

Conceptualizing Social Sustainability in the Business Operations

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Abstract

One of the most important challenges faced by business managers today is the integration of sustainability into their core functions. The contemporary enterprise is forced to leap forward from the mere adoption of green practices towards re-thinking, re-designing, and re-developing of business practices in a more sustainable way. Most of the initiatives in this attempt have so far emphasized primarily on the economic and environmental aspects of sustainable development and overlooking the social dimension of sustainability. As more and more organizations commit to sustainability, there is an increasing concern to incorporate social sustainability throughout their business operations. To evaluate the notion, value and impact of sustainability, typically, some organizations use pre-existing indicators while others look beyond the measurement of impacts by constructing their own system of indicators. This paper draws on comprehensive literature review to come up with broadly acceptable framework of social sustainability indicators. Suggest that core social factors including fairness and equality, poverty, health, education, delinquencies, demography, culture and employee engagement within an organization drive its economic and environmental sustainability. These results offer insight into the emerging phenomenon of formulating organizational sustainable business strategies based on social indicators to attain the ultimate organizational sustainable outcomes. Among the first studies identifying

social sustainability indicators from societal and corporate perspectives. And offered comprehensive social sustainability framework for the business world to be adopted.

Keywords

Sustainability; Social Indicators; Social Sustainability, Businesses

Introduction

The notion of sustainability achieved prominence through a report by World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) that described sustainable development as ‘*meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs*’. Much of the debate on sustainability has been dominated by ecological perspectives, since the late 1980s despite the world commission report focused on poverty, resources, ecology and economic factors. It has long been a practice of decision makers to address only the economic dimension of sustainability while there has also been an increasing focus on the environmental dimension as well in the last one decade. The social dimension, however, has not yet been well defined and the literature has only touched upon legislative issues and health and safety (Hutchins & Sutherland, 2008). The modern business world is acknowledging the significance of corporate social responsibility which makes their operations consistent with the morals and values of society. That is, while delivering profits to its owners/shareholders, an organization is expected to support discretionary activities such as philanthropic donations, healthcare, childcare and educational opportunities (Carroll, 1991).

Though WCED report (1987) had pointed out intergenerational justice, gender equity and participatory decision making etc., a systematic approach to social sustainability has only been a secondary consideration (Boström, 2012). The last decade, however, has seen an increasing interest in the social aspect of sustainability (Åhman, 2013). It should well be noticed that social consideration is intrinsically different from the earlier two in their nature. While the conservation of resources is the main objective to sustain an organization economically or environmentally, the same would not be true for the indicators of social sustainability (Marcuse, 1998). That is, the goals of social sustainability may not be in line with those of economic and/or environmental sustainability. For example, a firm may need more natural resources to foster human capabilities and to overcome social inequalities. One may even wonder if the goals of social sustainability are internally consistent themselves. For example, the interests of one generation may be different from those of another. Therefore, a formal development of the detailed perception of social sustainability is inevitable.

This paper aims to develop better understanding of the concept by revisiting the social dimension of sustainability from communal and corporate perspectives and then integrating the best suited approach in business world. The study will identify harmonies and variances in the understanding of social sustainability from both perspectives in an effort to recognize core aspects that are essential for business organizations.

Conceptualizing Social Sustainability

There has been a fragmented approach in literature to address social sustainability. A major challenge for the organizations engaging in social sustainability is to bridge the gap between their business approach to address their financial objectives and the long term social objectives (Buser & Koch, 2014). Another challenge is to have a ‘single-building’ approach with a broader local area approach. The solutions in literature have tended to focus on economic, environmental, and architectural solutions (Boström, 2012; Vallance, Perkins, & Dixon, 2011). These solutions give rise to disparities and segregation between areas. There is no sole definition to social sustainability in literature (Weingaertner & Moberg, 2014). For instance, the distinct focus of social sustainability is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Fragmented scope of social sustainability

Authors	Scope
(Sachs, 1999)	basic values of equity and democracy

(Koning, 2010)	culture, equity and social justice
(United Nations. Department of Economic & United Nations. Department of Public Information, 2009)	end of extreme poverty and hunger, universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, reduced child mortality, improved maternal health and fighting HIV/AIDS and malaria
(McKenzie, 2004)	a life-enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition
(Gilchrist & Allouche, 2005)	basic needs, capacity of individual/community
(Littig & Grießler, 2005)	satisfy human needs and to fulfill social justice, human dignity and engagement
(Marafa, 2002)	social and cultural consequences to the society

