

Chapter 2

Strong Sustainability as a Frame for Sustainability Communication

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Abstract The term sustainability has enjoyed great success, but at the cost of overextending its meaning to the point of trivialization. There is such an overabundance of definitions, concepts, models and political strategies that it is not clear anymore whether the terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ still bear any meaning. The theory outlined in this chapter counters these tendencies by identifying more precisely the normative field that constitutes the very core of the sustainability concept, while avoiding a too narrow understanding. It points out the ethical presuppositions as well as the requirements for a theoretical framework of a consistent and discursively justified concept of sustainability. This rectifies the vagueness of the term as currently used and offers new possibilities for sustainability communication.

Keywords Strong sustainability • Weak sustainability • Ethics • Philosophy • Natural capital

Understanding Sustainability

The complex idea of sustainability is the outcome of different intertwined threads running across history, societal movements, scientific research and political policy-making. After the Rio Summit, which contributed to establishing worldwide a discourse and communication framework for sustainable development, the term sustainability has often been used as a catchphrase without specific meaning. Some scholars consider the well-known definition of the Brundtland Report a bad

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compromise between the needs for nature conservation and aspirations for economic growth. While a broad framing of the sustainability concept allows for a diversified and wide-ranging participation of stakeholders in the implementation of sustainability, this vagueness also leaves it open to being misused by power groups who want to press their business-as-usual attitude into a new trendy setting, following the maxim ‘If you can’t beat them, join them!’

A more precise definition of the concept of sustainable development is needed, and one that offers a flexible and non-arbitrary orientation for action.

In the transdisciplinary field of sustainability discourse with its essentially communicative structure, the philosophical perspective has a number of important contributions to make. Crucial aspects of this contribution are:

- First, philosophy can play the role of a *mediator or messenger* by creating a bridge between the different ‘voices’ participating in the process – it can be a semantic bridge not only among different disciplinary languages, but also, and more especially, between non-formalized knowledge, intuitions, everyday assumptions as well as more formalized forms of knowledge (Muraca 2010). Moreover, philosophy can render accessible and subject to critique implicit intuitions about inter- and intragenerational justice, about duties towards the non-human world, about attributions of value emerging in different cultural and societal settings (economic, cultural valuation, livelihood values, preferences, spiritual and aesthetic valuations, etc.).
- Second, philosophy can play the role of the *gate-keeper* in discourse, by continuously verifying which voices have a stake and a place, who is permitted to talk and who is excluded from the communicative process. Moreover, philosophy has a critical role to play by making transparent the implicit and unquestioned assumptions behind arguments and demonstrating how powerful, mainstream lines of thought lead to the silencing of alternative perspectives on the question at issue (Muraca 2010).
- Furthermore, practical philosophy can act as a *participant* in discourse, rather than playing an observational role with regard to the different meanings, definitions and attributions of sustainability that are *factually* and often strategically employed in communicative processes within society. In this function philosophy introduces its own *methodologies and theoretical frameworks* into the communicative process.

This chapter focuses on this third role of practical philosophy, or more precisely, on how practical philosophy can frame the theoretical setting of sustainability discourse by developing a normative theory of sustainability, taking a clear stance in the scientific debate between weak and strong sustainability.¹ The theory

¹In the international discourse on sustainability there are only a few approaches that attempt a philosophical and normative analysis from the point of view of inter- and intragenerational justice (see among others, Dobson 2003; Norton 2005). A thorough presentation of these approaches, involving a comparison with the theory of strong sustainability, would go beyond the scope of this chapter.

of strong sustainability presented in this chapter does not take as a mere given the pre-deliberative agreement on sustainability (as established after Rio in societal, political and scientific documents). This agreement combines commitments to future generations with the so-called three-pillar model, by which economic, environmental and societal objectives are to be (somehow) balanced. From a philosophical perspective, this is an insufficient foundation for a genuine discourse on sustainability. The theory of strong sustainability goes beyond this widespread agreement to critically address the very core of the sustainability idea (inter- and intragenerational justice, a diversified concept of ‘natural capital’ etc.) in order to shape a comprehensive normative theory that can offer a well-founded orientation to societal and political decision-making processes (Ott and Döring 2008; Grunwald 2009; Norton 2005).

