



# INTRODUCTION

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In 2015 ICS elected sustainability as one of the three main strategic pillars, seeking to understand the socioecological, socioeconomic, techno-scientific, and governance dynamics that preside over transformations and transitions to more sustainable, resilient, and wellbeing-promoting societies, by studying the practices, institutions, processes, and public policies that affect, positively or negatively, these transitions. ICS has a long tradition of performing research on the social aspects of environmental sustainability, mostly based on the work of researchers from different areas within the social sciences. In the 1990s it partnered with ISCTE-IUL to create Observa – The Observatory of Environment and Society, which pioneered the first large scale public opinion surveys in Portugal on environmental perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours.

Sustainability is at the core of other scientific activities, such as postgraduate training (PhD Programme in Climate Change and Sustainable Development Policies, summer schools), public consultations (World Wide Views on Climate and Energy in 2015) and outreach.

Sustainability is a concept that has gained prominence in the past three decades, especially following the 1992 United Nations Rio Conference. The most commonly used meaning of sustainable development stems from the Bruntland Report (1987), and defines it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

The concept has entered public debate and the political agenda of national governments, inter-governmental (the UN) and supranational (the European Union) organizations, business companies, civil society organizations, and even academia, without a consensus necessarily existing over its meaning. Sustainability has been used to classify a plethora of different, and at times contradictory, practices, from corporate social responsibility to generating value to shareholders, from green economy to anticapitalistic de-growth, from giving priority to the needs of deprived populations to preserving the resources for future generations.

Although conceptual discussions tend to focus on the ecological dimension, sustainability encompasses four interdependent pillars of equal importance: socio-cultural, economic, environmental, and governance. The notion of pillars may not be the most adequate to understand the dynamics of the concept, since the implementation process may highlight different combinations of these dimensions. Not surprisingly, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, defined by the United Nations in 2015, include a wide

range of objectives, such as ending poverty and promoting good health, quality education, gender equality, renewable energy, building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels of government, employment, sustainable cities, responsible consumption, and peace and justice. There are to be pursued through an integrated approach by taking into consideration “the deep interconnections and many cross-cutting elements across the new Goals and targets” (UN GA, A/RES/70/1, 25 September 2015, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, paragraph 17).

Grounded on epistemological debates and empirical case studies, many questions can be raised in order to problematize research on sustainability: How do different social actors define sustainability? What interests and power struggles lie beneath conflicting definitions? How can progress toward achieving sustainability goals be measured and compared? Are SDG Goals and targets to be achieved at the same pace by all state parties or is there room for a differentiated method of implementation? Is progress made of a series of governmental decisions that have to take into account various societal priorities? What are the opportunity costs attached to these goals and targets and are there value trade-offs? What challenges are faced in the transition to more sustainable societies in different domains, such as energy, food, and transportation? How does public policy address sustainability in both discourse and practice? How do social and demographic trends affect sustainable development? How do the four pillars that broadly defined the concept of sustainable development relate to each other? Can environmental sustainability be socially unfair? What is the connection between sustainability policies and the scale of political intervention? How local is sustainability? Can solid sustainability policies be developed in a context of state competition? Does sustainability support a Western perspective of development?

The definition of the scope of the research object is a disputed matter. One of the most dynamic research issues on sustainability is its rich conceptual debate. The struggle for an intelligible and comprehensive concept is fundamental for its understanding and measurement as well as its policy and political implications. In a scientific field in which applied research is particularly central, the conceptual and methodological construct acquires significant social, economic, and political relevance.

For this volume, we have sought contributions that problematize the concept of sustainability on theoretical, methodological, and empirical grounds. We aimed at chapters that, based on different research projects and disciplinary

traditions, strike a balance between relevant, critical, and audacious general theoretical questions and debates and empirical data (quantitative and qualitative).

## THE EVER-GROWING WORLD OF SUSTAINABILITY

A group of autonomous universes of issues and problems have progressively emerged from the development of sustainability studies and policies in the last decades. Its relevance reflects the idea that, understood as a global phenomenon, sustainability depends on a set of interdependencies that must be met in order to achieve balanced objectives and policies, as the benefits of environmental or economic sustainability are not linearly related to other sustainability goals.

Take the example of the ill-defined world of social sustainability. The UN's definition of social sustainability includes principles and goals that overlap with its own institutional policies on human rights, labour policies, education, gender, protection of children, protection of minority groups, and protection of indigenous communities. However, the UN conceives the economic sphere and specifically the activities of companies as the privileged universes through which social sustainability is achieved: "Social sustainability is about identifying and managing business impacts, both positive and negative, on people. The quality of a company's relationships and engagement with its stakeholders is critical. Directly or indirectly, companies affect what happens to employees, workers in the value chain, customers and local communities, and it is important to manage proactively".<sup>1</sup>

As an economic unit, the company acts in the national space, subject to norms defined within the nation-state, but in many dimensions it is also an international actor.<sup>2</sup> Companies, especially large ones with a multinational

1 <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/our-work/social> accessed 10/7/2018).

2 In addition to complying with national laws, the company must respect international law and conventions, such as those of the Human Rights Convention (International Bill of Human Rights, Human Rights Translated), and the conventions of the International Labor Organization. The Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights is one of the most frequently cited documents as a means of framing social sustainability policies, encouraging companies to comply with laws and objectives, and reporting problems on the ground to institutions such as the Global Reporting Initiative and Business and Human Rights Resource Center.

nature, are expected to play a leading role in promoting social sustainability, particularly in national contexts where human rights and labour rights violations are recurrent.<sup>3</sup> The UN recommends that companies must intervene in the supply chain decision-making by acting on a diverse set of areas: health, education, housing conditions, affirmative action, labour rights, and community sustainability. Companies must commit to these recommendations and be monitored by experts. Failure to comply with corporate responsibility policies or complacency with infractions has economic consequences for businesses: lower productivity, loss of brand value, boycott campaigns, lawsuits, government actions, and bad environment with the competition. According to this approach to social sustainability, poor working conditions, forced labour, insufficient remuneration, lack of respect for trade union rights and freedom of association and collective bargaining, gender discrimination, child labour, and segregation of minorities and the disabled might be detrimental to business.

This ideal type of responsible company, acting in a global economic space, is confronted with agendas of other political and social units: transnational political and economic blocs, nations, regions, and cities. The UN recommendations suggest that companies, in accordance with international conventions, should challenge political and social models and cultural and religious frameworks that create obstacles to social sustainability goals. Therefore, the ineluctable process of globalization is assumed along with the inability of states, particularly in underdeveloped countries, to ensure respect for human, labour, women's and minority rights, and the inability of state institutions to guarantee a free civil society, which in most cases proves to be weak.

If the "planet" is the scale from which social sustainability issues are defined, research, policies, and institutions must deal with the emergence of a planetary society. It is as a function of this planetary society that global objectives, which are fundamental to creating a socially sustainable daily life, are to be considered. The conception of the planet as a whole is key to creating citizenship dynamics that stand beyond those historically defined by nation-states. This is even more important because areas as critical as poverty, inequality, access to education, gender equality, and the inclusion of

3 In this regard companies should consult documents such as Meeting the Responsibility to Respect in Situation of Conflicting Legal Requirements and conform to international standards.

minorities demand global solutions. However, the remission of institutional responsibility for achieving social sustainability goals for the corporate sphere reveals some of the weaknesses of this global representation.

In this volume the chapters that directly address the issue of social sustainability, or that do so indirectly, are significantly concerned about the effects of public policies, or the absence thereof. This certainly does not mean that case studies located at national or even at smaller scales ignore global dimensions. Nonetheless, it is on a national scale that many of the articles in this volume focus, investigating the effects of educational, agricultural, labour, development, and scientific policies. Between these case studies and a globally devised agenda there seems to be an institutional gap. In the European Union most of the national institutions concerned with social sustainability have been deeply affected by economic globalization. The institutional framework provided by the EU institutions to tackle the progressive inability of national social protection systems is feeble and arguably less developed than the institutional network that promotes and regulates economic exchanges.