Quite astonishingly, most of the social sustainability definitions that exist are frequently determined by specific criteria or study points of view, as opposed to being general. For some it is based on equity and democracy (Sachs, 1999) while others lay it upon fundamental estimations of values and democracy; e.g. (Barbier, 1987) and (Koning, 2010). (Littig & Grießler, 2005) had stressed the significance of nature and society by highlighting the fact that social sustainability would be guaranteed if tasks within general public and the related institutional courses of action fulfill a broadened set of human needs and are formed in a way that nature and its regenerative abilities are safeguarded over a drawn out stretch of time and the regularizing cases of social equity, human pride and cooperation are fulfilled. The literature has proposed key subjects or themes that portray social issues pertinent to the sustainability. Besides, there are Millennium Development Goals that target human needs and essential rights of every individual. For example, eliminating poverty, primary education and gender balance etc. The role of social sustainability has only been customary along with that of the stronger disciplines, i.e. economy and environment. But, the recent realization of the concepts such as equity and environmental justice (Agyeman & Evans, 2004) have highlighted the relevance of social aspects to a great extent. For example, corporate social responsibility has recently been used more actively through various tools (Carroll, 1991). Thus, a continuous evolution in this field has made necessary to have newer and clear tools and methods for assessing and reporting the social dimension of sustainability.

Social Sustainability and Corporate Sustainability

There is no common definition of corporate sustainability. Though Steurer et al. (2005) describe sustainable development as a societal concept, they stated it gradually being applied as a commercial notion below the term of 'corporate sustainability'. Christofi et al. (2012) argue that corporate sustainability developments should be regard to economic growth, environmental regulation, social justice and equity. IISD (1992) outlines corporate sustainability as embracing corporate strategies and actions that meet the needs of the businesses and their stakeholders at present whereas shielding, sustaining and augmenting the human and natural resources that will be looked-for in the future. Dyllick and Hockerts (2002) explain it by fulfilling the requirements of the organization's conventional and secondary stakeholders like (shareholders, employees, clients, pressure groups, communities etc.), without compromising its capability to fulfil future stakeholders' needs too. Corporate sustainability is vital in realizing company's vision without trailing competitive advantage while ensuring companywide economic growth, environmental stewardship and providing social responsibilities (Koc, and Durmaz, 2015).

Stakeholders and Social Sustainability

As a result of the substantial socio-economic and environmental influences in-built with business operations, organizations globally are progressively being managed inside the framework of sustainable development guiding philosophies mostly as a reaction to the gravity received by their numerous stakeholders (Jordao, 2009).

Sustainability involves incorporating economic, environmental and social performance indicators which are also defined as triple bottom line or the dimensions of sustainability (GRI, 2006) in business management and reporting process (Elkington, 1997). According to Artiach et al. (2010) in long term, the organization that has a powerful economic structure, socially meets stakeholders' expectations and minimizes negative environmental impacts could be sustainable. They further argue that in short term companies should provide competitive products and services to sustain economically and also protect the natural and human resources to provide continuity for the generation's future needs. Because of the pressure from internal and external stakeholders, companies consider a variety of sustainability initiatives according to environmental and social impacts of their operations (Koc and Durmaz, 2015). Organizations share full evidence about these initiatives through their sustainability reports. Details on these initiatives are gradually widely shared in corporate sustainability, or equivalent reports. However, stakeholders often struggle to make sense of the information reported (Koc and Durmaz, 2015) specially, for the social dimension of their sustainability initiatives or activities. To help highlight businesses with prototypical sustainability performance, a number of ratings, awards, and indices have emerged (Sadowski et al., 2010). Organizations that want to highlight their contributions, and inform their stakeholders about their activities and progresses towards sustainability are dissemination and developing corporate sustainability reports but still focus is on environmental and economic dimension of sustainability but social dimension doesn't make its clear and visible way to be incorporated and reported.

Quantifying and Reporting Sustainability

There is an increasing trend in organizations to measuring, improving and reporting sustainability (Dewulf & Van Langenhove, 2006) which in most cases encompasses a triple bottom line of people, planet and profit. This enhanced concern is partly originated due to the pressures from stakeholders that push for transparency in business operations. Thus, identification of true indicators is significant for quantifying, tracking and reporting multiple dimensions of sustainability. Most of the indicators in the current organizational practices are either enforced by experts (such as scientists or policy makers) with a focus on certain countries and or processes (Bell & Morse, 2008). The two focus groups report their efforts mainly through Dow Jones Sustainability Index and United Nations Committee on Sustainable Development Indicators respectively.

