuses on the social management of natural resources, which should in the long term (future generations) ensure the equal distribution of resources and thus the long-term

provision of the basic ecological requirements for social reproduction. Assuming that the relationships between society and nature are currently not sustainable, i.e. that they will not last, a re-orientation of economy, politics and culture – according to the understanding of such relationships expounded earlier in this paper – will be absolutely necessary to get us onto the road to sustainable development.

From this perspective, a re-regulation of socio-ecological relationships should take account of both the dynamics of social change as well as the dynamics of ecological systems. Thus the focus is not really on the preservation of existing structures or qualities, but rather on socio-ecological transformation, which cannot be easily predicted or estimated (cf. Becker et al. 1999: 6). In view of such uncertainty and due to the complexity and dynamics of social change it would clearly be fatal to choose only one way to attain sustainability. It seems to be a lot more reasonable to analyze a variety of non-sustainable developments, based on which a number of different paths towards sustainable development can then be selected (e.g. Reusswig 1998); Furthermore, this would also allow for some alternatives from the south as opposed to the dominant western/northern sustainability models (Shiva 1989; Braidotti et al 1998). Nevertheless, the development paths should not be chosen randomly but in keeping with the main normative principles of sustainability. In accordance with the already mentioned normative principles of sustainability, the current global socio-ecological crisis will most likely be overcome by changing the predominant (northern) modes of production and consumption, which are clearly harmful to the environment. This perspective also casts doubt on the social organization principles central to (Post-)Fordist working societies with their inherent mass production and (compensational) mass consumption (Littig 2001, Hildebrandt 2003).[ix]

All this leads us to the following conclusions concerning the conception of socially sustainable development: One important starting point in this context must clearly be the re-organization of work in our society and, connected to that, of all forms of social welfare (DIW et al. 2000; HBS 2001; Brandl/Hildebrandt 2002). The strong emphasis on work in the existing working societies still needs to be taken into account; not just with regard to securing people's incomes, but also with regard to the psycho-social functions of gainful employment (time structure, identity, etc.), citizens' integration (due to the high social status of paid work), and the significance of paid labour for social cohesion (Senghass-Knoblauch 1998). It is

furthermore absolutely necessary to pay special attention to the situation of women, not least because gendermainstreaming – with its clear and extensive demand for the equal treatment of both genders in social, economic and legal matters – is listed as one of the key goals in official sustainability documents (Chapter 24 of Agenda 21, cf. United Nations 1992). The ecologization of existing employment should be given top priority in the re-structuring process. If feminist analyses of the gender-based division of labour are to be taken seriously, securing (part-time) employment and creating new (environmentally compatible) jobs will surely be conductive to the further integration of women into the labour market (cf. contributions in: Stolz-Willig/Veil 1999). Considering both the demand for socio-ecological sustainability as well as the feminist demand for a gender-sensible distribution of labour, a sustainable working society will at least require

- the ecologization of existing employment and the creation of new, environmentally sound jobs, so as to ensure the environmentally, socially, and health-friendly provision of goods and services,

- the gender-sensible re-distribution of all the work that needs to be carried out in society, so that everyone can have a sufficient income from useful and publicly accepted work (e.g. by means of shorter working hours, childcare facilities, work-life balance for men and women, economizing care work, etc.)

- the freedom to choose at any stage in life between different forms of work (work arrangements, field of work) or lifestyles, while being at all times entitled to individual social security.

In order to fulfill these requirements formal economy will have to be expanded in a socially and economically compatible manner, although environmentally sound practices are sometimes deemed to be more easily promoted in the informal sectors of economy and in non-governmental organizations than in formal economy and politics (see also Becker 2001; Wichterich 2000). This proposed conception of sustainable work is similar to the concept of "mixed work" developed in the German interdisciplinary research project "Work and Environment" ("Arbeit und Ökologie") (DIW et al. 2000, HBS 2001, Hildebrandt 2003). Mixed work, which is introduced by this project as a new, ideal type of full-time employment, is taken

