



# Evidence-Based Policy Making Towards Social Sustainability

Nikos Papadakis<sup>1</sup>   
Stylianios Ioannis Tzagkarakis<sup>2</sup> 

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**Abstract:** *Social sustainability is one of the key pillars of sustainable development. In our analysis, this concept refers to the need for the creation of a society that contains all the conditions for sustainable development in terms of equal opportunities for employment and social well-being.*

*Currently, significant problems and dysfunctions exist as long as several European labor markets are fragmented with a strong insiders-outsiders divergence, job polarization, high labor market slack, and high in-work poverty rates, especially in precarious forms of employment. In Europe as well as globally, addressing these issues is of major importance to ensure social sustainability. This paper depicts the state of play of social sustainability in Europe and aims to identify specific policy responses that could offer viable solutions to old and emerging challenges in terms of social inclusion, within the framework of evidence-based policy making mainly related to social policy.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION – PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The present paper aims to analyze the state of play regarding social sustainability and the relevant key challenges for the public policy complex. The key research questions are the following:

- *What was the evolution of the interrelation between sustainable development and social sustainability?*
- *What are the key determinants-dimensions of social sustainability?*
- *What are the factors that contribute to social sustainability?*
- *What are the key challenges for the Welfare State and the public policy complex towards evidence-based policy making?*

Social sustainability constitutes one of the main theoretical pillars of the sustainable development concept, although it is open to variations in its content and meaning, as there is no commonly accepted definition so far. In any case, this concept refers to the need to create a society that contains all the conditions for sustainable development in terms of equality, opportunities and social well-being.

The inclusion of social sustainability in the sustainable development conceptualization is first identified in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) and the Rio reports of the United Nations (UN, 1992), in which a synthesis of the ecological, economic and social dimensions of social development takes place. Hence, these three areas were called dimensions or pillars of the concept of sustainability. At the same time, these pillars are not independent of each other but are

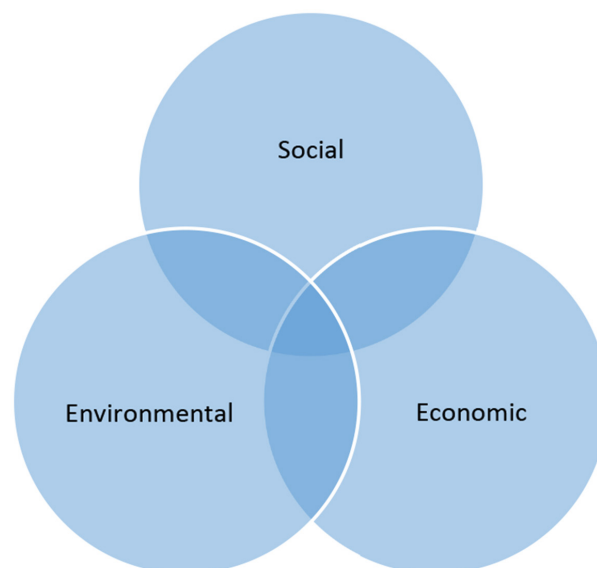
<sup>1</sup> Centre for Political Research & Documentation (KEPET), Department of Political Science, University of Crete; Centre of Training and LLL of the University of Crete (KEDIVIM); Scientific Board of the National Centre of Public Administration and Local Government (EKDDA), Greece

<sup>2</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Crete; Centre for Political Research & Documentation (KEPET); Hellenic Association of Political Scientists (HAPSc); Steering Committee of the ECPR Political Culture Standing Group, Greece

interrelated and the existence of all three is a necessary condition for forming a comprehensive content to the concept of sustainability. In any case, the concept of social sustainability is related both to environmental issues and to issues of social well-being and cohesion, while considering the contribution of the private and public sectors to the processes of achieving these objectives, i.e. improving living conditions on equal terms.

## 2. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainable development is based on three interrelated and equally important pillars; the environmental, the economic, and the social. The environmental refers to the preservation and respect of the natural ecosystem and its functions; the economic is related to the creation of stable economic systems that ensure social justice without hindering the functioning of the free market while respecting the environment; and the social involves building a framework that promotes the well-being of the whole population with the ultimate aim of preserving social cohesion (Ekins, 2000) while reducing social discrimination.



