

Culture matters in Sustainable Development

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Sustainable development is the biggest global challenge of the 21st century. It has been admitted that new approaches are urgently needed to enhance the development that better meet the environmental, societal and economic objectives of sustainability. Culture as an aspect of sustainable development is increasingly getting attention among scholars and policy makers. However, as recently shown by a review article (Soini and Birkeland 2014), culture as an explicit aspect of sustainability is a relatively new phenomenon in academic discourse: Although many researchers explore issues related to culture and sustainability, there are only a few attempts which explicitly focus on culture or ‘cultural sustainability’ as distinct dimension from social sustainability (e.g. Hawkes 2001; Throsby 2008; Duxbury & Gillette 2007, Kagan 2011).

The challenge of incorporating culture in the discourses on sustainable development, both scientifically and politically, is derived from the complex and multidisciplinary character of the concepts of culture and sustainable development. Culture is one of the most complicated words: Culture refers to the all achievements of human being, tangible and intangible as well as to the symbolic patterns, norms and rules of human communities. As such, culture both divides from and connects humans to nature and other humans. Similarly, sustainable development are contested, multifaceted, vague and interlinked concepts (Redclift 2005; Robinson 2004). Sustainable development can be considered as a process or pathway towards a society where ecosystem integrity, well-being and justice meet, as described by Our Common Future or as sustainability, as an emergent property of negotiations amongst interested parties (Robinson, 2004). Whatever position to sustainable development or sustainability is taken, culture has a crucial role in creating and imagining.

In order to make “culture” more visible in sustainable research and policy, the following roles of culture have been discerned (based on Soini and Birkeland 2014; Dessein et al. 2015):

1. *Culture in sustainable development* parallel with ecological, social and economic aspects or pillars. This means that cultural aspects need to be considered in the development processes alongside the ecological, social and economic pillars in order to fulfill the criteria of sustainability.
2. *Culture for sustainable development*. Culture can mediate between the three classical pillars of sustainability. In other words, it is acknowledged that culture processes, facilitates and translates sustainable development, and therefore cultural aspects should always be present in the sustainability assessments, policies and planning..
3. *Culture as sustainable development*. This implies that culture is an overarching concept, which contains and influences social, environmental and economic actions within sustainable development. In other words, sustainability needs to be embedded in the culture and cultural transition is needed on our way to a more sustainable society.

These three representations provide analytical “lenses” for exploring multifaceted roles of culture in sustainable development. In each frame, culture may have different meanings, manifestations and implications *in, for or as* sustainable development. Furthermore, they also point to different positions of culture in society and to different policy implications: Culture as a fourth pillar or mediating dimension is linked with a better consideration of culture in any decision making related to sustainable development, while culture as a new paradigm of sustainability suggests a cultural transition towards society where sustainability is embedded in culture. Research dealing with culture and sustainable development is dealing with norms and values. Therefore, it has a strong ethical component, and, implicitly, a normative dimension. The research needs not to be neutral to these norms and values, but research has to be transparent and it has to make the values and norms explicit (Ziegler and Ott 2011).

Issues related to culture and sustainability concerns all spheres of human life – such as everyday life and consumption, livelihoods, landscape, artistic practices, aesthetic experiences, heritage, tourism – in various contexts from urban, peri-urban to rural, and at various scales from local to global, and different temporal scales from past to present and future. Consequently, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches are needed for investigating the role and meaning of culture in the context of sustainable development.

Bringing culture into the sustainable development challenges has many policy implications. If culture is considered not only as a fourth pillar, but also having other, more fundamental roles, it concerns all policy fields, not only cultural policy. Also, in order to reveal the multiple meanings of culture in and for sustainable development, new tools and assessment methods are urgently needed. This implies promotion and integration of both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Sources

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