

Sustainable Development: Massive Project or Way of Life?

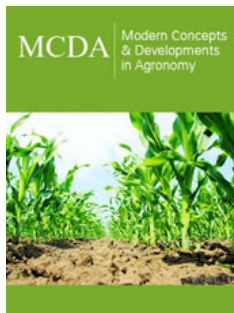
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Abstract

Is sustainable development an idea that can be achieved when it becomes a way of life? The aim of the paper is to advocate for a more human-centered design approach, recognizing the challenges inherent in addressing the dynamic and complex nature of socioecological systems. This article emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary teams, qualitative approaches, continuous learning, and the establishment of institutions and organizations that can effectively sustain sustainable development as a vibrant way of life.

Keywords: Sustainable development, Human-centered design, Socioecological system

Introduction

This is the era of sustainable development [1]. It is widely recognized that humankind must act decisively to secure our collective future by adopting new ways of living that are within the capacity of earth's ecosystems to sustain. Two critical systems must function in unison: the ecosystem and the social system through which humans interact with the ecosystem to generate the goods and services that support life and livelihoods [2]. Authors refer to this dyad as the socio-ecological system. A popular conception of sustainable development acknowledges ecological feasibility, economic viability and social acceptability for development to be sustainable [3]. In this conception, science is the arbiter that defines standards of feasibility and acceptability across ecological and social domains (economic, political, and sociological). The central question for us as humans is: should we blindly follow the dictates of science, or should we judiciously evaluate and apply science in our quest to attain sustainable development? Without calling on sophisticated arguments based on the philosophy of science, morals, and ethics, we draw on the commonsense notion (condensed from philosophy, ethics, and morals) that science tells us what is and what is possible given the current state of the science and technology. In other words, science gives us options and it is up to us to exercise our options considering the broader framework of equity and justice.

The extent to which humans can achieve sustainability in development depends on how we frame sustainable development and how it is practiced across scales of social organization: international, national, and local levels. We may frame sustainable development in a strict technical sense to include three primary components the ecological, social and the scientific. The scientific ensures advancement in ecological and social systems that meet the criteria for sustainable development. However, framing the concept of sustainability from a development perspective would include a fourth component-people. People and their institutions (both formal and informal institutions) carry out and benefit from actions that achieve the goals of

sustainable development. Therefore, in our view, people should and must be at the center of sustainable development. This means that the aspirational sustainable development goals (SDGs) must be interpreted as addressing problems associated with a “way of life” rather than a “charter” for implementing a massive developmental project for solving a development problem. The project approach is based on a paradigm of having complete knowledge or near complete knowledge of what needs to be done to implement the project to produce the deliverables (SDGs) within a predefined timeline and resource levels. This approach ignores the difficulty of operationalizing a complex concept. Sustainable development involves working with a complex socioecological system to address complex problems arising from the interaction of the ecological and social systems [4]. These problems are not amenable to a single well-defined specification that produces a single best permanent solution. Thus, even when feasible solutions are generated, many problems such as resource depletion and poverty do not remain solved. Consequently, the standard project approach is not well suited for addressing sustainable development, which is an ever-evolving complex socioecological phenomenon.

We believe that conceptualizing sustainable development as solving a way of life problem signals more accurately the challenges that we will encounter in addressing sustainable development. Adopting a way of life’s worldview brings into focus the realization that people are the agents and objects of development and adopting a more human centered design approach is more likely to produce solutions which are congruent with the lived experiences and lifeworld of people and communities.

From our perspective, challenges integral to sustainable development are two types. First, the complex and dynamic nature of ecological systems, notwithstanding this challenge, for which we benefit from the stability of the physical and biological models that explain, to a large degree, the behavior of ecological systems. Second, when it comes to the social system and the interaction between the social and ecological system, we are not afforded a similar level of explanatory power or clarity. Things are opaque, it is as if “we see darkly through a glass” due to non-stationarity and reflexivity that attenuate the explanatory power of social models [5]. All is not lost though; we can create designs with analogue structures and processes that nurture the creation of innovative solutions capable of addressing the complex problem situations that the socioecological system generates.

Pursuing Sustainable Development as a Way of Life

How do we proceed to address sustainable development from “the way of life” perspective? To address the challenge of the dynamism and complexity that the socioecological system poses for sustainable development we should:

A. Design transdisciplinary teams to generate the know-how needed to work with complex systems. Transdisciplinary teams bring together the diversity of expertise (professional, paraprofessional, and lay individuals with indigenous

knowledge) and shared culture (trust, level of engagement, joint cognition (the shared understanding of the problem or task) and emergent intelligence needed to integrate and focus diverse worldviews to address novel and emerging problem situations.

B. Acknowledge the power and relevance of qualitative approaches to extend and amplify the understanding of quantitative data and generate stories that provide in-depth unique knowledge that is discoverable at the interface of the social system (individuals, groups, and institutions) and ecological systems. For example, deep engagement that builds empathy, shared values, knowledge, and skill enables transdisciplinary teams to build an understanding of the map the lived experience of communities and determine how sustainable development fits in their current and future way of life. This is indispensable knowledge for achieving sustainable development. Approaches to sustainable development that neglect or discount this approach is seeking to impose a foreign way of life on communities.

C. Grasping the idea that the nexus of ecological and social systems generates problems that are ill-defined, problems that cannot be completely specified, or problems with no single objectively defined solution. These unstructured problems [6] alert us to the need for prototyping, experimentation, testing and iteratively developing solutions and continuous learning.

D. Since most if not all-important human endeavors are the result of collaboration within and between organizations and institutions, it is doubtful that we will ever be able to achieve the SDGs without enabling institutions and organizations. Consequently, an indispensable pivotal action is compulsory to create the organizations and institutions that provide a framework which fosters long-term political commitment, strong supportive legal framework, allocate ample financial resources, encourage the development of grassroots organizations with the capacity to undertake social problem solving in support of sustainable development.

Concluding Remarks

Since people are the agents and objects of development, framing sustainable development as pursuing a way of life justifies putting humans at the center of the SDG endeavor. Further, since cultural and social practices are the products of social evolution, a key action of society is to ensure organizations and institutions adopt SDG values as a key plank in the foundation of their value system. A value system infused with SDG values ensures that sustainable development evolves into a vibrant way of life.

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