

SUSTAINABILITY AS A PUBLIC NATIONAL PURPOSE

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The new millennium, despite having shaken the economic foundations of our world, has consolidated the causal link between economic and political influence. This can be clearly seen in the development path of the BRICS, whose economic growth was paralleled by an increase in their international political weight.

When Goldman Sachs speaks of the upcoming BRICS decade it is not only a prognosis of economic dominance but also of socio-political relevance. With such increase of economic and political power comes a greater concern about responsibilities in terms of socio-environmental footprint - Brazil and India account for 20 percent of the world population but only 3,5 of its consumption.

The concept of "sustainability", then, comes at the forefront of political and academic discussions. It was initially formulated very broad to encompass a different set of legal-political regimes and economic models. Sustainable development should, in that regard, be economically viable, socially just and environmentally friendly. Nevertheless, since its formulation in the 70s, most implementations did not manage to rightfully balance the different claims and focused on the economic and environmental aspects, or what is called "green economy".

"Social sustainability" or the equity of sustainability remains to date marginal to academic studies and the preoccupation of practitioners. In such perspective the Rio+20 gains another level of importance, as an opportunity to revisit the concept that has been deployed since in many development projects.

Following the common criticism of the missing consideration for micro-politics and the social aspects of sustainability, the proposed conference paper argues for a deeper exploration of the social dimension of sustainability by looking at the discursive construction of its meaning.

The authors intend to scrutinize the concept of sustainability and the discourse attached to it in a comparative case study approach. Specific cases in Brazil and India are compared, as both countries, with their different legal history, are interesting examples of heterogeneous societies under rapid economic transformation, growth in production and consumption. The pressure for growth is increasingly linked to environmental concerns – and the overlap of development and sustainability discourse are reflected in the public discourse of politics and media.

In that regard, and to narrow down the analysis of the “sustainable development” discourse, the authors will focus on projects that entail the management of two basic natural resources: land and water.

Throughout history land and water have been targeted by diverging interest groups. As essential resources for nature conservation, food production, subsistence exploitation and energy generation, the combination of these two essential resources offer an appropriate lens to analyze the issues of multiple and diverging claims - public purpose and/or national interest, the interest of future generations, individual and groups' interests.

To disentangle this complex configuration the authors use the focus of large scale development plans to concentrate on two intertwined dimensions: (i) the legislation addressing the different land/water claims and (ii) the discourse constructed around them.

In a first step we address the legal bases of land appropriation/expropriation. Pivotal to this analysis is the concept of ‘public purpose’.

- How do legal frameworks present the public/national interest in relation to the appropriation/expropriation and the management of these resources (land and water)?

The definitions in different legislative texts will be then used in a second step to dissect the similarities and differences in the discourses that support each case. Governmental reports, press statements, and interviews will be used to create a link between the discourse of sustainability, development and the idea of public purpose.

- How have discourses of development been presented in the new sustainable package?
- Has it redefined the ideas our societies hold of “greater good”, “public/national interest”?
- How has the social aspect of sustainability entered the picture?
- What are the differences and similarities between the Brazilian and the Indian case in regard to the above mentioned questions?

The authors argue preliminary that the concept of sustainability applied to the context of development projects represents an interesting set of competition of meanings. Sustainability despite its wide initial definition reduces ultimately the range of possible attachments of diverging meanings when used in context-specific cases and by different interest groups. Therefore, the understanding of the links between sustainability and development in different contexts of “public/national interest” is essential to the comprehension of which kinds of social action remain possible within the framework of sustainability.