(Littig & Griebler, 2005) had identified two ways to hypothesize sustainability: one-pillar and three-pillar models. The one pillar model demonstrates how ecological resources are to be maintained to balance the social and economic needs of future generations. On the other hand, develops independent social and economic goals. Furthermore, these models have been enhanced with various additional categories and sub-categories over the years (Pfahl, 2005). The interrelationship among these categories (subcategories) is yet to be established. That is the linkage between environmental (ecological), economic and social concerns is still not well recognized (Littig & Griebler, 2005). For example, the speedy production of affordable housing to ensure social sustainability may not serve the desire to have green housing (Berke & Conroy, 2000). An absence of clear definition for each category makes the problem even worse.

Certainly, traditional business companies give justification only to their shareholders, although in corporate sustainability understanding the scope of responsibility has been lingering. Stakeholders should get information about company's social, environmental and financial performance whereas sustainability performance can be defined as the performance in all dimensions of a company for all-inclusive corporate sustainability drivers (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2006). With sustainability reports, stakeholders can appraise company performance in terms of social, environmental economic dimensions and associate with other competitors. With the aim of survival in the future, it is prerequisite for the companies to integrate social sustainability in consort with their long-term objectives which will make it promising for the company to have a sustainable economic progression. And also redeploy on their vision in terms of sustainability which will deliver a blueprint to meet the varying needs of the communities like climate change, exhaustion of resources and poverty.

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2002) has well-defined sustainability reporting as: 'public reports by companies to provide internal and external stakeholders with a picture of corporate position and activities on economic, environmental and social dimensions'. In brief, such reports attempt to pronounce the organization's involvement towards sustainable development. Soerensen (2003) outlines sustainability reporting as the yearly assessment of an organization's economic, environmental, and social performance and the wide-ranging exercise of business doings related with organizational answerability and transparency that is motivated by environmental and societal demands. Though, Jackson (2005) states it as a high-level strategic paper that mirrors corporate actions that touch the society, economy and natural environment along with it addresses the challenges,

opportunities and concerns of sustainable development to the firm and its industry division. In fact, sustainability reporting aims to inform stakeholders during the reporting period with qualitative and quantitative information about the company's economic, environmental and social improvements and also efficiency and effectiveness of undertakings which are incorporated with the company's strategic components.

History and Ways of Sustainability Reporting

According to Koc and Durmaz (2015) initially, companies reporting process was started in the 1930's with the financial reporting process. However, sustainability reporting is considered to have been started in the 1970's with social reporting. Then from the 1980's till the middle of the 1990's the focal point for reporting has been environmental reporting. But, currently unfortunately focus is only given to economic and environmental dimensions.

Elkington (1997) presented the triple bottom line concept for corporate reporting that covers not only the conventional bottom line (economic and financial performance) but also encompasses it with environmental and a social dimension.

On the other hand, Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is an international non-profit organization, established in 1997 by the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES) and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). The GRI Rules were primarily available in 2000 to support companies in generating sustainability reports that integrate social, environmental and economic impacts of business with a shared method. The GRI aims to form the guidelines as an internationally recognized charter that promotes equivalent and pertinent sustainability reporting for all divisions and all sectors (Willis, 2003; GRI, 2006; Sherman, and DiGuilio, 2010).

According to Bossel's (1999) corporate sustainability should be measured by providing precise information about authentication of the whole system and their each constituent like; the documentation of the indicators of each dimension and determining the basic subsystems. In this setting, organizations use economic, environmental and social performance indicators in defining and measuring the sustainability (GRI, 2006). So corporate sustainability reporting needs to contain indicators and relevant qualitative and quantitative information on environmental, social, economic dimension. But, according to present reporting indicators there is satisfactory detail given for economic and environmental but very less detail for social sustainability indicators.

Triple Bottom Line Approach and Social Sustainability

Triple Bottom Line has been a common tool for assessing a firm's focus on sustainability (Samajdar, 2014). It embodies the three pillars of sustainability; namely economic, environmental and social. This assessment reflects the capability of a firm to confront with several contemporary challenges in the three dimensions. (Adams, 2006) developed the following schematic illustration of sustainability and argued that the three pillars of sustainability are not mutually exclusive and can be mutually reinforcing (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Convergence of Three Pillars of Sustainability

Why Social Dimension of Sustainability is Imbalance?

