Chapter 1
The Problems of Achieving Social Sustainability: A Cultural Shift

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1.1   Introduction

The importance of social sustainability has been emphasised in the 2019 SEEDS conference (Sturges, 2019). The only truly sustainable societies are those that have achieved social sustainability, whereby every member of the society subscribes to the way that it is organised. At the time when our thoughts on this paper commenced Autumn, 2019, the Extinction Rebellion protests were in progress in Europe, the USA and other various parts of the world (BBC, 2019). These protests were and continue to be based on the idea of directly influencing governments to take action on the current environmental crisis, particularly climate change. The premise of the protests would bring about media coverage, evoke public support and persuade governments and communities to adopt sustainability. Most movements, including appeals by icons, such as David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg, address those in leading position to change but also engage through public address whole communities. For such messages to resonate and result in action, all ages, sectors communities and counties will need to commit, a cultural shift is required.

Diamond (2006) has described how some societies that have been sustainable have achieved social sustainability usually by bottom-up approaches and in one case by a top-down approach (Tokugawa Japan). These societies were physically cut off from the rest of the world, or in the case of Japan, they were cut off by an edict of the ruling Shogun. However, the twenty-first century world is a globalised world, whereby all societies are linked by trade, transport and communication systems of various kinds. The links between our nations and international connectedness are being emphasised by the outbreak and global spread of the Corona 19 virus.

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Within 3 months of the virus being detected, it was considered a pandemic by the World Health Organization (Liu, et al., 2020; WHO, 2021). The international response to the pandemic may lead many to think that an international change to social sustainability is achievable in the face of the existential threat of climate change.

However, economies of the developed countries present the greatest influence on globalisation, and our international connectedness currently fails to offer the degree of social cohesion required to respond to sustainability crisis. Indeed, when addressing future sustainability, most policies give priority to economic sustainability before environmental sustainability and with little consideration for social sustainability (Toli & Murtagh, 2020). For the climate emergency to be acted on with sufficient haste commerce, governments and communities must act together or the impact will be felt.

The tipping point for climate change is rapidly approaching, and the loss of diversity in the ecosystem is so critical that humans will be witness to irreversible change in the next decade (Attenborough & Hughes, 2020). The recently reported loss of 219 billion tonnes of ice per year and sea levels rising considerably faster than previously predicted are set to displace millions of people, and, with the loss of the ice's cooling effect, a further acceleration to global warming is anticipated (Selley et al., 2021; Shepherd et al., 2020).

Environmentalist are increasing the pressure on governments, but so too are those industries likely to be adversely affected by the sustainability agenda and those changes proposed under the Sustainable Development Goals.

Governments usually wish to maintain the impression that they can solve all or most of society's problems, and so 'Extinction Rebellion' aims their protests at governments and also at The United Nations Assembly in New York. Unfortunately, they are not the only ones seeking to influence governments. The worlds of industry and big business also seek government influence via lobbying and via substantial contributions to political parties and campaign funds. Over the past 40 years or so, the number of lobbyists in Washington, USA, has increased by a factor of 10, and the money spent on lobbying has increased from millions to billions of dollars. Clearly this money is not donated altruistically, and the lobbyists are not in Washington for the 'high life'. Considerable efforts also go into producing misleading information about certain products where the producers have an interest in maintaining or increasing sale levels (Monbiot, 2007). Notable past examples include the lobbies for tobacco and for the production and use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) as refrigerants.

Extinction Rebellion is a group of open, highly visible influencers, whereas the lobbyists operate covertly. Everyone is aware of Extinction Rebellion, whereas the lobbyists prefer to remain unseen. Money and campaign contributions are powerful influences, and while street protests have some effect, it appears to be limited to eliciting sympathetic utterances by some government officials. Extinction Rebellion has staged demonstrations in various capitals including London and at the United

Nations in New York. Are they making their case to the right people? Are there others who need to hear the message? If progress is to be achieved at the necessary scale and speed, then everyone needs to be involved. What are the barriers to getting the message and its urgency to everyone to get them on side?

1.2 Problems of Social Sustainability

The foregoing account illustrates both sides of the problem. On the one hand, experience teaches us that sustainability can only be achieved when everyone in society subscribes to its achievement. This means that everyone realises that sustainability is the only way forward long term and is willing to accept the various limitations that are imposed by it. On the other hand, an industrialised form of consumer capitalism is now widely perceived as the only way forward, even in what are or were communist regimes, China being a notable example. Furthermore, the West is wedded to democratic systems of the government, where representatives are usually elected by a simple majority vote. In some peoples' minds, this is the 'only' way to do things. People living under autocratic regimes often express an understandable longing for democratic government. However, democracy does have limitations. If we look again at those societies that achieved sustainability, none of them had a formal system of democratic government as we understand it. The bottom-up societies in Tikopia, Ladakh and New Guinea operated by consensus, and the top-down society in Japan followed the edicts of the Shogun, trusting him to make wise decisions in the interests of the common good of his people. For two and a half centuries, this system worked, and it only broke down under intense pressures, initially from outside Japan. These pressures eventually took root among part of the Japanese population who began to urge changes, so eventually the Shogun returned to the Emperor the power to rule in the 1868 Meiji Restoration. The requisite situation for sustainability had been lost once Japanese society became divided, showing once again how important social sustainability really is.