to be essential for social sustainability; it is expected to open up new opportunities and provide additional ways to ensure social welfare. The concept of mixed work takes up basic transformation processes in our existing working society and demands a normative (= focusing on sustainability) but at the same time realistic (= attainable by means of socio-ecological reforms) extension of the predominant definition of gainful employment. Besides gainful employment, mixed work should also include unpaid work, care work, and community work, and it should replace the existing – and already rather "eroded" – standard employment relationships (cf. HBS 2001, pp. 30ff). Even now, mixed work is already carried out by a large and continuously growing number of people, although the quality of life it entails is subject to variation and depends on how this type of work is treated at a political level. Mixed work, as it was proposed by the aforesaid project, results in mixed incomes (from different fields of work) and requires mixed skills (which are necessary to meet the requirements of different working areas). According to the project partners, a re-organization of employment on the basis of an extended definition of work is essential for the implementation of social sustainability.

3.3 On indicators of Social Sustainability

Based on these sociological considerations we suggest a set of three core indicators to assess the social dimension of sustainability.[x] The first group is dealing with the satisfaction of basic needs and the quality of life. These indicators should relate to individual income, poverty, income distribution, unemployment, education and further training, housing conditions, health (private as well as at one's workplace), security, as well as subjective satisfaction with work, health, housing, income and the environment. The other two sets of core indicators relate to the claim of social justice within the sustainability discourse as well as social coherence. A narrow concept of social justice indicates merely justice regarding the distribution of economic goods (e.g. income), a broader philosophical definition also implies equal opportunity regarding quality of life and participation in society (Nussbaum/Sen 2002, Löffler 2004). Thus, the second group of indicators is dealing with equal opportunities, the single indicators relating to equal opportunities in education and further education, gender equity and migrants. The third set of core indicators relates to the aspect of social coherence and suggests to measure, e.g. integration into social networks, involvement in activities as volunteers as well

as measures for solidary and tolerant attitudes (e.g. towards migrants, unemployed, gays and queers).

However, to suggest social sustainability indicators that are drawn from sociological theory is one story. To incorporate them into policy-making and to have an impact is another one. One possibility to do that is to integrate them into periodic adjustments of national and international sustainability strategies. These are declarations of political intent, which in order to be measurable, must be combined with quantitative and qualitative targets, policy instruments and budgets. This requires political bargaining processes with broad stakeholder participation (see 1.2). In the context of sustainability strategies the main function of indicators is to monitor relevant policies; the function of (social) sciences is provision of evaluation and advice.

Furthermore, to take the notion of equity regarding the pillars of sustainability seriously means to really integrate the ecological, the social and the economic dimensions. In this sense progress in sustainability can only mean improvement in all the three dimensions. For example, it is not sufficient as a political target and contribution to economic and social sustainability to create and maintain employment, but these jobs must also add to ecological sustainability. Otherwise the equity claim of ecological, economic and social sustainability remains window dressing (see 1.2).

4. Outlook: Social Sustainability, (European) Social Policy and the Need for Further Research

The proposed focus on (paid) work in a gender-sensible conception of social sustainability provides various starting points, yet it also represents a great challenge with regard to the widespread crisis of national social policies and the changes necessary to overcome it. The main focus in (European) social sustainability policy should be placed on devising and implementing effective and coordinated measures to promote and ensure employment for all citizens (i.e. for men and women). In this connection, an increase of public investment – e.g. in social infrastructure, health and care, environmentally sound urban re-development and traffic planning, environmentally friendly energy sources, etc. – seems to be a lot more conductive than a reduction thereof or a privatization of public property.

Secondly, a successful and socially sustainable European employment strategy needs to provide for a sensible reduction of working hours – and adequate social security to make up for it – which will allow a fairer distribution of (paid and unpaid) work among the genders. Moreover, best practice models and national efforts to set up working time accounts, sabbaticals, childcare leave or part-time work for parents, etc. ought to be supported and implemented in all areas and at all levels.