The research focus on state institutions transversal to the various case studies presented in this collective volume seems to suggest that the nation-state remains the locus where most policies and measures to curb situations of social unsustainability are developed and implemented. In EU member states, public institutions, unlike companies, respond to democratically elected governments, which in itself is not a guarantee of efficiency or protection against global problems, but grants legitimacy to political action and makes political decisions and outcomes subject to scrutiny. Assuming that it is fundamental to achieve global social sustainability and a post-national worldview, as suggested by global programmes such as those present in the SDGs, it is not clear what the institutional scales are, at a European level and beyond, to which these goals articulate.

Several authors in this book have voiced their concern about the vagueness of the definition of social sustainability, which is sometimes too abstract, wide, difficult to measure, and hard to articulate with other forms of sustainability and/or the lack of proper institutions to address it.<sup>4</sup>

These conceptual, methodological, and policy ambiguities are also common to other dimensions of sustainability, such as governance sustainability. In 2013 a High Level Panel of Eminent Persons was convened by the United Nations to

4 On the feebleness of the concept see Boström (2012).

recommend new goals and targets after 2015, when the original MDGs were set to expire. The Report of the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel Of Eminent Persons On the Post-2015 Development Agenda was informed by a broad consultative process under the aegis of different UN agencies and networks, and included the views of both decision-makers and a variety of stakeholders (businesses, the scientific and academic, and CSOs of all quadrants). Although the Panel's work was meant to take stock of the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) over the past 13 years, with a focus on poverty, hunger, water, sanitation, education, and healthcare, the new development agenda had a different approach to sustainability.

The MDGs fell short of integrating the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Political rhetoric, backed by academia, was now shifting the attention to good governance, defined in terms of institutional capacity, rule of law, accountability, transparency, and wider public participation in policymaking (UN 1999; Callahan 2007) as a precondition for sustainable development. Sustainable development was no longer regarded solely in terms of economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability, but was largely dependent on the performance of institutions, decision-making processes, and citizenry. In this line, a stand-alone goal on good governance and effective institutions, including two targets related to the fight against corruption, was introduced in the final report of the panel of experts.<sup>5</sup>

This new approach to sustainability was finally translated into the United Nations General Assembly Resolution adopted on 25 September 2015 (A/RES/70/1) entitled "Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" that came into force on January 1, 2016. The signatory states agreed to adopt measures aimed at *Promoting Peaceful and Inclusive Societies for Sustainable Development, Provide Access to Justice for All and Build Effective, Accountable and Inclusive Institutions at All Levels* (hereinafter, SDG16).

SDG16 was regarded as an important enabler of the rights and policy targets embodied in the other SDGs, but the formulation of its targets was overambitious, fuzzy, and also contested during the negotiations. Some countries feared that the implementation of this goal might lead to stricter

5 *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development – The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, New York: UN publications. Available online: [https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/files/HLP\\_P2015\\_Report.pdf](https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/files/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf) (accessed 23-2-2018).

aid conditionality in countries that are already facing enormous difficulties in meeting the other goals. Others feared that the association of the term “peaceful societies” with the good governance agenda under SDG16 could lead to a situation in which development aid is used to advance countries’ national security agendas (UN Chronicle, 2014).

The adoption of a new approach to sustainable development had implications in terms of resource allocation internally to the UN Development System. According to the Dalberg Report (2017), although most UN entities see themselves as multitask, working across a variety of SDGs, the first six SDGs (on poverty, hunger, health, education, gender, and clean water and sanitation) and SDG16 (on peace, justice, and strong institutions) “have the highest allocations of expenditure and personnel while the environmental and sustainability SDGs (7, 12, 13, 14, 15) have the lowest allocations” (2017, 5).