However, the problem goes deeper than this. The western world is wedded to notions of personal liberty and the assertion of individual rights with little or no limitations on an individual's choices. Politicians rarely mention individual responsibilities, a notable exception being John Kennedy's inaugural address in 1961, where he famously said: 'ask not what your country can do for you, ask rather what you can do for your country'. Europe, America and the western world hold to democracy and to the ideals of individual liberty, and while China does not, they both pursue consumer capitalism.

Two current news items illustrate the problems we face. Sales of electric cars are beginning to increase, but at the same time sales of less economical SUV types are increasing, and many car manufacturers say the production of SUV types amount to 40% of their output. Even the top-end luxury car makers such as Rolls Royce, Bentley and Aston Martin now market SUV models as part of their ranges.

Consumption of plastics by supermarkets has increased because consumers treat the heavier plastic bags for which they are charged in the same way that they treated the 'free' ones. If supermarkets were serious about this problem, the price of a plastic reusable bag would reflect its environmental cost if wasted. This would make plastic reusable bags relatively expensive and may induce consumers to change their behaviour, reusing rather than disposing of the bags.

The UK is increasingly experiencing problems with heavier rainfall and flooding, impacting heavily on communities across the country. Yet in towns and cities, people continue to pave over their gardens to make parking space for their ever-larger and more numerous vehicles. Hundreds of hectares of rain-absorbent land have been covered over in this way in the past two decades. The same amount of rainfall occurs but run-off is increased. This flooding may in large part be ascribed to climate change, since warm air holds more water vapour than cold air. Despite this fact, many people are willing to ascribe increased rainfall to 'freak weather' conditions. Why is this so?

Turning again to our western notions of democracy, people view it through 'rose-tinted' glasses. People are given a vote at election time and vote for their MP in the UK or their Congressman or Senator in the USA. However, in between elections, they can write to their MP over any matters of concern, and most MPs do a good job of representing their constituents. In between elections, individual MPs can exert some influence on their behalf. This is not the only influence brought to bear on governments in the UK or in the USA. The ease with which senior figures move between the private and public sectors is an indication of close relationships that exist between the private sector, big business and government. Reference has already been made to the number of lobbyists in Washington and to the sums of money expended on influence.

The ideals of western democracy – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – have been given, perhaps most memorably, by some former US presidents, especially Jefferson, Lincoln and Kennedy. Words of high-flown rhetoric that they uttered are remembered by people all over the world. In his Gettysburg address, President Lincoln paid tribute to those who had given their lives in the cause of the Union. The civil war had another 2 years to run, but he encouraged his listeners to honour the dead by re-dedicating themselves to the task of preserving the Union, with its ideals of equality and freedom. He concluded the last sentence of his address with the following words: 'and that the government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth'.

The words *for the people, by the people* imply that a truly democratic form of government is the future for the USA after the war and henceforth. No reference is made to very large campaign donations or support for political parties now made. President Lincoln will not have foreseen how his country's government would evolve in the twentieth century. The industrial and 'big business' sector had not developed into the major centre of power that it now is. President Eisenhower's farewell speech was also memorable for his warning about the power of 'the military industrial complex'. In the USA, since the closing of World War II, the military

has also become a huge centre of power, with the huge industry sectors of aerospace, electronics, weapons, etc. now closely involved in Washington. The need for a highly educated population to staff expanding government and industry has led to the growth in importance and size of academia in America, Europe and beyond. Another group with influence that cannot be ignored is 'the media', the press, the broadcasters and the internet.

In many fields of human society, what is apparent is not always the complete picture. Business organizations have management structures, but sometimes the person with the most influence is not the one in the top seat. American management theorists saw the mismatch between the formal organization chart and called this 'the informal management structure'. Big business exerts influence not only by financial contributions but also by issuing 'spoiling publicity' designed to mislead, as referred to above (Monbiot, 2007). When so much power and influence is in such a small number of hands, how easy is it to operate in a truly democratic way? People eagerly accept and take up all the latest products put out by the industrial economy, but they never ask about the price. 'I can order it on-line', 'I can have it delivered to the office', 'I can get my hands on it tomorrow', etc. No paperwork, no trips to the shops and so on. Some complain about the vast sums of money made by the entrepreneurs who market these things. These superrich people dispose of greater wealth than some of the poorest nations of the world. If California was an independent country, it would be among the ten richest nations on Earth, and yet there are thousands of homeless people in Los Angeles. Such social inequality is the mark of a nonsustainable form of society.