The proposed goals of a socially sustainable policy are, however, contradictory to the prevailing neo-liberal trends in European politics/policies and the tendency to (re-)commodify the labour force (Offe 1984, Esping-Andersen 1990).[xi] While such measures lead to a reduction of social funding and public intervention, we believe that the creation of public or publicly funded jobs wherever they are needed in the social, cultural, and ecological sectors, would be absolutely necessary. These areas often have been neglected by private investors in the past, as they were deemed to be unprofitable and will most likely continue to be so in the near future. The governments and/or welfare states, on the other hand, clearly have the means to take measures to improve the quality of life and revise the prevailing, ecologically incompatible ideas about prosperity and wealth (cf. Nussbaum/Sen 2002), not least because it is exactly those ideas that are most detrimental to sustainable development.

As far as we know, there have been hardly any efforts to link the debate on social sustainability with the debate on a gender-sensible social and welfare policy.[xii] Yet we do believe that these two areas combined represent a complex, challenging, and – most of all – a highly important research area (Littig 2002).

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Figure 1: Schematic Portrayal of Sustainable Development and the Relationships between Society and Nature
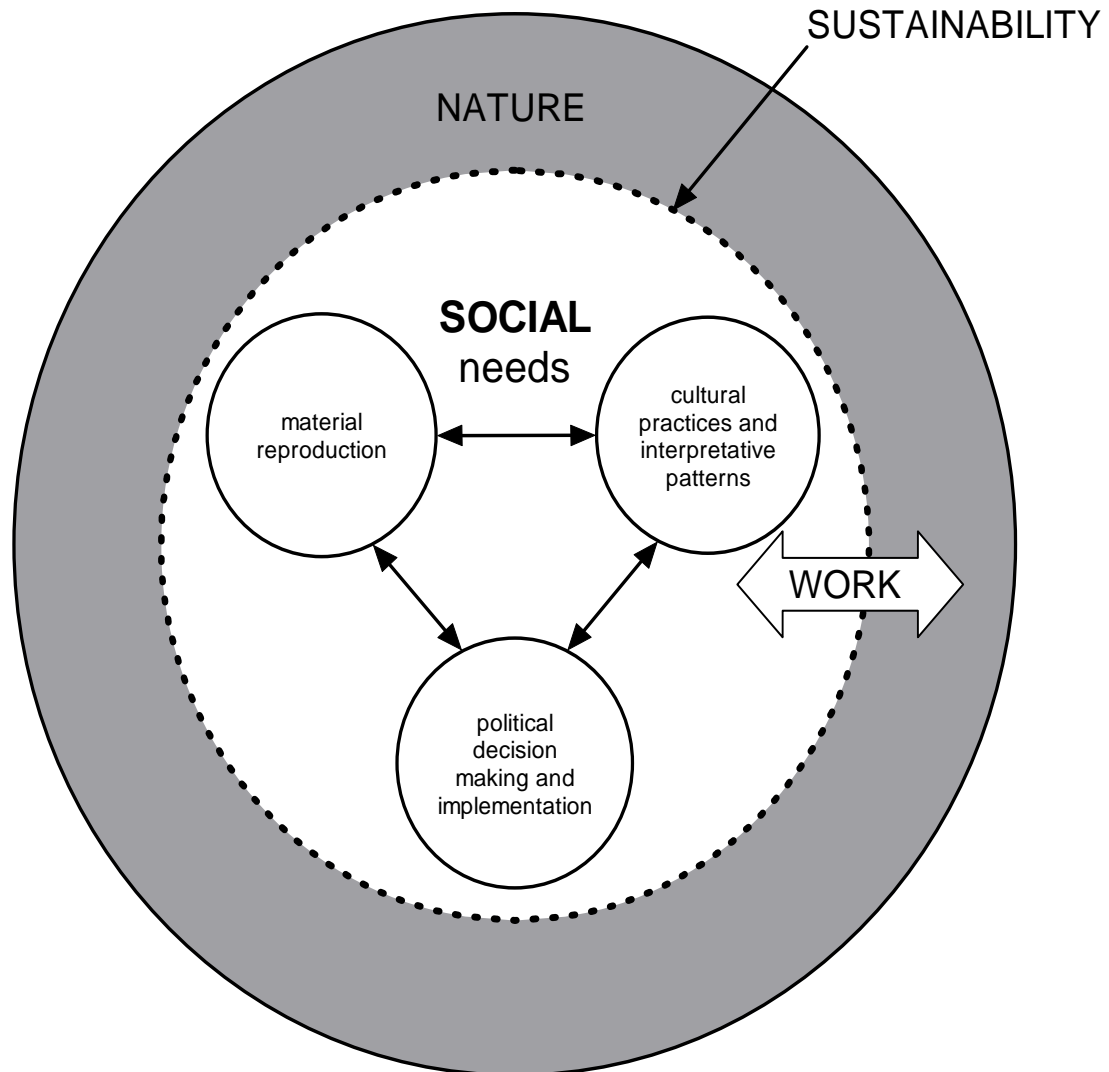
[i] "Participation" is also frequently considered in three-pillar models, even though it is mostly just included as a rather general goal in the social pillar.