The social dimension of sustainability does not emerge from 1960s environmental movement and the 1970s basic needs approach to economic development (Colantonio & Dixon, 2010). This identical fact lays the foundation for an imbalance while prioritizing within the framework of sustainable development (Landorf, 2011). An intuitive reason

behind this disparity is that social aspects cannot be measured through cost-benefit analysis, gross national product and greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, they still present definitional vagueness and discrepancies and thus lack an international framework for evaluation (Littig & Grießler, 2005). The limited evidence in literature is rather based on practical understanding of plausibility and political agendas rather than on theory and empirical evidence (Littig & Grießler, 2005). This vagueness presents a huge gap in literature about the consensus and a capability to address a balance of economic and environmental issues with social issues (Morrison-Saunders & Therivel, 2006).

Sustainable Development and Social Sustainability

Each individual in a community should have access to a decent quality of life, equity, security and medical care (Chiu, 2004; Partridge, 2005). The last decade has witnessed a significant increase of the importance of the social dimension of sustainable development (Labuschagne, Brent, & Van Erck, 2005). As a result, there is a growing level of interest from both public and private firms in addressing corporate social responsibility (Dias-Sardinha & Reijnders, 2005).

The term sustainable development refers to a process of change towards achieving sustainability goals (Marcuse, 1998). (Goel & Sivam, 2015) have reviewed and discussed the ways in which social sustainability is presented from the fields of urban development as well as industries/products. These two fields cater to the interests of both public sector (social development) and private sector (industries/products). This conceptualization of social sustainability within the contrasting fields should enable us identify core themes within interdisciplinary boundaries. This mutual understanding would also enable the stakeholders to work together more effectively. Moreover, exploring the social dimensions in sustainability might help us to understand why sustainable policies are not able to produce the expected results (Goel & Sivam, 2015).

Social Sustainability and Different Disciplines

Social sustainability has been of concern to both professionals and academia in industrial contexts such as manufacturing (Hutchins & Sutherland, 2008; Labuschagne & Brent, 2008). This concern must be embedded in a process during design, planning and production (Zuo, Jin, & Flynn, 2012). It is well recognized that the construction activities have significant impacts on the environment, economy and society (Lützkendorf & Lorenz, 2006). Positively, the construction industry produces a variety of buildings to satisfy different requirements, contributes towards the national GDP and provides a large amount of employment opportunities. However, the depletion of natural resources and degradation of environment has triggered an increasing level of public scrutiny on construction activities. The last decades have witnessed the strong efforts been made from both the industry and academic to target the sustainability issues in the construction industry.

However, these efforts are largely environmentally oriented such as waste management, greenhouse gas emission reduction, energy efficiency and water conservation. Impacts of construction activities which affect the surrounding society include traffic congestion and delays, disruption of economic activities, excessive generation of pollution and pollutants, damage to sensitive ecosystems, and damage to existing structures and infrastructure systems (Gilchrist & Allouche, 2005). According to (Abowitz & Toole, 2009) construction is a social process and the social aspects of sustainability need to be paid attention to as well in construction at higher level.

Social aspects of sustainability are increasingly being recognized as important, and a vast amount of literature discussing social sustainability has emerged within different fields such as sociology, urban planning and tourist studies. Even though there have been attempts to summarize this growing quantity (Colantonio & Dixon, 2010; Koning, 2010; McKenzie, 2004; Vallance et al., 2011), the concept of social sustainability is still, to some degree, under-theorized (Weingaertner & Moberg, 2014).

Societal Perspective on Social Sustainability

Despite the considerable academic and political attention paid to broad concepts of sustainable development, there is some feeling that the 'social' has been neglected, and is not seen to be equal to or as important as either the economic or environmental aspects of sustainable development (Cuthill, 2010; Davidson, 2009). As a result of this neglect, social sustainability is the least conceptually developed of the three pillars (Kunz, 2006; Littig & Grießler, 2005; Partridge, 2005). For example, it is only over the last 7–8 years that we have seen some limited reporting

focusing specifically on social sustainability theory and policy (Barron & Gauntlet, 2002; Becker, Jahn, & Stiebs, 1999; Empacher & Wehling, 2002; Koning, 2010; Kunz, 2006; McKenzie, 2004; Polèse & Stren, 2000).