The streets in towns and cities are full of white delivery vans, and the townscape now consists of fast-food outlets, betting shops, estate agents, charity shops, etc. This is part of the visible price. The invisible price is the coming into being of huge data centres to serve the ever-expanding internet. Each centre is filled with file servers and consumes as much power as a city the size of large UK cities. Is it to be wondered at that the CO_2 emissions continue to climb? In the meantime, everything is gradually being connected to the internet – the 'internet of things'. If these trends continue, a future power outage could bring civilisation to a halt.

It is interesting to note that, as lockdown measures were taken and movement restrictions introduced to reduce the Corona 19 virus transmissions, global daily energy use drastically changed (Le Quere et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020) and emissions from personal travel and pollution in the major cities fell (Gorse & Scott, 2021). However, this was countered by domestic energy and media use as home-based activities increased the internet's carbon footprint (Obringer et al., 2021). We need to recognise and be responsible for our actions.

Social sustainability requires everyone in society to share the ideals and to work together to achieve them. We now have a good understanding of how we have brought the world to its present unsustainable (as far as human existence is concerned) state. We have 'globalised' the problems, but we have not globalised this knowledge, and we have certainly given no thought as to how we might globalise any solutions that we may devise.

This discussion has shown that when considering political influence, it is not a duopoly of government and people (electorate) but that other centres of power have emerged in the modern world. These are the industry sectors including manufacturing, services and agriculture, the military and academia. The media play an important role in providing information transmission between the centres of power. Millions of people switch on TV for the news every day from CNN, BBC, etc., and the content of the broadcast depends on the news editors. The news that we receive is what the broadcast editor deems to be most newsworthy, not always what is really news or all that has occurred.

The way that societies have developed in Europe, America and the wider world illustrates how we have moved away from social sustainability and raised the barriers to its achievement. The largest international industrial organizations have grown to the point where their size and power rivals or even exceeds that of many national governments.

1.3 Likely Barriers to Achieving Social Sustainability

The foregoing sections have attempted to set out the scale of the problems we face. We live in a 'globalised' world, i.e. a world where the same social forces are at work in many parts of the world, a world with a population of over 7.5 billion. One hundred years ago, people in remote parts of Indonesia lived in complete ignorance of conditions in Europe or America. Because of the internet and the ubiquity of the mobile phone, this is no longer the case, and this has undoubtedly helped to drive the great migration crisis being felt in many places throughout the world today.

One hundred years ago, there were societies living in some remote parts of the world that lived sustainably (Diamond, 2006; Norberg-Hodge, 2000). These societies lived apparently happy lives but without the physical trappings of the modern world. Furthermore, they had stable population numbers, because everyone in them knew that there was an upper limit to how much food they could produce and that their existence and survival depended upon not generating too many mouths to feed. Interestingly, when they did begin to interact with and to absorb western ways, they began to consume more energy and to produce more children. A population explosion inevitably followed the adoption of western ways. In the west, we recognise population pressure as a big factor in bringing about adverse effects in our world, but we do not recognise that our adoption of consumer capitalism has driven the population explosion that is now seen as a problem.

The achievement of sustainability must be an objective shared by everyone, or it will not be attainable. We have seen that, besides the government and the people, other centres of power have emerged in our highly developed societies. These centres of power are interconnected via the media, but there is not complete transparency, which is yet another difficulty.

1.4   The Importance of Social Sustainability

We are led to believe that social sustainability occurs when relationships come together to sustain an ecosystem generating the capacity to support healthy communities now and for future generations (Barron & Gunlett, 2002). At its simplest form, social sustainability is the relational effort to ensure the health and wellbeing of people now and in the future. Although often identified as one of the three pillars of sustainability, within the field of sustainability, the 'social' element receives least attention (Spangenberg, 2006; McKenzie, 2004, p. 14) and is largely overlooked in debates and political discourse (Woodcraft, 2015). The concept of social sustainability is diverse, possibly the most difficult to measure, and receives less political attention when compared with economic and environmental sustainability (Toli & Murtagh, 2020). Notwithstanding this imposition, respect for our fellow citizens and their wellbeing does exist. The recent COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the scale of action nations are prepared to make but also exposes the challenges of introducing consistent measure across a nation's action. While restrictions were found to be effective in reducing transmission, measure taken and response rates varied as countries attempted to balance social and economic impact (Alfano & Ercolano, 2020; IMF, 2021). However, as the reality of the pandemic was made evident, country-wide measures were introduced to protect the public, and with each national restriction, a sharp economic decline was experienced (IMF, 2021).