[ii] This is most likely due to the fact that the idea of sustainable development was conceived and should thus be seen within the context of the environmental movements and policies of the post-war era, in other words, within the context of the rise of environmentalism (Pepper 1996). But since the beginning of the 20th century, along with various industrial, democratic, and ecological developments, traditional environmental protection has evolved from being a local, purely ecological initiative into an ambitious global sustainable development program, which is highly committed to integrating ecological, economic, and also social aspects (Littig 2001). In addition to that, the discourse on sustainability was also partly initiated by the need for further development in the so-called "southern" countries (Braidotti et al. 1994).

[iii] We have analyzed the means of operationalization employed by the UN, the EU, Finland – and as a recently set up example for a national strategy – by the Austrian Federal Government in a study for the Austrian Chamber of Labour (Grießler/Littig 2004).

[iv] This could also be positive if sustainability is seen as a relatively open area for discussion (Grunewald et al. 2001; Weidner/Brandl 2001). Such openness would make it easier for people to familiarize themselves with the concept. Initiating an extensive discourse on sustainability and future thus appears to be more important than a "pure" concept.

[v] The use of the plural form should highlight the fact that modern societies have a large variety of economic, political and cultural regulations and practices for interacting with nature (cf. Jahn/Wehling 1998: 85)

[vi] It should be pointed out at this point that all different ways to meet human needs, including "immaterial" needs, require some sort of material exchange process between humans and their natural environment. Even the satisfaction of immaterial needs is tied to the human body, which – in order to survive at all – is constantly interacting with and connected to its surroundings.

vii The definition of basic needs played an important role in the debate on development policy in the 1970s, although a final agreement could not be reached about the actual extent of the list of basic needs (for more information on the current debate see Nussbaum/Sen 2002).

viii The more recent debate on work and environment uses the definition of labour proposed by K. Marx and F. Engels, who understand work as an essential requirement for human existence. In the labour process, the worker uses an instrument of labour on the object of labour, i.e. on nature. The destructive nature of the working process, i.e. unintended side effects and ecological consequences, is explicitly neglected in Marx and Engels' definition. But as opposed to many of the definitions developed after that, it does contain the idea of a metabolic exchange between man and nature (Fischer-Kowalski 1997: 122).

ix The debate on the current stage of our transforming societies being either post-Fordist, post-modern, or still Fordist shall not be further elaborated at this point. It can be said, though, that the material flows have not yet diminished – in spite of Cyberspace and "immaterial" knowledge economy.

x For a detailed presentation of these indicators for the Austrian case c.f. Grießler/Littig 2004, p. 83 ff.

xi According to Esping-Andersen (1990), the quality of social rights depends very much on the extent to which the labour force is "de-commodified", which in turn largely affects the conditions under which labour is sold on the market (e.g. wage levels, collective organization, welfare, security). Furthermore, Esping-Andersen believes that these framework conditions are also used by the government to influence female employment. This thesis, however, was deemed to be insufficient by women's research and was therefore expanded to include other aspects as well (e.g. gender policy in the welfare states (Lewis 1992), different cultural traditions with regard to gender roles (Pfau-Effinger 2000)).

xii This synergetic field of research has neither been covered by feminist welfare theorists (like Lewis 1992; Pfau-Effinger 2000) nor by feminist sustainability theorists (like Biesecker 1997).