**Figure 1.** Sustainable Development Pillars

The academic debate on these issues started in the 1960s (UNEP, 2002), but the emphasis was initially on improving management, while the social and environmental pillars were not distinguished. The transfer of the concept of sustainable development from the theoretical to the practical-institutional level first took place in 1972 with the report “The Limits to Growth” by the Rome Group, which referred to the decline of natural resources due to industrial pollution, population growth and economic growth, and the Stockholm Declaration of the United Nations, which placed a substantial focus on the environmental orientation of development (UNEP, 2002; Baker et al., 2005). Both in the 1970s and even more intensively in the 1980s, the link between sustainable development and the environmental pillar was strengthened, to the point where the concept became synonymous with environmental sustainability (Evans & Thomas, 2004). However, the process of more closely linking and in some cases identifying the concept of sustainable development with environmental issues is seen by some scholars, such as Castro (2004), as a response to the growing radical environmental movement of the time that was putting obstacles to development. Therefore, it was necessary to find solutions that combined ecosystem protection while promoting economic and social progress. This was precisely the subject

of the UN's definition of sustainable development in the Brundtland Report, according to which sustainable development refers to the satisfaction of the present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). This general definition provided the opportunity for the gradual development of a public debate around the content of the concept through the creation of several approaches, critical or supportive (Baker et al., 2005). Some of these approaches did not accept the link between the conventional concept of development and sustainable development but considered that these two concepts could work in parallel in order to prevail in the modern political-economic, globalized system (Rennen & Martens, 2003). In contrast, several international organizations developed the view that environmental sustainability should be part of neoclassical economic principles. However, the result of this inclusion has been the very low impact of environmental sustainability principles and the limited development of alternative effects that the concept of sustainable development can include, such as the social pillar, under the influence of the economic pillar. On the other hand, the view of the utmost importance of the concept of sustainable development was cultivated, as the protection of the environment must be the basic precondition for economic growth, so as not to undermine the well-being of future generations (Baker et al., 2005; Castro, 2004).

The debate on sustainable development and its content led to the creation of several different definitions, but the common element was the effort to deepen both the environmental issues and the socio-economic. Thus, the Rio Conference in 1992 brought together all these contributions to the public debate and several states signed Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, committing themselves to implementing a sustainable development policy that respects the principles mentioned (UN, 1992). Sustainable development was also included in the 1996 UN Istanbul Conference, during which it was stated that sustainable development for settlements (the subject of the conference was human settlements) is necessary to combine economic development with social development and environmental protection (UN, 1996). The protection and respect of human rights and individual freedoms were set as a necessary condition for achieving this objective. There is a greater effort to link the three pillars mentioned above (environmental, economic, and social) as a prerequisite for achieving sustainability. Within a year (1997) the Third UN Conference was held, in which an international legal instrument was established for the first time to promote sustainable development, which would control its main pillars but would focus mainly on environmental protection, and was called the "Kyoto Protocol" (UN, 1998). Finally, the UN conference in Johannesburg in 2002 and, more importantly, the 2012 conference on sustainable development in Brazil, were characterized by the attempt to link the three pillars and consequently consolidate the coexistence of economic development, environmental protection and the safeguarding of social cohesion (UN, 2002). In Johannesburg issues were raised relating to a) the importance of civil society and the private sector in promoting inclusiveness and cooperation between different actors (with the ultimate aim of strengthening social entrepreneurship in order to promote sustainable development), b) the link between green growth and the battle against unemployment and poverty, and c) institutional reorganization at international, national and regional level in order to achieve sustainable development.

The United Nation's (UN) most recent "Agenda 2030" for Sustainable Development ("Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"), signed in August 2015, sets 17 global strategic goals that will balance social, economic and environmental needs and commit to the effective implementation of Sustainable Development (Figure 2). At the same time, in the European Union, the establishment of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017,

sets certain objectives in the course of satisfying social rights, thus making a crucial step towards social sustainability (ETUI, 2021). Although European integration in social issues has not taken a comprehensive dimension, the European Pillar of Social Rights is particularly important because it includes the principles and necessary values in order to achieve social prosperity and social cohesion, thus social sustainability.