However, the major challenge to this new approach, and in particular to the achievement of SDG16 target goals, will be felt at the implementation level. Let us leave aside the choice of indicators and suitable metrics to assess progress in the implementation of target goals. Since the end of World War II, donors have been experimenting with governance reform efforts to improve the quality of institutions and legal systems in developing countries. They have done so by investing substantially in democracy and human rights promotion, technical assistance projects for institutional capacity development, and by setting benchmarks and importing best practice models from abroad, and yet progress has been scant. Countries known for their systematic abuses of power and disrespect for human rights, for not having participatory and accountable governments, for having unpredictable and arbitrary fiscal capacity and administrative decisions, for having restricted freedoms and access to information, and for not having fair and predictable rule of law are also known for displaying poor inclusive and sustainable development records. Although some authoritarian or hybrid regimes that have opted for technocratic government solutions are known to display comfortable growth rates and social progress, which may generate positive regime public support, this does not necessarily mean that the benefits of development are being shared and equally enjoyed by those with the least voice. Growth-enhancing policies may suffer from a redistributive bias and exacerbate rather than mitigate poverty and social exclusion. If SDG16 is to work as an enabler of sustainable development and a catalyzer of a profound social transformation,

political commitment and grass-root involvement is needed to achieve the target goals set under SDG16, so that this whole process does not end up being a mere empty rhetoric moulded by technocratic quick-fixes lacking real applicability and impact.

## STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book is divided into three sections. The first comprises three chapters that help to set the scene by addressing the main theoretical and empirical challenges facing the concept of sustainability. The second section brings together chapters that discuss emerging agendas in various sustainability-related issues such as the circular economy, goods insecurity, climate change adaptation, governance, and the role awarded to non-humans. The third addresses transitions to sustainability in fields such as agriculture, energy consumption, food practices, digital media, and good governance.

Chapter 1, by Luísa Schmidt and João Guerra, sets out to analyse social archetypes, the discrepancies between discourses and practices, and the slippage factors that have characterized sustainable development, looking at some indicators that reflect the dynamics of global (un)sustainability and making an overall assessment of sustainability today as a key programmatic concept for transforming society. The authors seek to identify the conditions that will make sustainability possible in the critical circumstances facing humanity in these early decades of the twenty-first century.

João Guerra and Luiz Brito Lourenço, in chapter 2, present the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, providing an overall appraisal of their implementation. The authors explore the available database of *SDG Index and Dashboards 2017*, crossed by Human Development Index and income average of countries, as well as more concrete and diachronic information, gathered mostly from the World Bank databank.

The final chapter in this section, authored by João Mourato et al., addresses the alternatives aiming at radically changing our present actions in order to attain different, more sustainable, futures. The chapter explores the conceptual origins, role and scope of these alternatives against the backdrop of the debate on wider transitions toward sustainability. It systemizes diverse proposals of socio-political movements embodying alternatives toward sustainability, as well as some of the resulting on-the-ground practices.

Section two of this book begins with José Luís Cardoso's chapter on the historical grounds of the concept of circular economy. The author argues that the ingredients that were used to form the concept of the circular economy, such as the shortage and perishable nature of resources, the stationarity of growth rates, the rejection of consumerist abuses, the criticism of the society of abundance, the appeal for sharing and reciprocity, and the preservation of the environment, already had antecedents that were deeply rooted in the history of economic ideas.

Chapter 5, by Vasco Ramos and Nádia Salgado Pereira, addresses the impact of food insecurity and material deprivation over mental health and well-being, drawing attention to the proximity between food security and sustainability in terms of intergenerational justice and distribution. Based on case studies of families undergoing food insecurity in Portugal, the chapter issues public policy recommendations covering not just employment and income policies, but also primary health care and specialized mental health services.

Chapter 6, authored by João Mourato, Luísa Schmidt, and João Ferrão, also relies on a case study of a research project on local adaptation strategies to discuss the governance of climate change. The chapter engages in an analysis of the concept of adaptation, followed by a deeper look into adaptation research and practice, before introducing the ClimAdaPT.Local project and framing it against the backdrop of contemporary adaptation research and practices, by illustrating the ethos underpinning the project's research focus and methodological approach.