The pandemic has demonstrated that nations are prepared to take action necessary to protect their fellow citizens. Notwithstanding the action taken across the globe, the social unrest and resistance experienced in some countries show just how difficult it is to change social and cultural behaviour as economies suffer. The projection of climate change having a devastating impact on the wellbeing of fellow citizens 'in years to come' appears insufficiently imminent for a consistent response at this moment in time. Unfortunately, our anthropogenic actions are having a devastating impact on the ecosystem and ultimately the niche climate conditions upon which humans rely to exist (Xu et al., 2020). Social sustainability and our ability to protect humans and other species now have to become a central tenet to reduce the impact of climate change and ensure human survival.

Humans clearly evolved and outdid most other living animals as a result of their ability to communicate and work together. As humans, we are recognised as the life form that has exploited the ability to work together. Human relationship skills have been used to build resource, sustain health and wellbeing and protect ourselves and offspring from threats. While in the past humans have done this extremely successfully, recent events may raise questions about our ability to perform social sustainability at a global scale.

One of the key questions raised is can social sustainability exist within the commercial world? Allmahmound and Doloi (2015) argue that sustainability outcomes are best achieved when taking account the satisfaction of stakeholders. Within the global context, the stakeholder perspective seems short-sighted. However, the aim is to enhance the importance of the social context and overall benefits. There is an

argument that as we continue to develop economically and indeed sustainably, we neglect the life—the social dimension within the context of sustainability has been treated with apprehension (Hill & Bowen, 1997; Edum-Fotwe & Price, 2009).

While Ducker would have us believe that 'culture eats strategy for breakfast', we have yet to experience the cultural change that can engender social sustainability.

1.5   Concluding Remarks

One proposed solution to the climate crisis was that of geoengineering the planet (Royal Society, 2009). The Stockholm Resilience Centre Report and the Royal Society's geoengineering report were both published in 2009, and a decade has since elapsed without international concerted action. This clearly illustrates the lack of united political will to agree a common policy. This is frustrating, because we understand the essence of the problem and we have many technical solutions to hand, and while nothing on the right scale is done, the problem becomes more urgently in need of solution. Unfortunately, it remains true that until everyone sees the lack of sustainable operation as an existential threat, many people will disregard it as mere background noise. At all levels of society worldwide, people are focused on the need for economic growth. Those societies that were sustainable knew very clearly that they faced an existential threat if they did not maintain a stable population, and every member of these societies was well aware of this fact. The challenge we face today is that of presenting the information to everyone in a way that puts emphasis on the fact that we face an existential threat.

A recent genre of book has come into being dealing with 'sustainable companies', of which the one by Laszlo (2003) is an early example. The book contains some very interesting case studies of companies that have made great efforts to reduce their environmental impacts while remaining profitable enterprises. Laszlo rightly differentiates between 'shareholder value' and 'stakeholder value', and he highlights various methodologies for getting company workforces onside in the quest for improved company performance—in other words, how to achieve social sustainability within the company. The book is written with a deep knowledge of American management theory but with no knowledge of the physical and biological sciences that underpin how our planet functions. Furthermore, the author mistakes environmental impact mitigation for sustainability, and sustainability is much more than environmental protection. Without an appreciation of system thermodynamics and evolutionary biology, authors are writing blind to the problem. To gain an understanding of the problems that we face requires a good deal of effort and a degree of scientific knowledge that many do not possess. Many people are familiar with the first law of thermodynamics, but very few understand the second law and especially its implications, and this despite that fact that the consequences of ignoring the second law are all around us. It is true that thermodynamics is a recondite subject, but that does not diminish its importance. Later works in this same genre of management and sustainability (e.g. Zokaei et al., 2013) show that management

thinkers still do not understand the ramifications of system thermodynamics. They still assume that impact mitigation is the same thing as sustainability, and like Laszlo (2003), they offer yet more interesting case studies and more well-thought-out methods for promoting social sustainability within organisations. However, the whole of society must be engaged, and these authors have nothing to say about this.

A point made by another author, Speth (2008), is that we face 'apathy, ignorance and greed', and not just CO_2 emissions, global warming, biodiversity loss, etc. This is not universally true, but it certainly is true for large sections of society. Most people are too focused on the problems of their day-to-day existence to become concerned about a problem that they think belongs to someone else. To gain some understanding of the present state of our world takes considerable effort, but most people want to carry on as normal and adopt a head-in-the-sand approach to the unmistakable and mounting evidence of the reality of global warming and its effects. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the world is so committed to the status quo and business as usual that governments national and local, industry, academia, the media, etc. are not prepared to begin thinking seriously about confronting the changes that need to be made.

All the strategies discussed, apart from an immediate cessation of fossil fuel burning, will take time to be developed to an effective level. This is time that we do not have.

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