What is Social Sustainability?

The mission of the Integrated Network for Social Sustainability (INSS) is as follows:

“The INSS works to encourage a greater appreciation for social aspects of sustainability with a particular focus on engineering and its allied professions. At heart, we see sustainability as an integrated concept, rather than as separate environmental, economic, and social sustainabilities, in that each of these elements is inseparable from the others. Social elements remain underappreciated in this model, and we work for greater inclusion of these in planning and practice.”

But – what is social sustainability? The truth is, it’s not clearly defined. As food for thought during the conference, below and continuing on the reverse side we have reproduced what INSS says on its page, “What is social sustainability?” But we have not found these definitions very satisfying. So, for the purposes of this conference, we have created this working definition:

“Socially sustainable development aims to help human and natural communities flourish, now and in the future. It prioritizes equity and human capital development at the individual and community levels. It maximizes community assets, including community-based knowledge, history, traditions, and social networks.”

Our definition of “social sustainability” builds on the well-known definition of “sustainable development” from the 1987 Brundtland report: “Sustainable Development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” It is also based in part on a definition shared with us by INSS co-coordinator Brett Tempest, Assistant Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at University of North Carolina at Charlotte: "Social sustainability is the often overlooked social solutions that can be used to address environmental and economic crises, and the often overlooked social consequences to environmental and economic catastrophe."

At Georgia Tech, as a technological institute, we are particularly interested in using science and technology to strengthen or advance social sustainability. We are asking:

How can science and technology strengthen community-building, or the social relationships, associations, and institutions that help human and natural communities flourish, now and in the future?

At this conference, we are also exploring resilience and how it relates to social sustainability and sustainable development. We are defining resilience as:

The ability to prepare for and adapt to changing conditions and to withstand and recover rapidly from disruptions.

INSS: What is Social Sustainability?

Sustainable development is often explained in terms of three intersecting domains that must be co-optimized when designing a product or process: society, environment, and economy.

The concepts of environmental and economic sustainability have been addressed in much greater depth than has social sustainability, and as a result, they are better defined and more consistently applied. Despite a shared interest in social sustainability, academics, professionals and policymakers often hold varying perspectives about what social sustainability is, and how it can be implemented and assessed. Broadly speaking, the social aspect of sustainability examines the social relationships, interactions, and institutions that affect, and are affected by, sustainable development. Perhaps a variety of definitions will help…

Some Definitions

“Social sustainability is a quality of societies. It signifies the nature-society relationships, mediated by work, as well as relationships within the society. Social sustainability is given, if work within a society and the related institutional arrangements

- satisfy an extended set of human needs
- are shaped in a way that nature and its reproductive capabilities are preserved over a long period of time and the normative claims of social justice, human dignity and participation are fulfilled.”

Social sustainability: a catchword between political pragmatism and social theory, International Journal of Sustainable Development


“Social Sustainability is: a positive condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition.”

Stephen McKenzie 2004 Hawke Research Institute Working Paper Series No 27 SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: TOWARDS SOME DEFINITIONS. Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, Magill, South Australia (pdf)

Social Sustainability is “development (and/or growth) that is compatible with harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population.”


Social Sustainability is “the continuing ability of a city to function as a long-term, viable setting for human interaction, communication and cultural development.”

“Social sustainability is one aspect of sustainability or sustainable development. Social sustainability encompasses human rights, labor rights, and corporate governance. In common with environmental sustainability, social sustainability is the idea that future generations should have the same or greater access to social resources as the current generation ("inter-generational equity"), while there should also be equal access to social resources within the current generation ("intra-generational equity"). Social resources include ideas as broad as other cultures and basic human rights.”

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia