SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE MISSING LINK IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Documents de travail GREDEG
GREDEG Working Papers Series

Jérôme Ballet
Damien Bazin
Frédéric Thomas
François-Régis Mahieu

GREDEG WP No. 2025-06
https://ideas.repec.org/s/gre/wpaper.html

Social Justice: The Missing Link in Sustainable Development[1]

Jérôme Ballet[a], Damien Bazin[*B] Frédéric Thomas[c] and François-Regis Mahieu[d]

[a]Université de Bordeaux, Bordeaux School of Economics (BSE), CNRS, France. ORCID: 0000-0002-3980-2671
[b] Université Côte d'Azur, CNRS, GREDEG, France. ORCID: 0000-0002-0020-5044
[c]University of Montpellier, CNRS, IRD, MIVEGEC, France. ORCID: 0000-0003-2238-1978
[d]Fund for Research in Economic Ethics, FREE, France. ORCID: 0000-0002-1090-6418

GREDEG Working Paper No. 2025-06

^

Summary

Governments, civil society groups, and international organisations actively raise awareness about major environmental risks and work to mitigate them. In practice, however, sustainable development tends to be approached in stages: first by addressing the economic dimension, followed by the environmental, and finally, the social dimension. We argue that this sequencing reflects an inherent bias in how the importance of each dimension is perceived, with the social dimension consistently being undervalued. We challenge the prevailing notion that the social dimension is synonymous with poverty and is detrimental to natural resources. Instead, we propose that sustainable development must shift towards a model of socially sustainable development. Our findings suggest that socially sustainable development is more closely aligned with addressing inequity and enhancing capabilities, rather than merely alleviating poverty. It is therefore essential to move beyond the outdated view that economics and environmental protection are in conflict. Instead, we must frame the environment as a matter of human justice, where the social dimension is given its rightful importance. In this context, we present three key pillars of analysis—equity, safety, and social cohesion—to renew the sustainability debate and mitigate the disruptions caused by imbalances between the dimensions.

JEL Classification: Q01, Q26, Q50.

[1] This work was carried out within the framework of the Camargue Health-Environment "Zone Atelier" (ZACAM) of the "Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research network" (LTSER-RZA), funded by the Ecology & Environment of the French National Center for Scientific Research (EE-CNRS).

In recent years, citizens' movements like the Climate Strike have urged governments to address major environmental risks, while others, such as the more apolitical 'yellow vest' movement in France, have taken opposing stances on environmental issues. The 'yellow vest' protests began as a spontaneous response to a diesel tax increase. Instead of embracing the environmental rationale behind the policy, they viewed the French government's proposed ecological transition as a direct assault on their purchasing power. This reaction is not an isolated example of 'anti-environment' protests. Bhatti and Dixon (2003), along with Burningham and Thrush (2003), similarly noted that the UK government's increased taxation on domestic heating oil—intended to shift energy consumption away from fossil fuels—was perceived by the public as an attempt to prevent them from heating their homes.

Should we then conclude that a social divide exists, where different social classes find themselves in opposing camps? Certain comments and opinions from 'yellow vest' members appear to support this notion (Huyghe *et al*., 2019). Attempts to bridge the gap between the Climate Strike and the 'yellow vest' movement failed, suggesting that these groups may indeed be disconnected from each other. Beyond potential class divisions, this situation highlights a fundamental flaw in the conceptualization of sustainable development.

A lesser dimension

Sustainable development is generally understood to consist of three interconnected dimensions: economic, environmental, and social. The dominant view tends to associate sustainable development primarily with environmental protection, nature conservation, and the promotion of ecological values. In fact, many people do not clearly distinguish between these aspects (cf. Bazin, 2006 for clarification) or between reconciling economic growth and environmental preservation (ecosystem integrity). The social dimension—defined as equality of opportunity and the freedom to be or to act—has often been overlooked. The Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) significantly contributed to this by emphasizing the conditions needed for an ontological reconciliation between environmental sustainability and economic growth.

Sustainable development is often seen as envisioning a future that aligns with the risks posed by current human activities in relation to nature (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). According to Beck (1992), since the 1960s, modernity has been characterized by an anticipation of and control over the future consequences of human actions. This theory suggests that once society becomes aware of the hazards it has internally generated, it becomes increasingly focused on risk management, making modern society intrinsically linked to the concept of uncertainty. Both spatially and temporally (given the irreversibility of certain negative effects), the existence of global risks amplifies the need for anticipation and control (Beck, 2005).