Figure 2. The UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 priorities

Source: UN, 2015

## 2.1. Outline of the Social Sustainability Dimensions

Before delving into the analysis of the social sustainability dimensions, it should be mentioned that due to the lack of agreement on the content of the term, different approaches (Shirazi & Keivani, 2019) often appear, not driven by the theoretical thinking that leads to the research on specific domains but by practical issues in different circumstances and under different research methods. Hence, reformist approaches argue for a balance in the three pillars of sustainability (Peterson, 2016), revisionist focus on the addition of a cultural pillar (Soini & Birkeland, 2014) and others stress issues related to governance (Leal Filho et al., 2016), to the political bottom line (Bendell & Kearins, 2005) as well as to ethical values (Burford et al., 2013). In addition, the connection between the three pillars of sustainability, in some cases, continues to be unclear while different priorities are given to each of these directions and they are not integrated as a whole, giving the concept of sustainability an unclear and often “open” content, thus, highlighting the need for further study that leads to a clearer and more comprehensive definition. In this light, we will try to include in the term social sustainability all those dimensions that are necessary and should be included in relevant considerations of sustainability, thus contributing to the clarification of the role of individual actors in achieving social sustainability.

One of the key terms set out by the Brundtland report on sustainable development was that the concept of sustainability necessarily includes needs, highlighting a kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising those of future generations, thus indicating the interconnection between nature and society, giving a human-centered dimension to sustainability and highlighting intergenerational solidarity. Certainly, the concept of need must be seen in its broadest form, since on the one hand, it includes, in the context of the environment,

the satisfaction of nutritional energy and other needs in a way that does not compromise the ecological dimensions and the durability of resources, while, on the other hand, there are social needs, which include a wide range of sub-categories such as health, retirement, and education. Consequently, if the concept extends to meeting needs such as education, personal development and social relations, then a much greater activation in terms of interventions is required, leading to the achievement of social well-being.

Employment is one of the key development factors and at the same time, constitutes the basic precondition for achieving social sustainability, on the one hand, it plays a key role in meeting needs, and on the other, it improves living conditions by combining the satisfaction of social and environmental factors. Hence, a key component in achieving social sustainability is the creation of conditions and opportunities for the satisfaction of individual needs. Consequently, employment, which is one of the dominant factors for achieving individual autonomy, through the existence of appropriate norms, institutions and normative-protective frameworks, could achieve individual well-being if promoted in a socially just context. At this point we should bear in mind, the rising of the precarious work in Europe, as well as globally, that affects social inclusion. Further, the rising mega-trends affect employability. It should be noted that during the years 2010-2018, the risk of poverty in temporary employment increased considerably in the majority of EU28 countries (Eurostat, 2020a, 2020b), while the risk was almost three times higher for employees with temporary jobs than for those with permanent jobs (Eurostat, 2020c). Thus, there is a strong correlation between precarious employment, social vulnerability and the risk of poverty (Papadakis et al., 2021). Further, Mega-Trends that are taking place and seem to gradually prevail (e.g. globalization, digital economy, digitalization, demographic and social changes, climate change, etc.- Eurofound, 2020, pp. 3-4) have a clear impact on the structure of the economy and labour market, industrial relations systems, and business models, having, in turn, direct impact on work relations, forms of employment and contracts types and, consequently, on social welfare systems in Europe (Eurofound, 2020, pp. 3-4). Given all the above-mentioned, we are not simply referring to the use of resources to meet needs but to the construction of a society that will organize individual life trajectories in an efficient and socially just manner (Senghaas-Knobloch, 1998).

In this context, the form of welfare provided by the state constitutes one of the primary characteristics of modern societies and shapes the conditions for their development within the ever-globalizing system (Pfau-Effinger, 2000). Socially sustainable development should include the reorganization and promotion of the social welfare concept (HBS, 2001; Brandl & Hildebrandt, 2002). Therefore, rights such as employment must be safeguarded not only in terms of ensuring adequate income but also concerning psychosocial dimensions such as working time, social integration and the importance of wage employment for social cohesion (Senghaas-Knobloch, 1998). At the same time, rights to education and health as well as equal access to goods and services, gender equality and tolerance, are aspects of primary importance for achieving social sustainability.

