

# HOW SOCIAL INNOVATION UNDERPINS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Social innovation has been the anonymous bedrock of global sustainable development for many years, but mainly disguised by a plethora of other labels.

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Although global sustainable development initiatives have been deploying social innovation principles and practices for many years, it is only recently that they have started to use this term and engage with SI networks and concepts. The two have much in common, and the UN' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 are bringing them together for mutual benefit.

## TWISTS AND TURNS IN DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

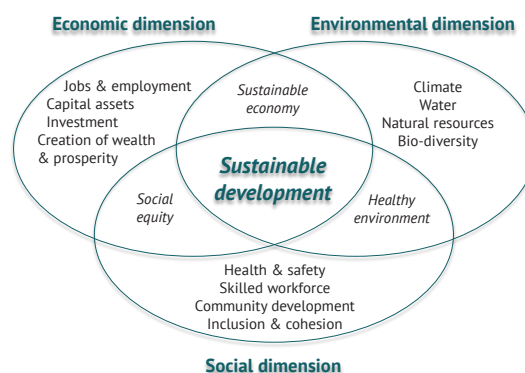
For most years since 1945 a market, technology-driven and top-down approach to development has been the norm through practices based on ideas around so-called modernisation, growth, structuralism and dependency [1]. These all accept the primacy of top-down macro-economic interventions, typically imposed by the 'Washington consensus' led by the IMF and the World Bank through their lending and funding policies. In effect, national governments have been coerced to adhere to the so-called 'global forces' that largely ignore existing social and institutional conditions and needs. A reaction came in the mid-1970s with the more bottom-up 'basic needs' approach which attempted to take account of social and economic needs as reflected in specific contexts and through a specific focus on poverty alleviation by activating people in society. However, these new ideas lacked any rigorous theory or widespread political backing, so the early 1980s saw a re-established neo-liberalist hegemony in which transformative social change was once again seen as needing a strongly market-based framework across all areas of society.

Although the more simplistic and extreme interpretations of this approach have since ebbed, a great deal of its furniture remains today and still determines much societal policy, despite the economic and financial crisis of 2008. However, over the last twenty years, and despite the continued overall

sway of neo-liberalism, promising new frameworks have started to be built in the development context, most notably the so-called post-development and human development theories, and in particular the ideas of sustainable development especially as articulated through the United Nations system.

## MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE PRESENT WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE FUTURE

Much of this has been driven by the realisation of the dangers of climate change and other environmental concerns, and their growing and pernicious impacts on social and economic development generally, and on the least developed countries and the most vulnerable populations in particular. The United Nations' sees sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It has since developed frameworks for global development, most recently in 2015 through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. As illustrated in the figure on the three dimensions of sustainable development, sustainable



The three dimensions of sustainable development

development is seen as the guiding principle for balanced long-term global development consisting of the three dimensions of economic development, social development and environmental development, so that if any one dimension is weak then the system as a whole is unsustainable.

## THE 'OLDEST PROFESSION' IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Unlike the UN's previous global development goals, the SDGs have been signed up to by almost all countries around the world, including the so-called developed countries in Europe and elsewhere, by the emerging economies like India and Brazil, and by the developing countries. The SDGs were also developed through intense and widespread consultation, involving a large number of organisations drawn from all sectors, including governments at all levels, civil society, businesses and academia. At the same time, the UN system and other decision and policy makers have started to recognise that historically all human development has relied on changing social practices and cultures, whether imposed top-down or developed perhaps more slowly from the bottom through ordinary people's everyday ways of living and working, adapting to their specific needs and their changing environments.

As a result, the UN now acknowledges that social innovation approaches are needed as mainstream tools for delivering sustainable development, alongside large-scale public and private funding, although until recently the term 'social innovation' has rarely been recognised or used. Today, however, the role of bottom-up social innovation in designing and delivering public services to income-poor and marginalised people in a gender sensitive manner, especially when based on local acceptance and advocacy campaigns, is seen as an important issue in achieving the SDGs by 2030.

## SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GO HAND-IN-HAND

For example, the United Nations Social Development Network is supporting Asia-Pacific countries' use of social innovation to tackle ageing population and gender inequality [2]. In India, building a mass social movement around the lack of basic utilities and services, through the mobilisation of opinion and advocacy across as many groups and interests as possible, can help change the behaviour and attitudes of both citizens and service providers to issues like public health. The potential benefits of public-civil partnerships in northern Ghana, where the former provides the framework

and expertise and the latter provides community activism, knowledge and resources, is a core issue addressed in the high impact 'School for Life' basic education initiative in rural areas. In 2001, a bottom-up social innovation was launched in Brazil's dry north-east by a network of civil society institutions and small farmers working to promote co-existence and local empowerment. One million cisterns were built for capturing rainwater to provide rural families with healthy drinking water year round regardless of when the rains come. This was undertaken in partnership with the government and the private sector, but retained its strong focus on ensuring the democratisation of access to water in order to ease the lives of the poor and especially women whose task it normally is to

obtain water for family use.

