



Social Sustainability and Social Capital

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Abstract This chapter examines the social dimension of sustainability by situating it within the broader debate on sustainable development and by highlighting the analytical relevance of social capital as a conceptual bridge between social cohesion, equity, participation and collective well-being. While environmental and economic dimensions have historically dominated discussions on sustainability, the chapter shows how social sustainability has progressively emerged as a distinct and complex field of inquiry, shaped by cultural orientations, everyday practices and institutional arrangements. Drawing on recent theoretical developments, social sustainability is conceptualised as grounded in four interrelated pillars—equity, well-being, participation and social capital—whose interactions produce the conditions for inclusive and cohesive communities. Within this framework, social capital is understood not only as a relational resource embedded in networks of trust and reciprocity but also as a structuring factor that enables belonging and democratic engagement. The chapter argues that a social capital perspective allows for an operationalization of social sustainability by clarifying how social systems foster cooperation, reduce exclusion and support

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shared capacities for shaping the future. It concludes by calling for further empirical work to develop analytical approaches capable of capturing the dynamic interplay between social relations, institutional settings and sustainable development trajectories.

Keywords Social sustainability · Social capital · Equity and well-being · Sustainable development · Theoretical debate

10.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of social sustainability belongs to the context of the broader debate on sustainability and on the conditions for the possibility of sustainable development. It is therefore necessary to conceive it in a very complex articulated framework.

The social dimension of sustainability came to light with a certain delay and less incisively than the dimensions of environmental and economic sustainability. From the outset, these other two dimensions dominated the debate, delineating perspectives and themes.

Social sustainability is particular because it applies concepts of development and ecology to models of contemporary life through the cultural orientations, daily interactions, constraints and opportunities of individual and collective trajectories.

In this perspective, social capital is a concept that enhances the importance of the social dimension, especially that of bridging social capital, which concerns the ways in which individuals define and practise solidarity and cooperation.

This concise review of the semantics and thematic declinations of social sustainability outlines its links with social capital (common elements, distinctive aspects and analytical overlaps).

10.2 THE TRADITION OF STUDIES ON SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

The concept of social sustainability has evolved in recent decades. Initial interest in the interactions between human development and the ecosystems that sustain life on our planet grew in complexity to include social, economic and environmental dimensions in a multi-dimensional approach to sustainability.

The first reflections on the relation between human development and the sustainability of ecosystems date back to Boulding (1966), who pioneered the idea of *social and economic ecosystems*, based on criticism of the linear model of economic development typical of capitalist societies. The Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) subsequently brought the concept of sustainability onto the international stage, defining “sustainable development” as a development able to meet present needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet their needs. This United Nations document formally introduced the importance of integrating the ecological, economic and social aspects of development, though the social dimension was less fully delineated than the others.

In the 1990s, the exploration of social sustainability began more systematically, especially with regard to land and urban spaces. Yiftachel and Hedgcock (1993) linked the concept with town planning, examining the way social dynamics influence and are influenced by the development of cities. In this period, social sustainability began to be perceived as a crucial element for urban quality of life, and the ensuing debate underlined the link between social participation, equity and well-being.

In 2000, research on social sustainability intensified and expanded, with an increasing number of studies contributing to the definition of the concept and its ramifications. For example, Polèse et al. (2000) explored the topic of sustainable urban development, while Jabareen (2006) examined the link between social sustainability and social practices. The proliferation of academic articles saw authors like Vallance et al. (2011) and Dempsey et al. (2011) focus on the role of social sustainability in fostering the social cohesion of urban communities. Their work contributed to the increasingly elaborate debate that recognises the link between quality of life and sustainability at community level.

More recently, authors like Eizenberg & Jabareen (2017) and Deeming (2022) proposed innovative interpretations of the concept, taking an interdisciplinary approach and applying it to a diversifying range of social questions. Despite the variety of approaches, these studies share the aim of making social sustainability an autonomous concept, no longer linked to environmental or economic sustainability.

Social Sustainability as an Evolving Concept

The concept of social sustainability did not arise in isolation but developed in parallel with other dimensions of the debate on sustainability. Although

the specific declination of sustainable development emerged only in 1980 in the framework of the United Nations, according to scholars such as Colantonio (2011), its social dimension did not appear until more recently, leading to broader reflection on social inclusion and justice.