Different factors could be distinguished that contribute to the achievement of the social dimension of sustainability. A first category could include all those factors related to the satisfaction of basic needs and the improvement of life quality. Therefore, they are related to the level of individual income, poverty, income distribution, unemployment, education, training and lifelong learning, housing, health, insurance and employment that satisfies both material and psychosocial needs. The achievement of these goals-factors can only be realized if there is a level of

social justice that implies fairness in terms of opportunities for quality of life and participation in civil society (Löffler, 2004; Nussbaum & Sen, 2002). The next level for achieving social sustainability is social consistency, i.e. social integration through participation in social networks and voluntary actions where the concept of solidarity is realized outside formal institutional and normative frameworks as part of citizenship. These theoretical dimensions could be transferred to the level of political practice through the welfare state and the framework of social policies and social rights it promotes.

### 3. THE ROLE OF THE WELFARE STATE IN SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

In order to achieve social sustainability, it is necessary to implement social policy through the institutional framework of the welfare state. Social policy (in all different fields such as health, labor, cash benefits, pension, etc.) is a deliberate intervention by the state to redistribute resources among citizens as a way to achieve social welfare and sustainability. The concept of well-being is synonymous with that of welfare and meeting needs where there is a shortfall, thus creating a framework for reducing social inequalities and promoting equal access to social goods and services.

The concept of well-being involves two opposing perspectives that have had a major influence on ideological orientations of social policies and the scope of the welfare state: a) welfare is identified as well-being for all and therefore it includes the promotion of social protection as a right which implies the notion of universality and b) care is also offered to those most in need, by implementing selective welfare policies in areas, such as cash-benefits and care services, as a lever for reducing inequalities.

### 4. SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES IN SOUTHERN EUROPE: STATE OF PLAY

The economic crisis, the pandemic, and the current energy crisis highlight the necessity of the welfare state in protecting citizens from the multidimensional social risks that are being reproduced, multiplied, or readjusted. At the international level, the socio-economic context is becoming more complex, with more interdependence and a speed of events that is constantly increasing (Schwab & Malleret, 2021), creating new challenges for achieving social vulnerability. The permacrisis era (multiple crises) highlights that the respective public policies need to be more prepared for phenomena that one might mistakenly consider rare.

The Covid-19 pandemic, as well as all other crises, that occurred in the last decades (economic, energy, migration, etc.), are not “black swan” but “white swan” phenomena (Schwab & Malleret, 2021, p. 34), as humanity has experienced similar situations many times in the past if one takes into account the historical data of pandemics (Huremović, 2019) as well as economic (Sewell, 2012) and migratory crises (Hoerder, 2019). At the level of social policy, permacrisis legacy indicates the importance of an organized, effective and inclusive welfare state.

The labour market in Southern European countries is often considered to be fragmented and divided into the following sectors: central, regional and informal/underground. This fragmentation creates more strongly the problem of insiders-outsiders (Ferrera, 1996, 2010; Moreno, 2000; Papadakis et al., 2021) as well as increases precarity, in-work poverty, and social vulnerability in general (Jessoula et al., 2010; Mulé, 2016). Hence, over time, Southern European countries have had higher in-work poverty rates than the EU average, despite a downward trend in recent years, which follows the trend at the EU level, but does not reduce the existing gap between

South Europe and the EU average. The qualitative characteristics of this indicator show that older employees are more likely to be at risk of in-work poverty. Moreover, employees with low educational attainment, the self-employed (which underlies the case of freelancers), contract workers and part-time employees have over time been the groups most at risk of in-work poverty (Papadakis et al., 2022; Ziomas et al., 2019). At the same time, poverty and social exclusion indicators are higher than the EU average in southern European member states (Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal) as well as in some eastern (Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Estonia).

At the same time, the shift to teleworking, especially during and after the pandemic, is a crucial transformative factor of the labor market, as the economy is currently increasingly based on working through online platforms. In this form of employment, employees are often neither permanent nor part-time but offer work in pieces (gigs), which intensifies the deregulation of work and the risks for them (Bieber & Moggia, 2021). While promoting teleworking creates new opportunities for trade and innovation, inequalities could be further increased, especially for those in the peripheral and informal sector - rotational employment, freelance and non-formal employment (Nieuwenhuis & Yerkes, 2021). Furthermore, the phenomenon of family-work-life balance disruption occurs because the employee tends to be in a standby situation. The “right to disconnect” and the non-violation of working hours, if respected, can create positive effects. Therefore, there is a necessity to safeguard labor rights, enhance digital skills, strengthen small and medium entrepreneurship and provide incentives for new jobs in order to achieve social sustainability.