This interpretation of sustainable development compels us to directly confront the effects of economic consumption and production on the environment. As a result, traditional analysis has primarily focused on critiquing the economic growth model to prevent ecological disasters and other irreversible harm that could compromise humanity's ability to live a "genuine human life" on Earth (Jonas, 1984), or at least to maintain current living standards. However, this conceptual framework is fundamentally flawed if it disregards the social dimension. This oversight of the social aspect can largely be attributed to biases in the formulation of public policies (Murphy, 2012).

The One Health Approach: An Integrative Perspective

The One Health concept highlights the close links between human, animal, and environmental health, emphasizing the interdependence of these systems for equitable sustainable development (Zinsstag *et al*. 2010; Destoumieux-Garzón *et al*. 2018). In vulnerable areas, where zoonotic and environmental risks converge, this approach becomes crucial in terms of social justice. For example, integrated management of pandemic risks such as Ebola or avian flu in sub-Saharan African regions has strengthened the resilience of healthcare systems while reducing social inequalities. Moreover, deforestation, uncontrolled urbanization, and the overexploitation of natural resources in these regions not only increase ecological risks but also exacerbate social vulnerabilities (*e.g.* Mills *et al*. 2010). Therefore, sustainability strategies must integrate these public health considerations to reduce social divides and protect the most disadvantaged from the impacts of environmental changes. True sustainability cannot be achieved without this comprehensive integration of social and health dimensions within environmental policies.

What does the social dimension encompass?

When it hasn't been entirely neglected, the social dimension of sustainable development has often been limited to examining the relationship between poverty and the degradation of natural resources (Ballet *et al*., 2011). As a result, it continues to be seen as a lesser dimension, with the primary focus remaining on determining an economic growth rate that is compatible with both preserving nature and reducing poverty. This narrow approach reflects the trajectory set out by the Brundtland Report (Robinson, 2004).

At best, the social dimension has become a "catchword" (Littig & Griessler, 2005), representing a variety of forces that either link the other two dimensions or drive them apart. It has also become the default category for issues that don't neatly fit into the economic or environmental dimensions. Reviews by Griessler and Littig (2005), Vallance *et al*. (2011), and Murphy (2012) identify two primary ways the social dimension has been analyzed: a) by exploring the connection between living conditions and environmental concerns, and b) by examining the social acceptance of behavioral change.

Rather than defining the social dimension as a mere repository for issues not covered by the other two dimensions, there are clear criteria that can guide its characterization. We propose three fundamental criteria.

The first criterion is the level of equity in society. Equity is the most frequently mentioned topic in the literature on the social dimension of sustainable development (Jabareen, 2008). Furthermore, research on environmental justice has demonstrated the deep interconnection between the social and environmental dimensions (Schlosberg, 2007). To some extent, social inequity can help explain environmental inequity (Pellow, 2000). Thus, it is insufficient to focus solely on poverty and basic needs or to rely on the notion that economic growth will trickle down to alleviate poverty. In fact, the trickle-down effect is far less effective in economies plagued by inequity, where the relationship between poverty, inequity, and growth is highly complex (Adams, 2004; Bourguignon, 2004).

The second criterion is the level of safety experienced by a community, where safety refers to protection from economic and social risks (social risks being a key developmental issue [Fiszbein *et al*., 2014]). This protection can significantly impact the living conditions of a community, helping its members avoid falling into poverty traps (Barrett *et al*., 2016). Studies conducted in

Zambia and Honduras, as well as programs in southern Asia (Chaudhury *et al*., 2011; Bee *et al*., 2013; Davies *et al*., 2013), have shown the effectiveness of new flexible social policies that link social protection with climate and environmental events.

The third criterion is the level of social cohesion. Social cohesion has been the subject of many debates in the social sciences, but in its simplest form, it can be understood as the coherence in attitudes and behaviors among members of a group (Friedkin, 2004). In a society, social cohesion reflects the consistency in the attitudes and behaviors of its members. Consequently, environmental conflicts are often deeply rooted in social antagonisms (Urdal, 2005; Raleigh & Urdal, 2007).

Broadly speaking, greater coherence in political decision-making is more likely when there are higher levels of equity, safety, and social cohesion. While this does not mean that pro-environment policies will be easy to implement, they will at least not suffer from the incoherence that arises when the social dimension is neglected.