Drawing on Habermas’s discourse ethics, the theory of strong sustainability assumes that discourse is a particular form of communication in which argumentation takes place (Habermas 1981). Rather than being considered successful to the extent that actors achieve their individual goals, as is the case for strategic action, communicative action and its second-order mode of argumentation succeed insofar as the actors freely agree, on the basis of rationally supported arguments, that their goals are reasonable and acceptable by all participants. Thus in order to reconstruct the normative presuppositions that shape discourse one cannot simply, from a mere observational point of view, describe argumentation as it empirically and factually occurs; rather, from the participant perspective, it is possible to articulate the shared and often implicit ideals and rules that provide the reasons for regarding some arguments as better than others.

The theory of strong sustainability therefore aims at:

- identifying criteria for distinguishing sustainable and non-sustainable paths on the grounds of a wider consideration of arguments than merely economic ones,
- specifying the proper scope of the discourse by setting up a framework of fields of action and application,
- delivering a basis for operationalisation in policy and politics,
- performing as a ‘rational corrective’ to clarify the diffuse discourse on sustainable development taking place in society (Grunwald 2009).

By drawing on Lakatos’s and Stegmüller’s post-Popperian assumption that every theory is constituted by core elements and a set of applications, some of which are paradigmatic, some secure and some contested, the theory of strong sustainability avoids the risk of transforming sustainability into a ‘theory about everything’ without any specific boundaries of application. For example, global climate change would be a paradigmatic application of a theory of sustainability, whereas the issue of juvenile criminality in urban areas is only marginally related to sustainability issues, although not completely independent from them.

Consequently, the theory of strong sustainability consists of different ‘levels’ (see Table 2.1 below), which are not intended as a deductive hierarchy. The first two levels – the core elements of the theory – consist of a theoretical reflection framing the concept of sustainability as a regulative ideal. The last three levels open the field

Table 2.1 Levels of the strong sustainability theory (Ott and Voget 2007)

| Level | Status in the theoretical framework |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Idea (Theory of intra- and intergenerational justice) | Core of theory |
| 2. Concept (<i>Strong</i> or <i>weak</i> sustainability, mediating concepts) | |
| 3. Key principles (Resilience, sufficiency, efficiency) | Bridging principles |
| 4. Fields of action (Nature conservation, agriculture and forestry, fisheries, climate change etc.) | Practical application |
| 5. Target systems, specific concepts, indicators | |
| 6. Implementation, institutionalisation, instrumentation | |

for a fruitful exchange with policymaking, praxis and socially participatory actions. The third level aims at bridging theory and practice. By means of this structure it is also possible to identify different fields for communicative actions at different levels of the discourse.

Sustainability as an Ethical Concept

The ‘ethics’ of sustainability should not be equated with a comprehensive ethical theory (e.g. discourse ethics), a theory of justice (e.g. the theory of John Rawls 1973) or with environmental ethics. Instead, it presupposes that certain assumptions from discourse ethics, theories of justice and from the argumentative framework of environmental ethics can be used to elaborate the idea of sustainability (Ott 2004a).

The core of the idea of ‘sustainability’ consists in the issue of intra- and intergenerational distributive justice and encompasses duties *towards* currently living generations and future generations regarding different goods (see Norton 2005), with a special focus on natural resources (Ott and Döring 2008). The idea of sustainability thus links the obligatory dimension of moral reasons with a teleological perspective that takes different distributions of goods into account. Deontological obligations to posterity can be combined with an assessment of the consequences and side-effects of current actions and institutions in order to constitute a teleological perspective of how sustainable development might be established in policy-making. The deontological assumptions must be made explicitly. In terms of the responsibility of justice towards future generations, at a minimum the following questions must be addressed:

- Are there any obligations to future generations at all?
- Should responsibility for the future be based on an egalitarian-comparative standard or on an absolute standard?
- What can be considered a ‘just’ legacy?

