# Social Sustainability Indicators as Performance

- Social sustainability indicators should be viewed as performative processes of acting toward and on particular worlds.
- Development sustainability is a necessary precondition for equitable maintenance and bridging social sustainability outcomes.
- Indicators should detect structural inequalities and injustices, and help in destabalizing practices which are shown to limit diverse and equitable outcomes.

Social sustainability indicators should work to address issues of inequality and injustice on several levels of an industry, business, or farm. However, social realities often feature relational, processual and conditional qualities[1] and, as such, present several challenges to researches attempting to measure social sustainability. (1) Indicators are inherently reductive. They simplify complex social realities into shorthand symbols for the purposes of easy communication but thereby can create distortions or unintended consequences.[2] (2) Academic disciplines that prize observable, robust, publishable outcomes, and industries that look for quickly communicable assurances and marketable outcomes face pragmatic difficulties given the intricacy of process and justice oriented approaches of social sustainability. The challenge is to avoid indicators that simply measure the acceptable, but completely miss the 'social' aspect.[3] (3) A pillar-approach towards social sustainability, the distinction of social sustainability from economic and environmental sustainability, is problematic because it can cause conflicts between the three forms due to their interrelation[4]. For example, reduced pesticide use in conventional farming systems can increase the intensity of labour requirements, and if a farm is getting rewarded for environmental practices but it's labour practices are

| | Individual | Relational | Institutional |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Bridge Social Sustainability**: Behaviour change toward environmental goals | Adoption of sustainable environmental practice (i.e. fallowing land, biodiversity) | Farmer trust of industry, academia, and urban populations (i.e. how much do you trust the following?) | Civic engagement with people from industry, academia, and urban settings (i.e. farmers involved in decision making processes with industry, academia, urban groups) |
| **Maintenance Social Sustainability**: Preserving socio-cultural patterns and practices | Increased farmer income; improved worker welfare (i.e. wages, benefits, work hours) | Trust among farmers and community (i.e. how much do you trust other farmers? Others in community?) | Civic engagement among farmers and community (i.e. are farmers working with other farmers and community members to make decisions?) |
| **Development Social Sustainability**: Reduce poverty, inequity, and address injustice | Increased income for all groups regardless of socio-economic status (i.e. age, sex, ethnicity, religion, class) | Trust across all within society (i.e. age, sex, ethnicity, religion, class) | Civic engagement with people across society (i.e. age, sex ethnicity, class) (i.e. are all SES involved in the decision making process?) |

Table 1: Examples of social sustainability indicators

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[1] Carolan and Stuart (2016).
[2] Bateson (1972); see also Rosin, Campbell, and Reid (2017), Rosin et al. (2017).
[3] See also Turnhout (2009).
[4] Gibson (2006), Boyer et al. (2016).

ignored, the effects may incentivize increased labour exploitation.

To overcome some of these challenges mentioned above and to acknowledge the academic's impact of their choice of indicators, we suggest viewing indicators as performative and processual.

## The role and impact of scientists

Whether academics are aware of it or not, they have an impact with their research and ways of describing the world. Rather than focusing on social patterns at a more abstract level, and based on measures that hinge on an unacknowledged normative reading of reality, a performative approach considers how people create the world around them, and create normative realities through actions that reinforce them.[5] If we, as social scientists, consider

Vallance et al in organizing social sustainability into three general orientations[7]: 1) instrumentalist *bridge sustainability* concerned with behaviour change to achieve bio-physical environmental goals, 2) *maintenance sustainability*, which is focused on the preservation of socio-cultural patterns and practices when surrounded by social and economic change, and 3) value focused *development sustainability* that aims to address poverty and inequity through addressing injustice. Taking into account their relationally real and performative characteristics, table 1 provides an example of how indicators can represent and detect social sustainability for individual, relational, and institutional aspects of agri-environmental schemes.

Due to the fact that development goals

| | Individual | Relational | Institutional |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Performative Social Sustainability**: Encouraging fair relations across difference | • Openness to different people, ideas, and experiences (i.e. if you are working with oeple different than you, how open are you to their ideas?)<br>• Sceptical of social hierarchies (i.e. how important are traditional family and gender values?) | • Humility and lack of sense of entitlements (i.e. do leaders display/feel sense of entitlement? Or more community orientated?)<br>• Deference and recognition of achievements<br>• Capacity for discomfort (i.e. interactions which support expression of difference) | • Policies, procedures, and resource allocation which encourage civic engagement<br>• Creation of social space to express difference – facilitation skills, cultural competency trainings, civic trainings<br>• Interactional space (physical or online) paces for civic engagement to be carried out |

Table 2: Examples of performative social sustainability indicators

ourselves as actors in an existing set of relations, we may consider how to best disrupt the existing set of symbols and relationships that we see as unproductive positionality so we can better perform toward the worlds we seek to create.[6]

## Social sustainability

There is disagreement as how to define social sustainability and what it should encompass. We follow an approach by

highlight the more structural aspects of social life related to inequality, they are preconditions for adequate outcomes in terms of maintenance and bridging processes. These mostly unnoticed practices over time and space work to distribute symbolic, positional, material, and emotional resources in ways that disproportionately advantage particular social groups (i.e. race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion) over others[8]. Social

[5] Gibson-Graham (2008).
[6] Law and Urry (2004).

[7] Vallance, Perkins, and Dixon(2011).
[8] Adapted from Grove and Pugh (2015).

sustainability indicators should therefore encourage equitable and fair relations between heterogeneous entities[9] to improve material and symbolic space to connect across difference (i.e. in terms of inclusive governing bodies or leadership reflective of traditionally marginalized communities). Though a relational structure may not always appear active does not mean it is absent[10]. For example, white supremacy is a relationally real social structure enacted in practice, even if agents may not understand it as such. To be able to detect the possible presence of such structures, a degree of anticipation is sometimes needed. Table 2 demonstrates what kind of indicators could determine unjust, systematic practices.

## Policy Recommendations

Viewing indicators as performative and processual encourages reflection about what sort of indicators help create more diverse and equitable outcomes. When developing social sustainability indicators one must take into account the following points:

1. Social sustainability cannot be considered separately from economic and environmental sustainability.
2. Equitable maintenance and bridging social sustainability presuppose development sustainability with its focus upon justice and fairness. Indicators should deal with issues of unequal relations between heterogeneous groups.
3. Academics need to recognize that indicators have an impact and they ought to be thoughtful about the work they do.
4. Pragmatic and sometimes disruptive stances toward developing and implementing indicators can help

researchers play a more deliberate role in social change. Indicators should enact in destabilizing the kinds of actual performances and practices which are shown to limit divers and equitable outcomes.

5. Sometimes a degree of anticipation is needed because relational structures may not always appear active.

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**Further Information**

Notes and citations can be found on the New Zealand Sustainability Dashboard Website: http://www.nzdashboard.org.nz/

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[9] Adapted from Muller and Schurr (2016).

[10] Carolan and Stuart (2016).