Potential interest for researchers and opportunities

This paper opens new avenues for research by reframing sustainable development through the lens of social justice. Researchers in fields such as environmental science, public policy, sociology, and economics can benefit from our expanded definition of the social dimension, which we propose as central to achieving true sustainability. By highlighting the intricate interconnections between social equity, environmental protection, and economic stability, this work provides a comprehensive framework that can guide future interdisciplinary studies on how these pillars interact.

Furthermore, our approach underscores the importance of integrating social cohesion and equity into environmental policies, offering new insights for scholars exploring the link between environmental justice and social policy. This can also serve as a foundation for applied research into policy-making, enabling a more holistic understanding of the complex dynamics that must be considered in the design and implementation of sustainable development strategies.

By moving beyond the traditional focus on poverty alleviation, we argue for a more nuanced view of the social dimension that is equally relevant to both developed and developing nations. This shift in perspective not only enhances the relevance of this work across global contexts but also presents a significant opportunity for researchers to investigate how different societies might adapt these principles to address local challenges. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the growing body of research that positions social justice as indispensable in the path toward global sustainability.

Why should the social dimension be taken seriously?

Two distinct yet complementary issues highlight the growing importance of the social dimension in sustainable development. Firstly, the social dimension serves as a crucial interface between the economic and environmental dimensions. Whether we are discussing living conditions or the social acceptance of necessary changes aimed at preserving nature, the three criteria—equity in society, community safety from economic and social risks, and social cohesion—facilitate the mechanisms that drive transformative change. Conversely, social fragmentation, as evidenced by movements like the 'yellow vests,' creates resistance to such changes. Much like the environmental dimension, the social dimension is vulnerable to social disruptions, making it susceptible to shockwaves. These vulnerabilities stem not only from individual fragility but also from the broader societal context (Corcuff, 2002). As individual vulnerability is linked to societal vulnerability, the social dimension reflects the fragility of society as a whole (Ranci, 2009). The ripple effects of

social shockwaves can undermine the effectiveness of pro-environmental actions. If, as with the 'yellow vests' in France, the social dimension is neglected or overshadowed, efforts to address environmental issues will inevitably be rejected.

References

Adams, R. H. Economic growth, inequality and poverty: estimating the growth elasticity of poverty. *World Dev.* **32**, 1989–2014 (2004). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2004.08.006

Ballet, J., Dubois, J. L., & Mahieu, F.-R. La soutenabilité sociale du développement durable: de l'omission à l'émergence. *Mondes Dev.* **4**, 89–110 (2011). https://doi.org/10.3917/med.156.0089

Barrett, C. B., Carter, M., Ikegami, M. & Janzen, S. A. Poverty traps and social protection paradox. *NBER Working Paper Series* **22714**, 1–32 (2016). https://doi.org/10.3386/w22714

Bazin, D. *Sauvegarder la Nature. Une introduction au principe responsabilité de Hans Jonas*. Paris: Ellipses (2006).

Beck, U. *Power in the Global Age: A New Global Political Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press (2005).

Beck, U. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage (1992).

Bee, B., Biermann, M. & Tschakert, P. Gender, development, and rights-based approaches: lessons for climate change adaptation and adaptive social protection. In *Research, Action and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change* 95–108. Dordrecht: Springer (2013).

Bhatti, M. & Dixon, A. Special focus: housing, environment and sustainability-introduction. *Housing Stud.* **18**, 501–504 (2003). https://doi.org/10.1080/02673030304246

Bourguignon, F. The Poverty-Growth-Inequality Triangle. *Working paper*, World Bank, 1–25 (2004). https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPGI/Resources/342674-1206111890151/15185_ICRIER_paper-final.pdf

Burningham, K. & Thrush, D. Experiencing environmental inequality: the everyday concerns of disadvantaged groups. *Housing Stud.* **18**, 517–536 (2003). https://doi.org/10.1080/02673030304244

Chaudhury, M., Ajayi, O. C., Hellin, J. & Neufeldt, H. Climate change adaptation and social protection in agroforestry systems: enhancing adaptive capacity and minimizing risk of drought in Zambia and Honduras. *World Agroforestry Centre Working Paper* **137** (2011). https://hdl.handle.net/10568/34940

Corcuff, P. *La société de verre: pour une éthique de la fragilité*. Paris: Armand Colin (2002).

