

CONVERSATIONS: Practising Sustainability Science: Challenges in Teaching and Research

Sustainability: Challenges in Teaching

Seema Purushothaman *

Sustainability could very well be the vantage point from where we can look at anything and everything- be it food, farming, forests, water, industry, livelihoods, lifestyles or civilisation itself. This universal applicability comes with a prerequisite for a pluralistic but integrative lens. I join others in this conversation on the need to have interdisciplinary teams and people undertaking co-enquiries in the interface of development and environment. At Azim Premji University, we are working on a project on these lines with the *adivasis* of central India.¹

‘Sustainability’ has an obvious difference from its close and widely used ally —‘Sustainable Development’ (SD), enshrined in Our Common Future (WCED 1987). Prominently anchored in neo-classical welfare economics, the SD approach has churned out monetary values of environmental changes, greenwashed business strategies and ushered in initiatives like Payment for Ecosystem Services and carbon markets. The meek presence of ‘inter-generationality’ in SD was translated into bequest values in several economic valuation exercises. Nevertheless, SD for whom, at what cost and who bears the cost are questions at large. What could ‘sustainability’ as a concept offer and stand for?

While SD in Our Common Future is perceived as closer to sustainable economic growth (Carruthers 2001), ‘sustainability’ is nuanced and sophisticated and more difficult to handle as a subject in both teaching and

*Azim Premji University, Pixel park, PES campus, Hosur road, Bengaluru, 560100; seema.purushothaman@apu.edu.in

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¹ Adaptive Skilling through Action Research is undertaken in parts of Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh, in collaboration with PRADAN, a development organization.

research. Evidently, it has shed the suffix - development. It could thus freely manoeuvre from the sustainability of the planet towards that of human society.² In that sense, ‘future’ is inbuilt in ‘sustainability’, as it can choose to be sensitive to all biotic and abiotic entities as well as to distributional equity within and across generations. Thus, it could be conceptualized as pertaining to ecosystems; to a social normative (much like justice or democracy); a way of life or a means leading to diverse ends; a new religion or even as the evolution of new cultures. These approaches involve conversations among diverse stakeholders while negotiating development trade-offs.

This note reminisces on the learning from designing and teaching sustainability at APU.³ Unlike the notes by Nitin Rai and Rashid Hassan in this section, this write up focuses on sustainability education in an interdisciplinary Masters’ programme aimed at moulding reflective development practitioners. The commonality in sustainability education at Masters’ and PhD programmes is the need to instil a holistic but questioning and ‘people first’ attitude.

APU offers a perspective that identifies sustainability with its intrinsic elements of social, ecological, political, scientific, technological and humane sensibilities (Purushothaman *et al.* 2016). Teaching and learning such a versatile concept envisage innovative approaches. The first course begins with sharing of learners’ initial understanding of sustainability and ends by sharing their transformed definitions of the concept. The curriculum emphasises interactive learning and considers the classroom as learning ‘commons’.

There is a caveat here; the classroom needs to reflect diversity in the society while being not too large to enable the chosen pedagogic tools and to accomplish the learning objectives. An essential requirement for our MA students has been the need for trans-disciplinary interpretations and explanations using a simple vocabulary of disciplinary academic evidence from contexts that are closer home. This often requires intra class translations of conversations into multiple vernacular traditions.

Classroom deliberations engage with both abstract and tangible interpretations of the concept, as well as empirical real-life topics around us.

² There are many definitions for a sustainable society, starting with the one by World Council of Churches (1974)

³ Basically, two courses of three credits each—“Sustainability- an Interdisciplinary Exploration” offered in the third semester and “Sustainability in Planning and Practice” in the fourth semester of the MA Development programme.

Lived experiences of people in the class, as well as structured debates around questions arising from deliberations, are used as pedagogic tools in the first course. Structured and graded debates happen in identified outdoor premises of accessible institutions engaged in practicing sustainability—for instance, selected residential collectives, educational institutions or agricultural interventions around Bangalore. While debates bring to the fore the inevitable complexity and divergence, exposure to experiments diminishes the abstraction and complexity of the concept.

Student feedback on the course reflects the transformative experience, beginning with unlearning pre-conceived notions by engaging with rich conceptual analysis and finally coming to terms with the reality of inevitable complexity - both in concept and in practice. By mid-semester in the first course, students tend to think about sustainability as an oxymoron and by the end of the course, they deem it as a conscious work in progress.

While the first course on interdisciplinary approaches undertakes conceptual disambiguation, the course on planning and practice in the following semester familiarises learners with challenges in different sectors. The second course involving field work connects individual students with interdisciplinary approaches to issues like waste management, urban mobility, water commons, etc. Technical skills are imparted in optional courses, including those on social-ecological systems, economics, law and justice, water, land change, agriculture, forests and urban commons, all of which follow the sustainability framing originating in the first course.

The challenge has been to engage with the following questions: if sustainability is eclectic and lending itself to various interpretations,⁴ then how do you define, conceptualise and articulate it for the common person? Does the concept allow itself to be pinned down to a clear proposition and hence to be taught as a textbook subject? Can studying and teaching sustainability confine to unpacking the complexities or does it inevitably entail questioning and adapting one's own way of life?

The teaching approach distances itself from the bandwagon of sustainable development, though it evades paralysis at the hands of complexity and vagueness. The primary accomplishment is to unravel sustainability as a multi-dimensional normative to be pursued despite complexity and vagueness.

⁴ For instance, as the ability of human civilization (as we know/ want it to be) to sustain into prolonged—if not infinite—time period or defining it as context-specific adaptive abilities (e.g. in sustaining a water body, crop productivity or biodiversity).

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