The search for socially sustainable development: Conceptual and methodological issues

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Introduction

Interest in the concept of ‘socially sustainable development’ proceeds from two different lines of thought which became important in the 1990s. The first of these focuses on the idea of sustainable development, and the second on the issue of reducing poverty.

The idea of ‘sustainable development’ was widely publicized by the 1992 Earth Summit, held in Rio-de-Janeiro. It is derived from the Brundtland report, ‘Our Common Future’, published a few years earlier. Development is said to be sustainable when it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987).

This implies that the process of development will improve the well-being of people now alive, while maintaining a sufficient level of resources – especially non-renewable resources, whether natural, social or human – to permit future generations to enjoy at least an equivalent standard of living. This issue is now viewed as a serious matter by many governments and civil agencies. It demands that we take into account not only the objectives and outcome of development, but also address the method and process by which development is achieved.

Several key decisions taken during the Earth Summit, including the launching of Agenda 21, recommend the implementation of measures to protect the environment at the regional, national and local levels. Agenda 21 also encourages the development of multidisciplinary research to analyze the interactions between the various dimensions of sustainable development. There was general agreement that economic, social and ecological dimensions be given priority. The French government, backed by UNESCO and the EU Commission, suggested adding the cultural dimension. Others also refer to the political dimension. However, adding new dimensions increases the complexity of the analysis and, to some extent, weakens the conclusions that can be drawn.
Following the Summit, UNDP, which in 1990 had already introduced the concept of ‘human development’ in 1990 in reference to Sen’s capability approach, began speaking about ‘sustainable human development’. Human development is intended to improve people’s ability to live a life that they think is worth living, and Sen’s work relating capability to sustainability supports the notion of development intended to promote the capabilities of people alive now without compromising the capabilities of future generations (Sen 2000). This shift from the ‘ability of future generations’, as expressed in Brundtland’s report, to the ‘capabilities of future generations’, as suggested by Sen, provided a framework for the yearly Human Development Report at the world level and the National Human Development Report at the country level (UNDP 2005). However, this raises two major issues related to social justice: the distribution of capabilities within a given generation and the transmission of capabilities from one generation to the next. Research has to be pursued on these issues, which address the question of sustainability in social terms.

The second line of reflection is related to reducing poverty. The 1990s Decade for Development was mainly devoted to this objective. Moreover, at the 2002 Johannesburg Summit, poverty reduction was officially recognized as the social dimension of sustainable development.

We do not share this view and even think that this may have been a mistake. Social sustainability – which expresses the social dimension of sustainable development – cannot be simply reduced to poverty reduction, even if in this case poverty were to include not only its usual monetary aspects (levels of income and consumption), but also living standards and conditions, the quality of life, the ownership of assets and capabilities. Social sustainability surely implies considering a much wider range of issues, such as social exclusion, the rise in vulnerability, inequitable distribution and transmission of capabilities. All these issues have a major impact on social cohesion, and their consequences may be more serious than those related to poverty.

Social exclusion can be viewed as an extreme form of absolute poverty, in which access to goods, services and relationship is denied. Any increase in inequality hampers the reduction of poverty. The feeling of vulnerability is related to a decrease in capability and an increase in the awareness of inequality. Finally, the transmission of capability may be jeopardized by factors such as HIV/AIDS or various forms of discrimination. All these factors cause more damage to the social fabric than poverty itself, with the exception of poverty traps. They weaken social bonds and introduce a risk of internal conflict and irreversible
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social consequences. It is via these factors that the real issue of long-term social sustainability arises, and they must also be considered as key components of the social dimension of development, in addition to poverty (Dubois and Mahieu 2002).

For these reasons, this chapter focuses on the social dimension of sustainable development. This involves providing a clear definition of what socially sustainable development is and identifying the relevant conditions for social sustainability. These conditions are related to the issues of exclusion, vulnerability, inequality and so forth as observed in the field, and are not only based on the usual poverty indicators. They promote the emergence of specific precautionary principles that could make development agencies rethink their strategies in order to ensure social sustainability.