However, extensive community-based research, while not always explicitly linked to the sustainability discussion, provides a strong ‘practice’ perspective of what social sustainability might encompass (Partridge, 2005). This theoretical paper provides useful direction for exploring concepts of social sustainability by highlighting its important indicators (Table 2). Learning from this research has the potential to broaden current understandings of the social dimension of sustainability. As there has been little effort to encompass this effort into a broader conceptual framework, as happened with both economic and environmental sustainability.

Table 2: Social Sustainability Indicators from Societal Perspective

INDICATORS	INDICATORS
Health and Well-Being	Social Capital and Networks
Safety and Security	Accessibility
Fair Distribution of Income, Employment	Social Cohesion and Inclusion
Cultural Heritage	Participation and Empowerment
Equal Opportunities and Equity	Housing and Community Stability
Education and Training	Sense of Place and Belonging
Social Justice	Human Scale Development
Engaged Governance	Social Infrastructure

Companies’ Perspective on Social Sustainability

Viewing and focusing at social sustainability from companies’ perspective, it is clear that environmental and economic aspects have been on their agenda for some time, and are even used for the marketing of products and companies, but social sustainability aspects have only recently been introduced more broadly – perhaps because of the increasing demand and pressure from society for them to address the negative social impacts related to their activities and products (Weingaertner & Moberg, 2014). Table 3 elaborates how companies perceive social sustainability.

Table 3. Social Sustainability Indicators from Companies’ Perspective

INDICATORS	INDICATORS
Equal Opportunities	Indigenous Rights
Education and Training	Labor Practices
Governance	Fair Operating Practices
Health and Safety	Cultural Heritage
Employment	Community Involvement and Development
Job Security	Technology Development
Human Rights	Consumer/Product Responsibility

It is evident in the literature that most of the measures and indicators designed to evaluate the social performance of a firm are limited to the operational level of the company.

Negotiating Sustainability at Policies-making Level

At the policy-making level, that is, the social or community level, different actors are involved representing different groups. These actors can be planners; architects; land developers; individuals from local government bodies, non-governmental organizations at social groups; media personnel; private contractors or anyone who has his/her interests at stake while debating and making policies. Having so many interests involved in a single decision, it is a challenge in itself to convince all of them to achieve a single goal.

The existing sustainable planning policy structure/framework does not take into account the behavioral change initiatives, which are essential for the much needed behavior 'change'. The reason for not taking into account these initiatives is that 'the behavioral change is a much more complex phenomenon' than it is assumed (Jackson, 2005). Current efforts to bring in a large-scale change in individual consumption and daily living patterns have proved unsuccessful, as there can be/are many issues, complexities or circumstances involved which are associated with, or influence, an individual's daily living actions and behavioral patterns.

Improvement Work for a Balanced Sustainability Index

The development work for sustainability metrics for the measurement of sustainability performance in process industry was based on the idea that sustainable industrial development requires comprehensive approach towards sustainability, encompassing all its intertwined dimensions and elements. In addition, by integrating the concept of the sustainability to the companies' decision-making process enables the industry to overcome present and emerging sustainability challenges within operational environment. This means that the companies can address its sustainability challenges at the business level through the application of a balanced sustainability index by encompassing environmental, economic and social indicators with legal aspects as a part of each indicator set. According to (Husgafvel et al., 2015) sustainability of all operations is the key element of long-term success in any branch of modern process industry. Sustainability management requires focus on all dimensions of sustainability covering the linkages between sustainable industrial development and broader goals associated with sustainable societies and economy. The current indicators of industrial sustainability often satisfy primarily the needs of corporate management and global investors. The provided information is often broad and non-specific and might occasionally even give a false impression of sustainability performance. In general, global indicators tend to highlight one sustainability dimension over another and ignore local level sustainability performance. Thus, more balanced sustainability index is needed covering environmental, economic and social performance and impacts supported by legal aspects for each dimension of sustainability (Husgafvel et al., 2015).

Sustainable Business Development – The Need to Integrate Social Aspects

Sustainable industrial development and sustainable use of all resources are globally recognized priorities (ESCAP, 2015). This includes the establishment of industry–society–environment interactions to ensure responsible approaches to industrial activities (Graedel & Allenby, 2010) and paying significantly more attention to long-term oriented systems that recognize limits of resources, the closure of material cycles and economic recycling of materials (Jackson, 2005; Reuter et al., 2005). In addition, social indicators, life cycle methodologies and redefinition of system boundaries are becoming more important (Dewulf & Van Langenhove, 2006). The need for more informed decision-making and more sustainable policies and practices including sustainable use and good governance of natural resources, resource efficiency, and above all socially inclusive development should be prioritized.

