WHY SUSTAINABILITY IS NOT A STOOL OR A PRETZEL, BUT A MÖBIUS STRIP

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Theoretically, and in practice, much of the discussion around development has focused on tensions between jobs and the environment. Trade-offs are negotiated and crafted between economic and environmental “goods”, making it the job of decision-makers to choose between units of pollution and units of economic growth. Environmental degradation is constructed as an externality of economic growth and environmental regulations as job killers. Thus, environmental measures are seen as limiting economic growth.

Sustainability has emerged, for better or for worse, as a powerful metaphor and a proposed way to mediate the conflict between economic goals and environmental impacts. Rather than continuing the standoff between jobs and the environment, sustainability demands more. Although definitions vary, sustainability can be linked to pursuit of “triple bottom line” outcomes – or economic, environmental and equity values. This provides a more textured version of development that goes beyond growth as a singular goal. Sustainability reorients the argument from jobs versus the environment to one of jobs and the environment.

The nature of this and, and the way that sustainability has been constructed, is at the crux of the trouble with sustainability. Sustainability is often portrayed as a three-legged stool where social equity, environmental quality and economic development goals stand in tension. More recently, sustainability has been referred to by Opp and Sauders as a series of pillars. In this conception, environmental, equity and economic goals collectively form the base, with sustainability flanked across the top. All of these conceptualisations are hinged on efforts to realise three values simultaneously that appear essentially linked to progress.

How can sustainability’s trifold values be juxtaposed? In practice, much of the interaction between them comes from a focus on environmental quality and how it can be realised in a way that does not harm economic or social concerns. At the very least, sustainability has often been operationalised as requiring environmental considerations to be added to the list of previous concerns and areas of policy focus. Thus, good policy requires the and between jobs and the environment. Policymakers should continue to pursue economic
growth, and to think about workforce development. However, they should also consider environmental protection as an additional goal. Whether or not the economic impact is linked to environmental regulations is unclear. EU member states have adopted climate action plans and sustainable development strategies to encourage the adoption of everything from massive renewable energy projects to implementation of Local Agenda 21s. At the end of the day, sustainability has been broadly utilised as a proxy for environmental measures.

Using sustainability as a call to action, many of the achievements in the realm of environmental governance are encouraging. But are they enough and are they synonymous with sustainability? Who benefits and who pays for the environmental and economic outcomes in a more sustainable Europe? Are net environmental benefits enough, or should the calculus of how such environmental wins are achieved rise to levels of equal importance? Thus, should calculations of who benefits and who pays at the interim level be likewise stressed? Will using sustainability, as leading framework around progress, achieve “triple bottom line” outcomes?

Many politicians have been unable to move beyond the environment and economy construction to incorporate equity concerns. Agyeman and Evans assert that sustainability tends to leave equity considerations behind. Even more alarming, sustainability has been accused by scholars such as Gunder of speciously offering a new way to talk about any range of measures that benefit any range of individuals. With no firm way to measure outcomes and few clear efforts that deal with equity considerations, sustainability arguably offers a purely rhetorical solution to label any desired programme, policy or project as good – i.e. sustainable. Rather than democratising or infusing justice in the dynamics between economic and environmental goods, sustainability can be utilised as a mechanism to reinforce the existing power structure. It is a powerful conceptual tool that may infuse environmental considerations into policy-making. However, such an infusion of values may be done without considering the distributional and procedural dimensions around its stated goals. Sustainability can be co-opted and corrupted by a select group of citizens who effectively advocate for a particular constellation of economic and environmental benefits. Equity is simply not taken seriously.

The trouble with sustainability stems from the fact that the nature of economic development, environmental preservation and equity are simply not the same. Economic development is a “good”. Environmental quality is a “good”. Equity is fundamentally different:
it is concerned with the distributive and procedural aspects of how goods, including environmental and economic ones, are distributed. Thus, policymakers and other stakeholders can trade units of pollution for units of jobs. However, equity cannot be traded in this manner. Instead, considerations around equity must be directly followed by the question: equity of what? Equity is not a good, equity is a framework. This leg of the stool, or particular pillar, must thus be conceptualised differently.

Rather than focusing on the dynamics of environment versus the economy, policymakers should focus on equity as the centrepiece of their evaluative framework. As suggested above, what has plagued sustainability the most is its alleged incongruence with environmental equity in the urban locale. Without addressing such concerns, sustainability will not be fully realised. Policymakers should use equity as the underlying framework through which other values can be considered, rather than as a “good”. If sustainability is a proxy for anything, it should be a proxy for equity, not environmental quality.

A sustainability framework should be synonymous with and even perhaps supplanted by an equity framework. Adding environmental considerations to the economic development-focused mix is a necessary, but not sufficient, means towards achieving the goal of sustainability. Equity is the missing link and should become the overriding framework towards achieving the three values that we claim to be after in conceptualising sustainability as a driving goal. Unlike an approach driven by environmental and economic concerns, a focus on equity will ultimately create a nuanced consideration of the environmental consequences of development. By leading with an equity framework, positive environmental and economic results are more likely to be achieved for all citizens.

An equity framework may be best achieved through locally driven pursuit of both environmental and economic goals. By linking sustainability to environmental justice, a locally based equity approach can be grounded in aspects of citizenship. This could be best achieved by considering the position of the worst off. An equity-based framework would look at sustainability as a strategy for disadvantaged communities, using a locally generative and citizen-focused approach around environmental and economic costs and benefits. The concept of sustainability is most powerful when focusing on equity in the places that are the most disinvested.

In the end, if citizens, stakeholders and policymakers are truly serious about achieving all values of sustainability, we must re-conceptualise sustainability itself. Rather than a three-legged stool or a
series of pillars or perhaps even a pretzel, a sustainability truly incorporative of equity can best be represented as a Möbius strip, with economy and the environment linked inextricably together. For sustainability to be achieved, equity must be achieved through the distributonal and procedural dimensions and dynamics of an equitable balance of environmental and economic goods across populations. By using equity as the overarching framework, we can seek to bring about more just distributions of these environmental and economic “goods”. Research and political efforts should begin here.