Naturally, poverty reduction remains a key dimension of this process, especially when dealing with the constitution of assets (in relation to ‘poverty of potentiality’), but it is now seen to be related to the fight against social exclusion (in relation with ‘poverty of access’ to goods and services) and vulnerability (in relation to ‘poverty of capability’). Moreover, equity and social justice, within one generation and between generations, are also addressed by considering the ‘inequality of capability’ (Sen 1982).

Within this framework, the concept of social sustainability raises a set of new conceptual and methodological issues. On the conceptual side, the characteristics of the economic agent and the ethical foundations underlying economic reasoning will have to be re-examined. On the methodological side, field observations of people’s socioeconomic situations and their ethical choices may help in compiling social precautionary principles to guide public action, NGO projects and policy design.

We will therefore first try to relate sustainable development to the capability approach to construct the concept of socially sustainable development. We will then go on to review the conceptual and methodological implications of this relationship.

**Sustainable development and the capability approach**

As was said earlier, the idea of a ‘socially sustainable development’ results from combining two preoccupations, i.e. sustainable development and reducing poverty. Their convergence is brought about through the capability approach. In the first case, it is the equitable distribution of capability from one generation to the next which is important; and in the second, it is the definition of poverty in terms of capability privation which counts.
Development can be said to be sustainable when it satisfies the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their needs. This definition gives a universal picture of development that considers its long-term effects on people everywhere. This is quite a novel approach and contrasts with the development policies of the past 20 years, which consisted mainly in stabilization and adjustment policies and usually focused on short-term economic and financial equilibrium.

Sustainable development involves several interacting dimensions – for instance, economic, social and ecological – and this implies that each dimension must be sustainable. Sustainability is usually described as ‘weak’ when substitutes can replace any resources destroyed: for instance, if a polluted lake can be replaced by artificial pools, or if the victims of inequitable policy measures are provided with financial compensation. It is described as ‘strong’ if no replacement is possible, because the production factors are complementary and no substitute can be envisaged. This may be the case, for instance, if pollution must be limited or a human cost avoided.

Economical sustainability is expressed by the idea of self-maintaining growth. It is based on a series of macroeconomic principles related to balancing the budget, current account balance, inflation control, and so on, and basic investment rules, such as budgetary allocations, investment sector rates, capital ratio, productivity levels, consumption/saving ratios, and so on. These are intended to optimize growth without saddling future generations with excessive debt.

Ecological sustainability focuses on reducing pollution, protecting non-renewable resources, energy savings and handing natural resources to future generations. In this context, basic principles have been compiled on the basis of the concepts of weak and strong sustainability and precautionary principles. A series of management rules, such as the Hartwick rule, according to which any resource which has been destroyed must be replaced, and property rights, clean development processes, renewable resource ratios and so forth translate these principles into practically applicable concepts.

Social sustainability has not been investigated as much as the other dimensions of sustainability. The fact that it is now being taken into account in economic analyses may lead to a radical change in how we think about growth and development. It implies that future generations should inherit at least as many resources, in terms of capital or various potentialities, as the current generation. This means that the social
dimension of sustainable development raises the issue of how to transmit sufficient assets and potentialities from one generation to the next. As well as physical and financial capital, these assets include human capital (including education and health), social capital (based on social interactions), rights, values, and so on, as well as the capacity to use all these potentialities in an appropriate way. Within this framework, we still have to identify and establish the key conditions, i.e. principles, standards and rules, which will ensure social sustainability.

Various aspects have to be taken into account when considering the three interrelated dimensions. First, economic and social linkage can be used to tackle the social consequences of macroeconomic policies in terms of the poverty, vulnerability and inequality various groups are facing. Second, the interconnection between the ecological and social dimensions raises the issue of trade-off between reducing poverty, on one hand, and protecting the environment, on the other. Third, we must consider the social nexus itself, which deals with access to and accumulation of human and social resources, as well as with the links between poverty, vulnerability and inequality for various groups of people.

Within this framework, the major issue is that current public policies – whether economic, social or ecological – may generate functional problems, such as poverty traps, exclusion, conflicts, etc., that jeopardize the potential benefits (in terms of access to social services), the assets and potentialities (among them human and social capital) and the capability to improve well-being for the present and future generations (Ballet, Dubois and Mahieu 2005).