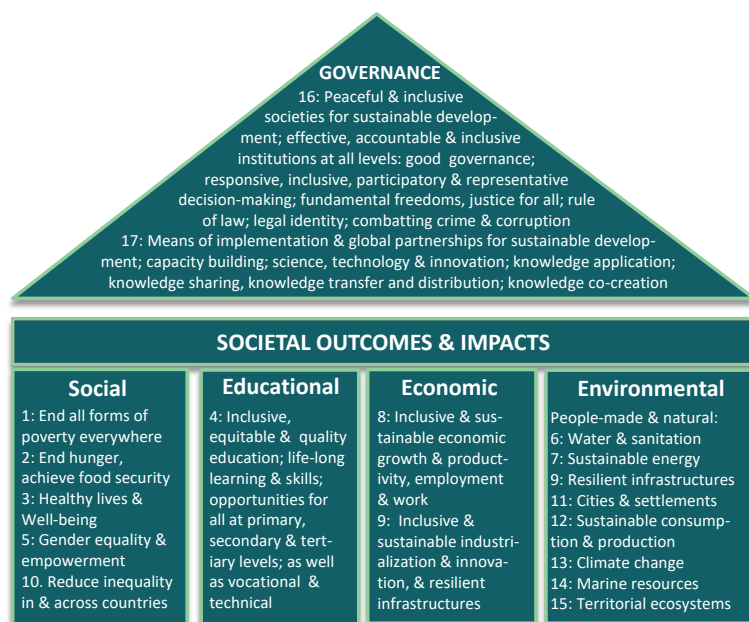
The experimental cistern was designed to capture rainwater, and is easy to build at low cost, using local knowledge and support from local authorities, universities and companies for technical assistance. The result is not only good quality drinking water but also the empowerment of family

farmers, women and local organisations, as well as their capacity to influence public policy [3].

Social innovation is thus increasingly recognised as an important component of the new innovation framework necessary for sustainable development. In addition to most developed countries, it is starting to become embedded and recognised in many developing countries and emerging economies. It helps to meet social needs (for example for an education or health service) in a new way that also involves collaboration with, and the empowerment of, the service user or beneficiary. It works with them rather than just doing something to them as passive recipients, also developing their own capabilities around and ownership of the service, and thereby transforming their social relations and improving their access to power and resources.

## CHARTING THE FUTURE TOGETHER

The increasing dialogue between the social innovation and sustainable development communities is also helping to chart the future policies and principles of societal development at all levels. It has only been over the last ten years that the recognised sources of innovation in society have started to include civil society. In an analogy with how DNA produces living cells in biology, the only model of innovation up until then was the so-called 'triple helix' that purported to twist together the three intertwining and intimately interacting strands of government, the private sector and research institutions. More recently, civil society has been added as the fourth innovation source to make up the 'quadruple helix',



The UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, 2016-2030

and this has happened at the same time that the concept of social innovation has come to the fore in both academic discourse and policy frameworks, especially in developed countries. Social innovation has indeed been one of the driving movements insisting on the recognition of civil society as an essential source of innovation, interacting with the others.

Today, by insisting on an important role for the environment, not only as a passive and suffering bystander but also as a source of innovation in its own right, the UN's approach to sustainable development has provoked a burgeoning movement proposing the recognition of the 'quintuple helix' model. This argues that nature, as biological and ecological systems, has been the prime source of evolutionary innovation, and that many social, economic and technological innovations have, both deliberately and subconsciously, aped and mimicked nature for hundreds of years. A useful rule of thumb might therefore be: if we have a problem, the first impulse might be, how has nature solved this or something similar? As an innovation source, unlike the components of the quadruple helix, nature does not have its own agency or conscious purpose, but if global society is to solve the massive and often existential challenges it faces (like climate change, employment, food resources and demographics) it needs both to be inspired by as well as work with natural systems. Thus, a socio-ecological transition is proposed as the framework for sustainable societies and development in the

future [4]. Environmental and ecological concerns are also a prime focus of social innovations, for example by recognising the need to much better contextualise and localise social development, the use of digital technologies like 3D printing which ape the way spiders secrete their web, the circular economy and re-cycling, self-leading teams in organisations and an ecosystems approach to successful social and business networks. Indeed, living assets in the form of people on the one hand, and nature as biological systems on the other, are the only real sources of innovation as these underpin what governments, businesses, researchers and communities do in order to innovate and develop.

The figure on the social development goals maps the 17 UN SDGs against the five elements of the quintuple helix: government and governance; social; educational; economic; and environmental.

Unlike previous development frameworks, this illustrates how the SDGs now comprehensively cover and attempt to interlink all elements necessary for sustainable development, with four direct impact pillars, plus the governance capstone to promote and enable their achievement. Social innovation works across and supports all 17 SDGs and all components of the figure. It is helping to create a new mind set and supportive framework for sustainable development as an essential part of the new innovation and knowledge paradigm [5].

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