## 5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In the coming years, global employment supply is expected to increase jobs related to new technologies, artificial intelligence, digitization and automation, while it is expected to decrease traditional forms of employment such as secretarial support, accounting, administration and unskilled labor (World Economic Forum, 2020). Skills such as analytical thinking and innovation, critical thinking, leadership, creativity and flexibility (inherent in social sciences and humanities content), as well as knowledge of using new technologies, planning, design and digital marketing, will become necessities in the coming years (World Economic Forum, 2020). Due to the expansion of digital platforms and teleworking the phenomenon of lego flexibility occurs. Lego flexibility refers to the fact that the production of each product is divided into its parts. These components are produced in areas where costs are low, quality is high, sufficiency is excellent and the rate of innovation is above average and high (Garud et al., 2002; Sennett, 2006). Each of these four elements brings in different components from different parts of the world, but they eventually come together to make up the product, which may be a mobile phone, a car, a computer, etc. Lego’s flexibility depends on having an organizational form in which multifunctional teams are the smaller units and global competence teams are the global units (Azmat et al., 2012). Furthermore, it is vital to assign a central role to knowledge development, knowledge transfer, feedback processes, co-creation, and social sentiment analysis (Meister & Mulcahy, 2017; Susskind & Susskind, 2015).

It turns out that there will be huge social consequences if this kind of Lego flexibility is enacted globally (Standing, 2011, 2014), and will represent the development of a new form of global distribution of labor and occupational specialization (Gaskarth, 2015). The above-mentioned impact should be further explored and analyzed, via relevant research. In this new landscape, skill development, careers, individual risk and wealth creation processes will all undergo inherent

changes. One outcome of this kind of Lego flexibility will be that sovereign states could easily lose control of wealth creation processes (Kessler, 2017; Stearns, 2013). In the 1980s and 1990s, a large part of the labor force moved from industrial production to jobs in the service sectors (Enderwick, 1989; Foster, 2016). This movement took place both through cuts in the number of traditional manufacturing jobs and an increase in service sector jobs (Thurow, 1999). On the threshold of the fourth industrial revolution, knowledge economy workers - the backbone of the middle class - are now under threat (Coates & Morrison, 2016), as well as service sector workers (Frey & Osborne, 2017). This transformation constitutes another future research field.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The key focus of the welfare states in order to achieve social sustainability during this transformative era should be given to public policies that prepare individuals and societies for fundamental adjustments such as those in labor market, in the environment, and the population (aging). An important strategy in order to achieve higher levels of social sustainability is social investment, which addresses the fundamental sources of the problems based on the concept of humanism but also on the protection of the environment and the achievement of economic sustainability. One of the main challenges is to broaden the tax base (special tax on higher incomes to reduce inequalities) and jointly increase productivity and the quality of employment, invest in human capital, which allows more and better jobs to be created and offer the opportunity for the development of social capital through enhancing participation, democratic dialogue and citizenship.

As social sustainability means an inclusive society and welfare for all there should be a focus on the knowledge society as well as on investments in education, training, reskilling innovation and new technologies. In times of permacrisis, the welfare state is more necessary than ever. It is therefore essential for the state to undertake systematic interventions to boost demand and thus create new jobs. Integration into the labor market and investment in innovation should guide the educational process from infancy through the phases of vocational training and university education. Thus, closer cooperation between employment services and employers, as well as social economy players, is essential.

Defining the concept of social sustainability is a major challenge. However, an attempt to emphasize also on the role of an inclusive and active welfare state is made in the present study. Hence, social sustainability is directly connected with equality of access to important services such as health and education, the concept of intergenerational solidarity combined with solidarity between members of the same generation, the acceptance of cultural diversity, the promotion of citizenship, the promotion of the idea of belonging to a society in order to enhance social participation and action, as well as the creation of incentives to strengthen the social economy and subsequently social inclusion.



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