An example of such issues is provided by the recent experience of a group of villages in southern Morocco in relation to a local NGO, Development and Migrations. By operating a generator, each village had four hours of electricity per day. The village council then decided, after obtaining general agreement, which public spaces should be lit and what the poorest and richest households would have to pay based on their per capita income. As a result, the richest families were indirectly subsidizing the poorer ones. Social life and the resulting relationships were sustained by means of meetings, discussions and consensus decisions.

It was such a success that the national electricity supplier, ONE, agreed to invest in electricity supply lines, transformers and equipment to connect these villages to the national grid, thus providing electricity for 24 hours a day at a much lower rate. However, each household would now have to pay ONE directly for their electricity, at a price based on the national marginal cost.
This led to a real improvement in the electricity supply, which was now permanently available, instead of being restricted to four hours per day, and at a much lower cost per hour. But this individualistic approach resulted in societal loss. As a result payment on a household basis public spaces are no longer lit. This will call for a new village initiative and the introduction of local council taxes. Moreover, even though the overall price per hour is much lower, some of the poorest families have difficulty in paying now that the rich no longer subsidize the poor.

Finally, ONE’s individual-household-based approach to the supply of electricity has reduced the capability of the poorest households, who can no longer afford the minimum electricity supply they require. Simultaneously it has increased the capability of the richest, who can consume more electricity than before at a lower cost. Permanent access to electricity looks like a beneficial change in terms of reducing poverty. In fact, it has increased the inequality of capability between households, and the vulnerability of the poor, with a risk of social exclusion of the poorest and, therefore, of jeopardizing social cohesion. Such a situation can be corrected only by setting up a new redistributive system, by means of taxes or subsidies at the village level, or a new, more socially-oriented national pricing scheme.

Similar situations may arise in other domains such as health and education, where inappropriate policy measures can also generate social exclusion, increased vulnerability and inequality generating feelings of injustice and disruption of social bonds and of cohesiveness. Economists group all these issues under the generic term of ‘social externalities’. These externalities can lead to dramatic and irreversible consequences, such as forced migration, suicide and social conflicts leading to civil war or genocide. At the very least, they demand that the human costs giving rise to social tension be avoided or compensation provided.

This example from Morocco shows that a social analysis of the likely impact of development policy or measures must be carried out before they are implemented and a wider view of the social situation must be taken into account.

*Socially sustainable development: relating capability and sustainability*

By defining sustainable development as development that promotes the capabilities of the present generation without compromising those of future generations, Sen (2000) introduces a link between capability and sustainability and implicitly addresses the issue of the intergenerational equity of capability.
According to the capability approach, converting resources, commodities and assets into adequate functionings, ‘beings’ and ‘doings’, is intended to improve the well-being of a person, taking into account his or her specific characteristics and the social context of opportunities and constraints in which he/she lives: a person’s capability results in the combination of various functionings (Sen 1987). Moreover, improving a person’s capability to do and be what he/she wishes, such as receiving an education, getting a job or participating in social life, increases his/her freedom to decide what he/she values.

Within this framework, it is easy to establish the link between poverty and vulnerability. Any lack of capability reduces the capacity for well-being and can, therefore, be viewed as a situation of absolute poverty (Sen 1999), whereas vulnerability corresponds to the probability of experiencing a loss of well-being when confronted by a dramatic event or an economic shock (Dubois and Rousseau 2001). Increasing the assets and potentialities of individuals, and improving their capacity to convert resources into adequate functionings reduces their vulnerability.

The issue remains the inequality of capability among individuals within a generation, which is a key factor increasing the risk of social dysfunction and political blockage (Sen 1982; 1997). This risk increases further when capabilities are transmitted from one generation to the next, especially if this is not done fairly (Dubois 2006).

In this context, socially sustainable development could be defined as ‘development that guarantees the improvement of well-being capability for all, by means of the equitable distribution of capabilities within the current generation on the one hand, and the equitable transmission of these capabilities to future generations, on the other hand’ (Ballet, Dubois and Mahieu 2005: 9).