Mostly, sustainability indicators are increasingly important tools providing information on corporate performance (Singh, Murty, Gupta, & Dikshit, 2009). In addition, globally competing companies are increasingly committed to reporting sustainability performance (Labuschagne & Brent, 2008). (Baumgartner, 2008) noted that companies also need to assess their sustainability performance because they are important societal actors that play a major role in the implementation of sustainable development. (Dreyer, Hauschild, & Schierbeck, 2010) noted that social aspects and impact should become a major focus area with an aim to support management-level decision-making, e.g. concerning socially responsible business practices. (Roome, 1998) recognized that modernization of industrial management requires focus on social and environmental consequences of industrial activities and on sustainable

resource use including contribution to overall sustainable development and a more sustainable society. Sustainable industrial organization is based on the idea that industry is part of an open system linked with other systems such as social systems and economic relationships (Roome, 1998).

According to (Laszlo, 2003), companies need to take into account the limits of resources and address long-term sustainability challenges including the potential and limits of technological aspects. He stated that forward-looking companies should focus on long-term sustainable performance with special emphasis on sustainable resource use and proactive management of social impacts to reduce risks and costs. Creation of sustainable value is based on economic, social and environmental performance (Laszlo, 2003) equally. (Rendtorff, 2009) presented corporate social responsibility as an integrated part of value-driven management and business ethics and noted that this concept relates to the responsibility of corporations towards their internal and external stakeholders and constituencies. Specially, as indicated in Figure 2 overall sustainability cannot be achieved until unless business world properly focuses on social dimension of the sustainability. Because social that is virtuously related to people is the foundation for the whole building of the sustainability. Through social or in other words by people we can protect our environment and if environment is green we can save a lot of money directly and indirectly.

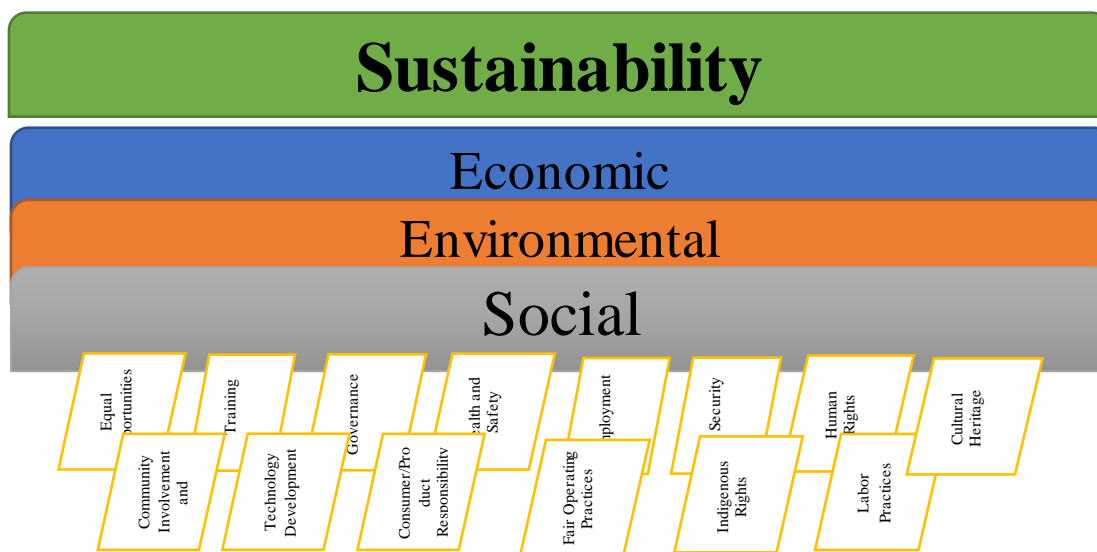


Figure 2. Foundations of Sustainability

Conclusion

Sustainability research studies have always relied upon the economic and technological approaches, but when the subject matter relates to society and individuals, it becomes important to approach the issues from a social perspective. Human behavior is a complex phenomenon if considered from a research perspective. As in the physical sciences, nothing can be generalized as universal truths in social sciences because the research problem under investigation, that is, society and individual behavior, is always changing and is not static.

This notion is vital in order to have an equal standard of life within communities, particularly those of less fortunate. The business world has started realizing that their actions have an impact on society, including the world at large. Thus, social sustainability caters to a worldview in the context of globalization, communities and culture. Being concerned about social sustainability would be expected to make a business reputable, respectable and lesser vulnerable to risk.

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