Davies, M., Béné, C., Arnall, A., Tanner, T., Newsham, A. & Coirolo, C. Promoting resilient livelihoods through adaptive social protection: lessons from 124 programmes in South Asia. *Dev. Policy Rev.* **31**, 27–58 (2013). https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7679.2013.00600.x

Destoumieux-Garzón, D. Mavingui P., Boetsch G., Boissier J., Darriet F., Duboz O, P., Fritsch C., Giaudoux P., Le Roux F., Morand S., Paillard C., Pontier D., Sueur C. et Voituron Y.. The One Health concept: 10 years old and a long road ahead. *Front Vet Sci* **5**, 14 (2018). https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2018.00014

Eizenberg, E. & Jabareen, Y. Social sustainability: a new conceptual framework. *Sustainability* **9**, 1–16 (2017). https://doi.org/10.3390/su9010068

Fiszbein, A., Kanbur, R. & Yemtsov, R. Social protection and poverty reduction: global patterns and some targets. *World Dev.* **61**, 167–177 (2014). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2014.04.010

Friedkin, N. E. Social cohesion. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* **30**, 409–425 (2004). https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110625

Griessler, E. & Littig, B. Social sustainability: a catchword between political pragmatism and social theory. *Int. J. Sust. Dev.* **8**, 65–79 (2005). https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSD.2005.007375

Huyghe, F. B., Desmaison, X. & Liccia, D. *Dans la tête des Gilets jaunes*. VA Press (2019).

Jabareen, Y. A new conceptual framework for sustainable development. *Environ. Dev. Sustain.* **10**, 179–192 (2008). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-006-9058-z

Jonas, H. *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1984).

Mills, J. N., Gage, K. L. & Khan, A. S. Potential influence of climate change on vector-borne and zoonotic diseases: a review and proposed research plan. *Environ. Health Perspect.* **118**, 1507–1514 (2010). https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.0901389

Murphy, K. The social pillar of sustainable development: a literature review and framework for policy analysis. *Sustain. Sci. Pract. Policy* **8**, 15–29 (2012). https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2012.11908081

Pellow, D. N. Environmental inequality formation: toward a theory of environmental injustice. *Am. Behav. Sci.* **43**, 581–601 (2000). https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343305054089

Raleigh, C. & Urdal, H. Climate change, environmental degradation and armed conflict. *Polit. Geogr.* **26**, 674–694 (2007). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2007.06.005

Ranci, C. *Social vulnerability in Europe: The new configuration of social risks*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan (2009).

Robinson, J. Squaring the circle? Some thoughts on the idea of sustainable development. *Ecol. Econ.* **48**, 369–384 (2004). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2003.10.017

Schlosberg, D. *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2007). https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199286294.001.0001

Urdal, H. People vs. Malthus: population pressure, environmental degradation and armed conflict revisited. *J. Peace Res.* **42**, 417–434 (2005). https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343305054089

Vallance, S., Perkins, H. C. & Dixon, J. E. What is social sustainability? A clarification of concepts. *Geoforum* **42**, 342–348 (2011). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.01.002

Zinsstag, J., Schelling, E., Waltner-Toews, D. & Tanner, M. From "one medicine" to "one health" and systemic approaches to health and well-being. *Prev. Vet. Med.* **101**, 148–156 (2011). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.prevetmed.2010.07.003

DOCUMENTS DE TRAVAIL GREDEG PARUS EN 2025
GREDEG Working Papers Released in 2025

2025-01 Bruno Deffains & Frédéric Marty
Generative Artificial Intelligence and Revolution of Market for Legal Services

2025-02 Annie L. Cot & Muriel Dal Pont Legrand
"Making war to war" or How to Train Elites about European Economic Ideas: Keynes's Articles Published in L'Europe Nouvelle during the Interwar Period

2025-03 Thierry Kirat & Frédéric Marty
Political Capitalism and Constitutional Doctrine. Originalism in the U.S. Federal Courts

2025-04 Laurent Bailly, Rania Belgaied, Thomas Jobert & Benjamin Montmartin
The Socioeconomic Determinants of Pandemics: A Spatial Methodological Approach with Evidence from COVID-19 in Nice, France

2025-05 Samuel De La Cruz Solal
Co-design of Behavioural Public Policies: Epistemic Promises and Challenges

2025-06 Jérôme Ballet, Damien Bazin, Frédéric Thomas & François-Régis Mahieu
Social Justice: The Missing Link in Sustainable Development