There are instances of non-sustainability attributable to the non-equitable transmission of capabilities in several countries. For instance, the present conflict in Côte d’Ivoire can be explained by intergenerational unfairness of access to farmland. In Mauritania, the danger arises from the unequal accumulation of assets and potentialities by various ethnic groups. In Southern Africa, HIV/AIDS has had a disastrous effect on food security, because sick parents are not able to teach their children to farm, and children have to leave school earlier to earn money to pay for their parents’ health care (Dubois 2003). In France, examples can also easily be found of the ineffectiveness of the education system in transmitting appropriate capabilities to immigrants’ children. The November 2005 riots of these young people in the suburbs of many large towns and cities indicate that in some case the limits of tolerance have been reached (Dubois 2006).
Socially sustainable development is therefore expected to protect social potentialities, to improve people’s capabilities and to facilitate equitable transfers from one generation to the next. This implies addressing the factors that prevent the creation of potentiality (such as poverty traps), the promotion of capability (for example, social exclusion and vulnerability) and a just transfer between generations (inequity).

Searching for social sustainability

The issue is therefore to see how to ensure social sustainability, i.e. long-term sustainability in social terms. As a first step, one has to consider a few important prerequisites before trying to identify sustainability conditions.

The first prerequisite consists of distinguishing between different types of social issues. Some are related to social sectors, such as education, health, employment, and so on, whereas others concern the structure of society, through social links and interactions. When the distinction is not clearly made, ambiguity and confusion occur between these two visions of social development, i.e. more precisely between social and societal development. ‘Sustainable social development’ involves the social sectors and, for instance, how to ensure education and human development in the long term. In contrast, ‘socially sustainable development’ focuses on the effects of education on social behaviour and on the quality of relationships with other people, as well as on self-esteem, respect and dignity. This approach confers a key role on individuals embedded in social networks, the structure of their capabilities and, through the issue of intra- and intergenerational justice, their responsibility towards present and future generations. For these reasons, the issues of social exclusion, inequality and vulnerability become fundamental, as does access to social services, primary goods and culture, i.e. more precisely the recognition of people’s identity.

The second prerequisite deals with the interaction between the various components of sustainable development. The capability approach is useful here, because it can address the interrelations between various capabilities within an individual’s capability structure (Ballet, Dubois and Mahieu 2007). Some policies intended to reduce poverty by improving one component of well-being, for example education, health or employment, force the capability structure to adjust. If the need for adjustment becomes too great, some capabilities may be unable to adapt and will be destroyed, leading to a destabilization of the structure and increasing the individual’s vulnerability. On the other hand, strengthening
some particular capabilities can also result in new inequalities between people. These are, of course, common consequences, however, they need to be addressed in time and reflected upon because of the social externalities that they generate.

Social sustainability may also conflict with other dimensions of sustainability, like economic or ecological sustainability. We know that growth policies, even when sustainable in economic terms, can generate negative social consequences, such as inequality, social exclusion, challenges to identity, social fractures, etc., which weaken social cohesion and jeopardize the development process. Some phenomena may take place in relation to ecological sustainability. For instance, failure to correctly take into account cultural values may produce negative externalities affecting the ecological or economic sustainability. More generally, the conditions of social sustainability interact with the sustainability conditions of the other dimensions. Therefore, to be consistent with the general objective of sustainability, policies will have to address all kinds of social externalities, considering the impact of economic and ecological decisions on the social dimension, as well as the effect of measures on the social dimension itself (reducing poverty, for instance).

The third prerequisite concerns the justice of the distribution of capabilities within a generation and their transmission from one generation to the next. Social sustainability requires that development result in an improvement of well-being within a generation of all the complementary aspects of standards of living, living conditions, quality of life, capability, and so on, without forgetting intra-generational justice. An unequal distribution of capabilities within a given generation increases the risk of social dysfunction and blockage. This can happen when policy measures intended to reduce poverty, such as labour-intensive work, micro-finance projects or educational programs, target specific groups of people (refugees, women, etc.) and generate inequalities and economic insecurity for other groups.