Axelsson et al. (2013) sustain that the social dimension of sustainability, initially limited to questions like poverty and income inequality, progressively widened to include basic human rights like inter- and intra-generational social justice and local participation in development processes. In time, therefore, the concept of social sustainability took a central role in the definition of policies aimed at improving people's capacity to shape their futures.

Foladori (2005) underlines that until the 1990s, international organisations considered poverty and demographic growth not so much as intrinsically unsustainable social problems but rather as causes of ecological unsustainability. His analysis shows that since then, the focus has shifted to social participation and the need to increase people's capacity to build their own futures.

Lee & Jung (2019) offer a concise picture of this evolution, distinguishing two key periods: between 1988 and 2000, social sustainability was seen principally as a complement to economic and environmental development; between 2001 and 2018, it became a dimension in its own right, characterised by attention to questions like unemployment, education towards sustainable development, waste management and energy efficiency.

The Elements of Social Sustainability

As we have seen, sustainability is a many-sided concept composed of three main dimensions: environmental, economic and social (WCED, 1987). While environmental sustainability concentrates on the conservation of natural resources and economic sustainability concerns long-term economic growth, social sustainability centres on fostering social well-being and inclusion. It implies an understanding of the working of social systems and how they can be improved to promote equality and social justice (Shirazi & Keivani, 2019). The social dimension of sustainability is intrinsically dynamic, making the concept broad and flexible on one hand, but on the other, preventing its unambiguous definition and enabling conceptual confusion (Isgren & Longo, 2024). In view of this complexity, here we consider the themes most commonly associated with the social

dimension of sustainability, common traits of the many definitions of social sustainability.

The capacity of social systems to build social connections and foster a sense of belonging, trust and socio-emotional bonds between individuals and social groups emerges as a major factor of social sustainability (Pieper et al., 2019). These bonds can be strengthened in various ways, such as creating and maintaining social networks, values and community vitality.

Promoting social sustainability implies recognising and tackling the social challenges that communities face. The basic idea is that by tackling these challenges, social systems can become more resilient and better equipped to ensure social sustainability (Baldwin & King, 2018).

The challenges raise a vast range of questions that together transmit the breadth and complexity of a social sustainability perspective (Dempsey et al., 2011). The main questions include: education and training, essential for the development of potential and skills as well as lifelong learning; social justice, concerned with ensuring equal opportunity and access to resources for all, irrespective of background and social status; local democracy, important for promoting citizen participation, engagement and responsibility in decision-making; health and well-being, essential elements of physical, mental and emotional health and for ensuring that people can conduct satisfying and fulfilling lives; social inclusion, to ensure that people feel appreciated and part of society, irrespective of their qualities/idiosyncrasies; equal distribution of income, necessary to ensure that wealth and resources are distributed fairly and that all have access to essential goods; social cohesion and active community organisations as essential factors for social connections, community empowerment and civic engagement.

To “tidy up” these very different elements of social sustainability, we refer to a recent systematic review of the literature by Nilsson et al. (2024), who identified four pillars of current conceptions of social sustainability:

- **Equity** or the fair distribution of resources, opportunities and costs among individuals, within society and across generations.
- **Well-being**, including physical and mental and the conditions that nurture it.
- **Participation** or processes and actions aimed at ensuring that members of society have the opportunity to participate by accessing decision-making processes and influencing policies and their implementation.

- **Social capital** or the connection between individuals and society, in terms of creating social relationships, social recognition and solidarity.

Each of these dimensions contributes to the understanding and promotion of the different applications of social sustainability. This framework not only shows the specific importance of each dimension but also its interconnection, underlining the fact that improvements in one area often have positive effects on the others.

Equity emerges as a significant component of social sustainability, because it refers to access to resources, opportunities and essential services by individuals and groups, irrespective of their socio-economic status, gender or ethnic origins. Equity is not solely concerned with material resources, but also extends to immaterial aspects like influence and rights. A crucial aspect of this conception of equity is the recognition that it operates within and between generations, ensuring that resources and opportunities available today are preserved and accessible to future generations. Thus, equity is not just a principle of justice here and now but also a lever of equilibrium in time and space.