When ethical questions of intergenerational duties are discussed, it has to be *first* justified whether there are any obligations to future generations at all (for a thorough analysis and refutation of so-called ‘no obligation arguments’, which deny the existence of such duties, see among others Ott 2004b). Neither Parfit’s ‘non-identity problem’ nor the argument claiming that future persons cannot have rights today are convincing (Parfit 1987). In fact, they seem to contradict basic intuitions of duties towards future generations that most people across cultures and centuries have shared. Parfit’s non-identity problem obtains its moral relevance by confusing the terms *individuality* and *personality* (Partridge 1990; Grey 1996; Ott 2004b). An argument against Parfit is that personality as a normative status is usually ascribed to human beings with specific cognitive capabilities. This status includes a system of rights. Individuality on the contrary refers to the concrete and contingent characteristics of a single human being resulting from a unique and non-interchangeable life story. Moral duties are applicable to a greater extent to personality than to individuality. Although the non-identity problem highlights the contingency involved on the level of individuality, its moral relevance regarding the justification of intergenerational duties is negligible. Accordingly, regardless of the specific individual identity that members of future generation might embody, they will still be ‘persons’ in the sense proposed here and therefore subjects of rights. Moreover, as Unnerstall has argued at length, future rights can justify present duties (Unnerstall 1999). The anticipatable impact of future (moral or juridical) rights of persons is a necessary and sufficient condition for current intergenerational duties with regards to different goods.

According to the *second* question, the ethical controversy centres on whether duties of justice towards future generations should be based on an *absolute* standard (access to anything that is required for a life of human dignity) or on a *comparative* one (no worse than current generations). The absolute standard ensures a ‘basic human level’ (in terms of basic capabilities, see below) whereas the comparative standard raises the issue of an appropriate ‘equivalence’. While the former allows current generations to bequeath less to future ones than they themselves have inherited (provided that this would be sufficient to lead a decent or dignified human life), the latter requires that future persons be no worse off than current ones (on average). Many authors argue for a comparative standard. This also corresponds to widespread intuitions expressed in deliberative processes with stakeholders and practitioners. However, its ethical justification is in no way a trivial one as questions arise as to whether the approximate equality of intergenerational prospects of life should be aimed at for its own sake and whether it is morally relevant how spatially and temporarily separated groups of persons with different supplies of goods relate to each other.

The theory of strong sustainability argues on the one hand for a strong and demanding absolute standard and suggests replacing the ‘basic needs’ approach with a culturally interpretable and context-sensitive list of capabilities, such as compiled by Nussbaum (2001) in her ‘broad and vague concept of the good’ (Ott and Döring 2008). Whereas according to the basic needs approach all human beings are entitled to have merely what they need to survive, the capability approach sets the minimum standard at a much higher level so as to include all the necessary

conditions to accomplish a good (rich, flourishing) life, i.e. a life worthy of a human being. This approach encompasses capabilities such as ‘being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living’; ‘being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves’; and ‘being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature’. The list is based on ideas of the intrinsic richness of human existence and on the idea that a good human life lies in the exercise and performance of specific human capabilities.

While anti-egalitarians deny that equality has any intrinsic value and thus limit intergenerational duties to an absolute standard (Frankfurt 1987), in the theory of strong sustainability also comparative aspects of justice above the absolute standard ought to be taken seriously. The comparative standard can be justified with the Rawlsian ‘veil of ignorance’ (Rawls 1973), which would have to be designed in such a way that the individuals behind it do not know to which generation they belong. Rawls’s idea of *reciprocity*, which suggests an equal distribution as the starting point, leads to the conclusion that rational persons would probably choose a comparative standard as far as this is feasible within safe environmental limits.

The comparative standard can also be justified without recourse to Rawls. The conviction that from the moral point of view in the generational chain no generation is ‘special’ can be combined with a prohibition of primary discrimination (Tugendhat 1993) and the disputed ‘presumption in favour of equality’ (P). This constitutes a sufficient premise to shift the burden of proof in favour of an intergenerational comparative standard. The justification of P rests on the transfer of generally accepted principles (equal moral considerability of every person, equality before the law, equality of opportunity) to the sphere of distributive justice. In the end, both lines of justification converge to similar results.