This issue may be exacerbated when considering the intergenerational transmission of capabilities. To ensure the well-being of future generations their access to various goods and services (private, public, primary), capital assets (physical, human, social) and potentiality (rights, knowledge, values), converted into capabilities, at a level at least equivalent to that enjoyed by previous generations, must be secure. However, this may be rendered impossible for two reasons. First, inequality in distribution of such endowments within one given generation is usually exacerbated in subsequent generations, unless redistributive measures ensure equitable access to services, the accumulation of assets and...
the transmission of capabilities. Second, the younger generation may inherit from the previous generation a heavy burden, such as having to pay off public debt or fund retirement pensions for their parents.

Social sustainability therefore requires that people’s capability of well-being be improved, through equitable distribution and transmission within and between generations. Appropriate conditions to ensure this improvement will have to be found. They are based on the three previous prerequisites, dealing with the issues of reducing poverty and vulnerability in an equitable manner.

We need appropriate indicators to characterize these issues in particular socioeconomic contexts so as to be able to assess the social sustainability of development projects, or of policy measures envisaged by a country. These indicators have to be chosen according to their relevance, their sensitivity to the phenomenon under study, and the facility with which they can be applied. They set up the statistical limits (such as poverty lines, coefficient of vulnerability or aversion to inequality) required to identify thresholds and norms. Within a particular socioeconomic context, they provide the basis for defining the precautionary principles that would express the core conditions of social sustainability.

A first set of indicators focuses on describing various forms of poverty, i.e. monetary, standard of living, accessibility to goods and services (as a measure of social exclusion), assets and potentiality (rights, values), capability, and so forth. A second set is related to the assessment of inequality issues such as, for instance, gender inequalities, regional inequalities, inequality in capabilities and so on. Other indicators measure poverty traps, vulnerability, social tensions within society, and so forth.

More sophisticated and analytical indicators – such as aversion to inequality, the coefficient of vulnerability, poverty traps, and so on – may result from econometric analysis expressing the interrelations between growth, poverty and inequality (by estimating the corresponding elasticities). Other important relationships have to be addressed, such as the relations between vulnerability, risk and capability, for instance, or those between gender inequalities, vulnerability and poverty transmission, or between inequality, social cohesion and conflicts, and so on.

However, monitoring all these indicators on a regular basis raises a key question: to what extent would it be possible to devise a synthetic indicator to express the level of social sustainability or unsustainability for a given project or a country? Answering this question requires research into modelling of social sustainability and the identification of relevant conditions.
Conceptual and methodological implications

The idea of socially sustainable development raises various conceptual and methodological concerns, which address the definition of the economic agent, the ethical foundations of social sustainability and the determination of precautionary principles that could be used as societal safeguards.

From the economic agent to the responsible person

In mainstream economics, the ‘individual’ is usually the subject of analysis. He is considered to be autonomous, rational in his choices and assumed to be trying to maximize his utility subject to various constraints. However, as a result of social interactions, individuals can also behave in an altruistic way, integrating the utility of others into their own utility function and gaining benefit from this, even in a dilemma situation (Becker 1974).

Sen and Nussbaum go further by considering the concepts of ‘agent’ and ‘agency’. They introduce the capacity of acting and of choosing the aim of the action. Such capacity may be used for economic objectives, like improving well-being, but also for any action relating to other people, for example promoting social justice or community participation. Such a view introduces the possibility of behaving in a way different from the conventional maximization of one’s own utility and introduces the possibility of involving personal responsibility into the choice of actions affecting others.

In fact, the agent, as encountered in daily life, is embedded in a series of social networks and institutions such as the family, community, district, municipality and country. This is not only the result of the individual’s personal choice, as described by Becker (1974), but also of the fact that, within these networks that provide security, a person cannot live without fulfilling a series of social obligations that confer a set of rights based on reciprocity (Mahieu 1989). Everyone who belongs to a community has to fulfil obligations, which are usually expressed as demands on time and resources made by the community, in order to benefit from the rights that it provides. Taking this set of rights and obligations into account in the personal decision process implies that the agent is not only rational, but also responsible.

This is why some authors speak of the reasonable ‘subject’ (Misrahi 2003) as someone involved in his/her social network and therefore responsible for both his/her current actions affecting others (i.e. ex-post responsibility), and what other people will experience in the future.
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(i.e. prospective or ex-ante responsibility). Touraine (2005), by considering the ‘personal subject’, also introduces the notion of cultural links with others and the importance of identity, respect and dignity.