Well-being is a principle closely linked to equity. It concerns the quality of life of individuals and the community. It extends beyond the meeting of primary needs, such as food, shelter and healthcare, to include broader dimensions like emotional and mental health, personal fulfilment and happiness. Well-being is considered a fundamental aspect of social sustainability because it reflects the overall health and vitality of a society. When people have access to services, opportunities for personal development and contexts that support their physical and psychological needs, they are more likely to contribute positively to their communities. Well-being is obviously not a static but a dynamic condition that must be nurtured through inclusive policies, social security and infrastructure, favouring a feeling of stability and opportunity.

Participation plays a crucial role in ensuring that social sustainability is not merely an imposed process. It is essential because it offers people and communities the capacity to influence decisions that affect their lives, from formulating policies to regional planning. This framework underlines the importance of guaranteeing that all social groups, especially the

marginalised and under-represented, have access to decision-making processes. Empowerment is a key factor because effective participation requires opportunities to participate as well as the means and knowledge to do so in a significant way. Thus, participation is not just a formal method of inclusion but simultaneously a means and an end. It concerns the creation of spaces to allow real influence, ensuring transparent governance and building individual capacity to contribute to the creation of communities and life contexts.

Social capital, the fourth pillar of Nilsson et al. (2024), is closely linked to participation and well-being. It concerns networks, relations and social bonds that allow people to live together in an effective and satisfying manner. Social capital strengthens the fabric of society, building trust and cooperation between individuals and groups. In such a framework, social capital appears essential for social cohesion and resilience: societies with high levels of social capital are better equipped for unexpected challenges and shocks. Social capital also supports equity, promoting solidarity and shared responsibility and enhances participation, favouring collective action and a sense of belonging to the community.

The link between the four dimensions of equity, well-being, participation and social capital is evident. For example, equitable distribution of resources can improve well-being, while strong social capital increases the capacity of individuals to effectively take part in decision-making. This indicates that social sustainability calls for an integrated approach in which promotion of one dimension strengthens the others, creating a more just society, able to adapt to changing social, economic and environmental conditions.

These aspects are represented graphically in the *Compass of Social* (Fig. 10.1) *Sustainability* (Nilsson et al., 2024), a circle divided into areas representing the four dimensions: equity, well-being, participation and social capital. The areas are further divided into concentric rings, creating a hierarchy of concepts. The outer ring shows the general category, the inner rings detail more specific components of the primary category. An interesting aspect is that many concepts appear in more than one area, underlining the interconnected nature of social sustainability. For example, “freedom” and “trust and reciprocity” appear in different contexts, showing that they touch various dimensions of social sustainability.

10.3 SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Social capital emerges as a crucial multifaceted concept in the context of social sustainability, even if it is not always clearly identified and defined in that framework. A glance at the compass (Fig. 10.1) shows that in the studies cited, it is associated with “participation and influence” in more than 75% of cases, and then with questions such as “diversity”, “belonging”, “security and protection”, “learning”, “rights and responsibility”, “identity