In chapter 7 Luís de Sousa examines the role of information and communication technologies in reducing corruption risk and fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goal 16 *Promoting Peaceful and Inclusive Societies for Sustainable Development, Provide Access to Justice for All and Build Effective, Accountable and Inclusive Institutions at All Levels*. It addresses transparency and "open government" as a necessary condition for the concept of good governance, discussing how government openness can be implemented through the use of ICT, and assessing its role in preventing and combating corruption.

This section ends with a chapter by Verónica Policarpo et al. connecting children, animals, and sustainable development. The authors point out the absence of animals in sustainability discussions and in Sustainable Development Goals, criticizing its anthropocentric approach and naturalist vision that treats animals and vegetables as resources to be exploited. They

argue in favour of a biocentric approach that ensures planetary survival and an enhanced awareness of animals as sentient beings, proposing the transition to a meat-free diet and a vegan-orientated education in the early stages of children's lives.

The third section starts with chapter 9, authored by Maria do Mar Gago. As in chapter 4, the author claims that the historical origins of environmentalism far precede contemporary accounts, connecting it to the rise of imperialism. The chapter explores the relationship between these two terms in the case of Portuguese Africa. Its main aim is to examine how environmentalist ideas and practices were appropriated and articulated by imperial agents, by describing their scientific tradition and following them in their missions to the coffee producing regions. The author seeks to understand how Angolan coffee, with its environmental, technological, and cultural specificities, challenged enlightened prejudices regarding native agriculture.

Chapter 10, by André Silveira et al., focuses on the olive oil production in Alentejo to discuss the sustainability of agricultural intensification. The authors draw on actor-network theory to explore the making of sustainable rural places, particularly place-specific interdependencies between economy, community, and ecology. Based on qualitative methodologies and a geo-historical approach that considers the economic, social, and environmental legacies of past agricultural modernization processes, and their implications for the present and the future, the chapter examines the sustainability of the ongoing agricultural intensification and financialization processes in the area of the Alqueva dam.

Ana Horta and Mathias Gross's contribution addresses the crucial issue of energy transitions. Chapter 11 begins by presenting the mainstream view of how digital technologies can contribute to a sustainable energy transition, with a focus on the role attributed to households' information about these technologies and how this has been discussed as a deficit of knowledge. The chapter then de-constructs technological determinism and rational choice by highlighting the complexity of relationships between users and technologies at the household level, proposing instead a theoretical framework based on ignorance studies. Non-knowledge is not taken as a barrier to social acceptance of digital technologies, but rather as a label for the uncertainty and unpredictability of ways users can deal with these objects.

Chapter 12, by Sónia Goulart Cardoso et al., presents a preliminary study on public support for vegetarian meals in public canteens. The authors

assess the influence of a set of beliefs and individual variables, namely, views concerning the environment, meat-eating habits, and perceived vegetarian threat.

Virginia Calado's chapter 13 is in close relation with chapter 5, by discussing food insecurity but on a wider, global scale, influenced by UN policies. The author calls for more consideration of the contribution that ethnography can give in an issue dominated by extensive, quantitative studies.

Finally, chapter 14, by José Luís Garcia et al., identifies and analyses current trends in the organization and management of online media. The authors examine media sustainability and sustainable journalism as an extension of the concept of sustainability to the media field taking place in a period in which the convergence between the processes of digitalization, globalization, and liberalization brought about a thorough reconfiguration of the media universe and of the rationales underlying the production, dissemination, and consumption of information. Based on a set of four case studies, the chapter questions the extent to which the broadening of sustainability may have produced contradictory meanings, between two fundamental aspects of journalism; the business aspect related with the media companies, their market positions and stakeholders' interests; and the ethical and political aspect related with sustainability's informative function and counter-power role, aimed at an inclusive, responsible and responsive politics.

The book ends with a brief postscript by João Ferrão, in which he reflects on the contributions of the social sciences to the sustainability debate, highlighting the seven main aspects that bring coherence and unity to the diverse contributions in the book.

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