The third core question leads to the next level of the theory, since it cannot be answered at the abstract level of theoretical moral justifications. It encompasses the widely debated issue about the ‘fair bequest package’ that current generations owe to future ones.

What Do We Owe to Future Generations? Arguments in Favour of ‘Strong Sustainability’

Different approaches within communication about sustainability have to deal with the question at a conceptual level. A constitutive issue for the distinction between the various concepts of sustainability is the question of what legacy (the ‘fair bequest package’) current generations owe to subsequent ones. Legacies involve the production, preservation and reproduction of, in the language of economics, *packages of different kinds of capital*. The concepts of weak and strong sustainability diverge basically on what they respectively consider a fair bequest package. This is due to different assumptions regarding the extent to which natural capital can reasonably be *substituted* by human capital and man-made capital.

The concept of *weak sustainability* assumes far-reaching substitutability among different types of capital. Accordingly, a fair bequest package consists of a constant (cumulative) total level of capital. In practice, this means that nature can be consumed, provided that other capital reserves (man-made capital, human capital) are built up in its place. This would make it possible to envisage a future world where there were for example no forests, provided that all of the functions forests currently fulfil (production of wood, leisure functions, balancing effect on regional climate systems, etc.) can be satisfactorily fulfilled by artificial means (synthetic substances, nature films on TV, air conditioning etc.).

Weak sustainability envisages the different capital stocks of society in terms of an overall portfolio, in which natural capital is only one among a number of different stocks. The ideal portfolio manager would consider possibilities of substitution by trying to maximise the net present value. From this point of view the preservation of natural resources would be a meaningful and feasible goal only if it proved to be more efficient when compared to other income types. For the sake of comparability, natural resources have to be expressed in monetary terms. The deontological meaning of intergenerational duties can only be described in terms of a constraint imposed on maximization paths. The ethical idea is thus expressed as ‘non-declining utility over time’.

Considering presumed limits of substitution between different capital stocks, advocates of *strong sustainability*, like Herman Daly (1997), plead for a diversely structured legacy. Regardless of the increase of other capital stocks, natural capital should be at least maintained at a constant level for the sake of future generations. Intuitively striking examples for the complementarity among capital stocks are the relations between fish and fishing boats, forests and lumber mills, crude oil and refineries etc. However, in principle this does not preclude the possibility of limited substitution in particular cases. For Daly (1997) the assumption of complementarity is a sufficient argument to justify the rule of strong sustainability, according to which natural capital should not decline over time (the constant natural capital rule – CNCR). However, further arguments can be introduced to justify the CNCR. In fact, it is not only about whether or not and to what extent nature *can* be substituted in the production process, but also about whether ‘we’ *would want* the ongoing substitution of nature with regard to the capabilities approach or, in other words, whether ‘we’ can justify this substitution in the eyes of future generations.

The concept of strong sustainability relies on a ‘biospheric’ *framing*: According to Daly (1997) the biosphere is characterised by living structures with a high degree of internal complexity, i.e. negentropic structures. The whole industrial economy is fundamentally reliant on the autopoietic regeneration of these very negentropic structures that, together with raw materials, constitute a specific type of capital, stocks and funds, which provides beneficial flows to human systems. Moreover, nature is not only seen as a repository of resources, but also as an interlinked ecological background in which economy and society are embedded.

The task of philosophical scrutiny is to develop a well-founded judgment that provides a guide to a reasoned choice between these two concepts of sustainability. The judging process takes place in due consideration of ethical principles and in a

situation that is practice-oriented but without any direct pressure to act. It assumes the perspective of citizens as moral persons examining together reasons provided by theorists. The key arguments are (Ott and Döring 2008; Ott 2009):