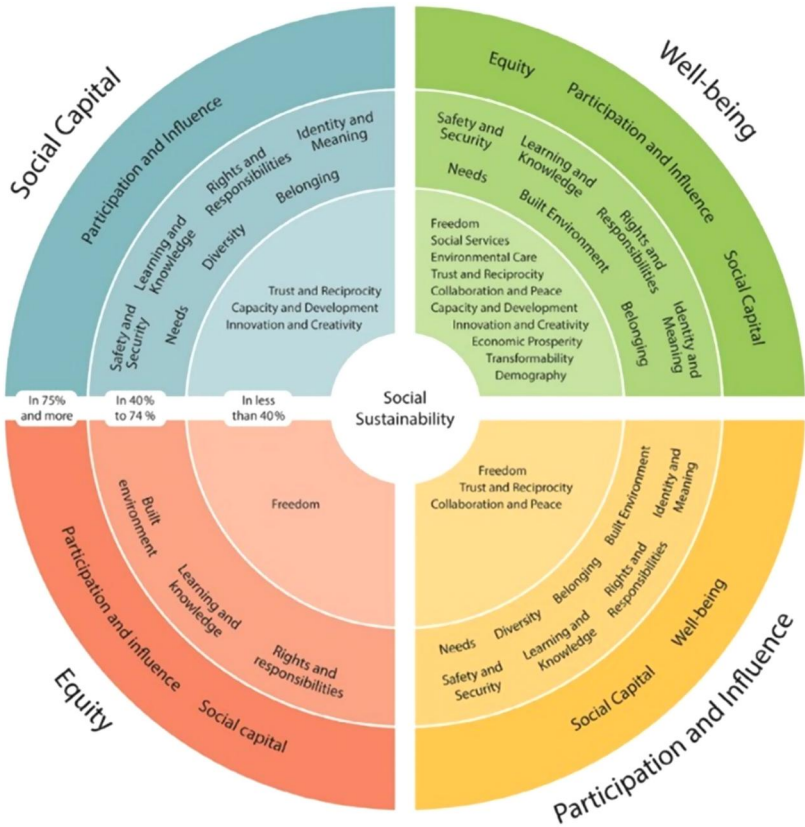


Fig. 10.1 The compass of social sustainability. *Source* Nilsson et al. (2024)

and meaning”. Finally, a minor but significant component of studies includes questions such as “trust and reciprocity”, “capacity and development”, “innovation and creativity”.

Nilsson et al. (2024) confirmed what we have already shown regarding the tradition of social capital research. Putnam (2000) emphasised that civic engagement is fundamental for creating and maintaining social capital. Sampson et al. (1997), for example, demonstrated that a sense of security in a neighbourhood is closely linked to social cohesion and mutual trust. Social capital, social cohesion and belonging to the community emerge as recurring themes in various academic studies on social sustainability, showing the importance of the role in achieving socially sustainable conditions (Colantonio, 2011; Cuthill, 2010).

In this context, the importance of the concept of social capital as a collective, open, non-excludable, values-related resource (Chap. 2), a lever for promoting social cohesion, facilitating the exchange of resources and information between groups and creating a broader and more inclusive sense of community.

Equitable, inclusive, sustainable communities in the broadest sense (economic, environmental and social) are good contexts in the long-term for human activities and interactions, being democratic, diversified and interconnected (Bramley & Power, 2009). Within such communities, there is less discrimination, such as racism and xenophobia that prevent significant participation of individuals in economic, social and political questions (Pierson, 2002; Ratcliffe, 2000). From this perspective, social sustainability is intrinsically associated with the concept of social capital because it contemplates social relations and the norms of reciprocity.

Thus, sustainability transcends the mere economic and environmental dimensions, being grounded in the social substrate of the community. It manifests through the creation and maintenance of structures and processes that favour equity, inclusion and active participation of all community members, irrespective of their individual or group characteristics.

Taking a social capital perspective of social sustainability enables a dynamic, holistic approach to the construction of sustainable communities. This means recognising that the long-term well-being of a society depends not only on its economic performance and environmental management but also on the quality of social relations. At the same time, it requires a reformulation of social, economic, political and environmental priorities that puts the quality of human relations and the capacity of communities to

collaborate at the centre of sustainability. This process aims to overcome “traditional” social fractures by opposing the main forms of inequality and processes of social marginalisation and exclusion.

10.4 CONCLUSIONS

The social dimension of *sustainability* concerns the lifestyles, cultural and values orientations, interaction patterns and networks of constraints and opportunities that frame environmental and economic questions, and the possibilities of genuinely sustainable development.

Some of the processes of daily life, such as participation, social cohesion, belonging and solidarity, are particularly important and underline the utility of a theoretical-analytical perspective that interprets them as civic culture in terms of social capital.

However, while the semantic and thematic spectrum of social sustainability includes many traits and challenges of contemporary society, it risks being indeterminate. Flanking it with the concept of social capital enhances the consistency and centrality of social dynamics. This applies to the capacity to produce and maintain adequate levels of inclusion, equity and cohesion in specific life contexts and at a systemic level, as well as to the influence that social factors exert on economic and environmental orientations and choices. At the same time, the peculiarity and relevance of the social dimension need support. This can be achieved by reducing theoretical redundancies and the overlap of contiguous frameworks in the social sciences. A further conceptual effort, supported by an attempt at operationalisation and by extensive empirical activity, therefore appears to be a priority.

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