The idea of socially sustainable development takes into account the fact that people are involved in social relationships, stressing their freedom as well as their dependency; that they are facing the future with either hope or despair and feel responsible for their children and, via them, for future generations. All these issues imply a need to review the rules and values that are assumed to guide people in making choices with economic consequences. This is why human beings cannot be reduced to the search for the optimal satisfaction of basic needs.

The concept of a ‘person’ makes it possible to take such issues into account and enables us to consider a wider range of responsibilities based on responsibility towards the present generation (Levinas 1983), as well as towards future generations (Jonas 1984). By definition, a person is able to imagine the situation of the other, to imagine being the other person, and more generally to sublimate his/her own attitude towards others by extending his/her limits (Mounier 1961; Ricoeur 1995). Phenomenological and existentialist philosophies have set out to explain these personal life experiences and transcendental behaviour.

In the economic literature, the ‘individual’ is still usually viewed as a rational entity, isolated from the human community, while the ‘person’ gives importance to others and thinks in terms of unity and a common future. The person transcends him/herself by a creative life based on respect and empathy for others, which leads to commitment. In this framework, the person’s freedom also implies satisfying his/her own needs but with a view to sharing and not wasting common goods and increasing the development of creative capabilities. All this contributes to widening the level of ‘personhood’ (Giovanola 2005), by understanding the link between freedom and responsibility.

In this way, the concept of a person provides the widest vision of a human being in charge of his/her decisions, focusing not only on him/herself, but also on others and more and more nowadays also on nature. In Japan, the Kyoto school, including the philosopher Watsuji (1949) and currently the ‘public philosophy’ approach (Yamawaki, Kobayashi and Ikemoto 2006), has already gone some way in this direction.

Theoretically, reference to the person’s capability through his/her agency opens many analytical possibilities (Sen 1999). One can list the set of capabilities attributed to a person (Alkire 2002) and consider the ‘capability for affiliation’ as essential (Nussbaum 2000; 2006). The capability approach could also look at responsibility by including specific capabilities, i.e. the capabilities of feeling responsible both ex ante...
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(like responsible parents) and ex post for his or her act (in a consequentialist view).

Dealing with social sustainability implies relating this normative definition of the person to the characteristics of his/her effective behaviour as observed in the field. This requires, in practical terms, field investigations with appropriate questionnaires to collect information about these characteristics, people’s relationships, the actions that they value and to which they are ready to commit themselves.

**Ethical foundations: a positive ethics approach**

The observation of what people value, of the way they combine various values to produce objectives and to justify their action, can be referred to as ‘positive ethics’. In fact, moral philosophy deals with the issue of personal values and usually provides convictions and rules about what one should do or not do. Ethics, in contrast, focuses mainly on the debates that arise from moral experiences to define and set up these rules. In a way, ethics can be said to be more spontaneous and to apply to specific cases, whereas moral rules are defined with a more universal objective and may also result from external decisions.

Ethics as a discipline can be divided into normative ethics and positive ethics (Ballet and Bazin 2006). Normative ethics are intended to set up a system of moral rules to guide action or to give meaning to life, whereas positive ethics observe how people behave in ethical terms with the objective of analyzing and identifying the empirical rules that account for this behaviour or action. This approach helps us to understand how people deal with dilemmas and moral situations in practical terms in everyday life and is very useful in designing and developing projects or policies.

Within this framework, two important philosophical traditions should be considered. The first approach refers to the mainstream ethics of the ‘good life’, which originates in Aristotle and was developed by thinkers like Hume, Bentham and Mill, converging on the aim of achieving the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. The focus is on ‘the Good’, i.e. what is good for a person or group of persons. This leads to hedonistic, utilitarian and consequentialist approaches, where priority is given to freedom, property, satisfaction and utility. In these approaches, responsibility is addressed by considering the actions that directly affect others. It is an ex-post responsibility, i.e. a responsibility that is a consequence of the freedom to act.

The second approach relates to ‘the Just’, i.e. to a universal law, which is the expression of traditional rules, religious beliefs or legal
norms that already exist. Kant’s (1785) principle ‘do not do anything that could harm anyone else’ is an expression of this way of thinking. Priority is given to a person’s intention and the obligations that he or she must satisfy. According to this approach, responsibility exists before the freedom to act. It is an ex-ante or prospective responsibility that results from the obligations of the person towards his/her community or social network. Freedoms and rights result from the satisfaction of these obligations. Both Levinas (1983), who focuses on the ‘other’, and Jonas (1984), who refers to future generations, consider that responsibility towards other people has priority over freedom.

The ‘ethics of responsibility’ tries to combine these two traditions by addressing the interaction between freedom and responsibility at the personal level and through specific action (Ricoeur 1995). For instance, in the case of emergency situations, after a dramatic event when people are confronted by vulnerability and distress, then responsibility towards others becomes the first priority. It is a situation where the ‘ethics of care’ prevails as part of the ethics of responsibility. In practical terms, the ethics of responsibility can be translated into a series of key questions that express how people react when faced with dilemmas between freedom and responsibility. It then becomes important to find out which ethical rules a person will actually refer to when deciding what to do.

Obtaining answers to such questions would provide the basis of the ethical foundations that underlie economic reasoning. This is required by the framework of socially sustainable development, which deals with responsibility towards future generations in terms of well-being and capability distribution.

Referring to positive ethics, rather than to normative ethics, as is usually the case, is the best way to understand how the people behave in real life and to identify the practical principles to which they refer. Positive ethics, which are based on the observation of how people adjust the moral norms of their community to their own egotistic preferences, provides some answers. Since people making decisions are often surrounded by various sets of values originating from tradition, religion, Western influence and personally constructed beliefs, a positive ethics approach may help us to understand the conflicting rules that the person faces when taking economic decisions. People consider these values to be fundamental and are frustrated when they cannot base their actions on them. This frustration may be forcefully expressed in conflicts that may jeopardize a development project or policy.

In practice, when confronted by various problems, people usually draw on several ethical systems to devise their own rules for decision-making.
This depends on how they see their own responsibilities. Taking this situation into account would help to improve the design of development projects and policies by tailoring and fine-tuning them to different social contexts.

Addressing ethical values within the development process widens the concept of social development and relates it to its cultural dimension. In this way, positive ethics provides a way to understand the choices of people, their aspirations and behaviour and the social dynamics within society. The work done by Weber (1930) on the religious values that permitted the emergence of capitalism is a good example of this approach.

Positive ethics does not preach any form of abstract goodness but considers the relativity of the moral choices made by people. These moral choices can be observed through field investigations and can be used to evaluate shifts in values resulting from conflicts faced during the development process. This requires observing and measuring not only economic behaviour but also the values underlying it. It implies designing appropriate field surveys of how people behave, asking them about the reasons of their choices, the values behind these choices, and so forth. ‘Positive ethics surveys’, for instance, would be appropriate tools to observe the relativity of the moral choices people make and the empirical moral rules that explain their behaviour and actions. In fact, such surveys would be quite similar to the tools recently used to measure agency in several countries (Alkire and Chirkov 2006).

The setting up of social precautionary principles

Investigations may reveal both people’s characteristics and socio-economic situation, on the one hand, and their choices, the ethical rules that they follow, on the other. Combining various types of information makes it possible to identify and produce indicators that reflect the quantitative thresholds and qualitative limits accepted by people within their current set of values. This approach makes it possible to devise precautionary principles for development operations, on the basis of what has been observed.

These principles are required to prevent undesirable irreversible consequences of projects and public policies, and to avoid socially unsustainable situations. They can be used (ex ante) to design appropriate development strategies or to mitigate (ex post) the effects of external shocks. In philosophical terms, they draw their legitimacy from the ethics of responsibility. Moreover, they rehabilitate ethics in day-to-day life. By protecting human resources and potentialities, by facilitating
the transfer of capabilities from one generation to the next, they play a key role in institutionalizing social sustainability.

A standard approach is usually used in drawing up such principles. First, the respective roles of the various agents involved in the decision-making process have to be examined. Second, the social consequences of various risks for people's capability structure and their agency role have to be assessed, taking into account the uncertainty of social risks. Third, alternative scenarios can be devised through ethical discussion among the stakeholders, by considering how capability and responsibility are distributed. And finally, a redistributive process has to be established, by the stakeholders themselves, to provide either compensation or rewards for the negative or positive social externalities that may arise.

A concrete example can be given by going back to the villages of southern Morocco mentioned earlier. It helps to explain the role of social safeguards that adequate precautionary principles can provide when they are based on local traditions.

To improve the standard of living, village leaders suggested using external investment to launch new income-generating activities. They chose a form of eco-tourism in which the inhabitants of the villages would host tourists. However, to maintain and protect the current social dynamics, debates with the local population were set up, examining how to proceed when implementing this type of development project. A pragmatic approach was used, based on in-depth knowledge of the villages concerned. Through a series of meetings and debates within village councils, three guiding principles slowly emerged.

First, any decision concerning the village has to be reached by consensus, through public meetings and debates. This rule can be viewed, in philosophical terms, as related to Habermas’s ‘ethics of discussion’ (1991), i.e. it is the group itself which sets up, after discussion, the ethical rules that will guide its decision in the future.

Second, the tradition of hospitality, which is considered to be a major feature of Moroccan culture, should be respected. This implies that visiting tourists will be hosted in the best houses, even if this may benefit the richest families more than the poorest and therefore increase inequality.

Third, to avoid excessive inequality of income and assets, which could destabilize the village’s social cohesion, a redistribution mechanism was adopted in order to boost the opportunities and capabilities of the poorest families. Part of the surplus generated by the visiting tourists will be allocated to the poorest families in order to improve their houses and provide for their children’s education.
These are three simple rules involving ‘discussion’, ‘hospitality’ and ‘sharing’. In fact, they are the expression of local precautionary principles that have emerged from debates within the villages. They emerge from the common values shared by the people and play the role of social safeguards vis-à-vis the development process.

Alternative scenarios would have been either to let the market govern the decision-making role, based solely on economic efficiency, or to allow the external investors to impose their preferred solution. In both cases, the risk of negative externalities on the villages’ social cohesion would increase, people becoming frustrated by a process they do not control and which gives rise to inequity. This example differs from and complements the previous one given for the same region. It highlights the capability of people to provide, through their agency, a shared solution, expressed by precautionary principles, with the aim of reducing the risk of social dysfunction.

Conclusion

The concept of sustainable development includes the idea that what is done now should not endanger the capability of future generation to have a quality of life at least equivalent to that presently enjoyed. Socially sustainable development, which addresses the social dimension of this concept, focuses on the dynamic aspects of sustainable development and insists on the fact that it should be a form of ‘development that guarantees the improvement of well-being capability for all, through an equitable distribution of capabilities within the current generation on the one hand, and the equitable transmission of these capabilities to future generations, on the other hand’ (Ballet, Dubois and Mahieu 2005: 9).

This is a process which is normally related to growth, since growth produces the goods and services required to improve people’s capabilities by conversion into functioning. However, the social consequences of growth, like all economic or ecological externalities, need to be controlled in order to ensure that human development remains sustainable. The objective is to make appropriate decisions that avoid generating social dysfunction that would jeopardize the development process. Such an attitude requires a feeling of responsibility towards the others, i.e. a prospective responsibility that emerges before any decision has been reached. In fact, it introduces the ethics of responsibility into persons’ everyday life.

In practical terms, when designing development strategies, this approach requires specific social analysis before implementing any
project or policy measure. Through these social analyses, current policies will be scrutinized to make sure that the main objective of reducing poverty is not achieved at the expense of social sustainability, as it was in the case of the supply of electricity to Moroccan villages. This implies making sure that people have equitable access to goods and services, to the various assets and potentialities and equitable distribution of capability both at the intra- and intergenerational levels.

These analyses rest on the idea of field investigations, including household surveys, panel surveys and investigations, which provide information about people’s capability set, their socioeconomic situations and their behaviour in terms of ethical choices. This makes it possible to identify the thresholds, limits and norms that would help determine, by means of appropriate indicators, the social precautionary principles which can be used as safeguard to ensure social sustainability.

However, research based on empirical studies on all these issues has still to be conducted in various contexts to make it possible to determine synthetic indicators able to evaluate the social sustainability of development projects and national policies.

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