- *Critique of the general economic framework on which the concept of weak sustainability relies:* A general reference to ‘technological progress’ or to economic models is not sufficient to justify weak sustainability. Such models are not at all neutral (Held and Nutzinger 2001); rather, if they make uncritical use of decisive economic concepts, such as substitution, discounting, and compensation, then they are part of the problem. An often given example of the falsification of the theory of weak sustainability is the insular state of Nauru in the Pacific Ocean (Gowdy and McDaniel 1999).
- *Multifunctionality of ecological systems:* A weighty argument against unlimited replaceability of natural assets is the multifunctional nature of many ecological systems. Specifically, for every single ecological function that a natural asset might possibly provide an artificial substitute must be identified. The substitutes must additionally be available now and not merely as a theoretical possibility. In addition, it is by no means certain that substitutes will always be of better value, have a lower risk or be more socially tolerable or ‘prettier’.
- *Risk assessments and the precautionary principle:* In accordance with the precautionary principle, it would be wiser to opt for the concept of strong sustainability in case it turns out that after the consumption of large quantities of natural capital it proves to be indeed non-replaceable.
- *Greater freedom of choice for future generations:* It is by no means certain that people alive in the future will approve of current substitution processes. It does not necessarily follow from the fact that future preferences (beyond minimum requirements) are changeable that future generations will be delighted with a denatured, artificial world. The conservation of natural capital leaves more options open to people alive in the future.
- *Better compatibility with the argumentative framework of environmental ethics:* It is incontestable that strong sustainability pays greater respect to the diverse cultural, biophilic and spiritual values that people associate with the experience of nature and landscape. If, at the general level of environmental ethical discourses, people alive today speak, or learn to speak, authentically and autonomously about what natural assets and experiences of nature really mean to them, then they are thus (*ipso facto*) attempting to create an ethical tradition that should also be taught in environmental and nature education, should become habitual and should have some degree of permanence into the future. This leads to the question of which concept of sustainability best matches current insights, convictions and attitudes in the area of environmental ethics. Educationalists in the fields of environmental studies and nature conservation in particular could better convey the meaning and purpose of their activities within the framework of strong sustainability. Conversely, advocates of weak sustainability must – for conceptual reasons – regard current efforts in the field of nature education somewhat sceptically, even if they might not like to say so out loud to nature education practitioners.

These reasons can be considered sufficient to justify the concept of strong sustainability in an envisaged counter-factual discourse with representatives of future generations. Of course, neither Western ethicists nor economists are allowed to dictate a concept of sustainability to others; they may only raise it as a topic for discussion. However, it can be expected that the concept of weak sustainability, if its core premises are expatiated *coram publico*, might meet with surprise and refusal in many cultures.

Natural Capital

Some scholars oppose the term ‘natural capital’, arguing that nature should not be designated as a form of capital (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2009), arguing that the term capital tacitly implies transferring an understanding of utility resulting from the means of production, which is typical for man-made capital, to complex natural systems providing a variety of ecological services, whose components are living and subject to evolutionary alterations. In the theory of strong sustainability, ‘capital’ is used as a concept at the intersection of economics and philosophy, being neutrally defined as stocks yielding a somewhat beneficial or useful flow (Ott and Döring 2008). This concept of capital must be specified according to the specific features and benefits of different types of capital. Therefore, the theory of strong sustainability starts with the term *natural capital* in order to show in a subsequent step the ‘differentiae specificaе’ of *natural capital as such*, especially the autopoietic productivity of the living.

Natural capital is a *totality* concept that encompasses heterogeneous entities. These entities can be described in terms of renewable and non-renewable stocks as well as living and non-living funds (Faber and Manstetten 1998). A *homogenised* understanding of natural capital contradicts the very meaning of the term. Single natural capital stocks are complex in themselves and, in addition, the actual components (soil, species, abiotic elements) are interlinked and interdependent (connectivity). Natural capitals are multiple, heterogeneous, and internally connected. The CNCR refers to this network of critical stocks. The definition of the term natural capital in the theory of strong sustainability is as follows: *natural capital consists of all components of animate and non-animate nature, especially living and non-living funds, that can benefit human beings and other highly developed animals in the exercise of their capabilities or that can constitute indirect functional or structural conditions for such beneficence in the broader sense* (Fig. 2.1).

Natural capital can be preserved by following ‘management rules’ as formulated by the German Advisory Council for the Environment (WBGU):

- Renewable resources may only be used at the rate at which they normally regenerate.
- Exhaustible raw materials and energy sources may only be consumed at the rate at which physically and functionally equivalent renewable substitutes are created.

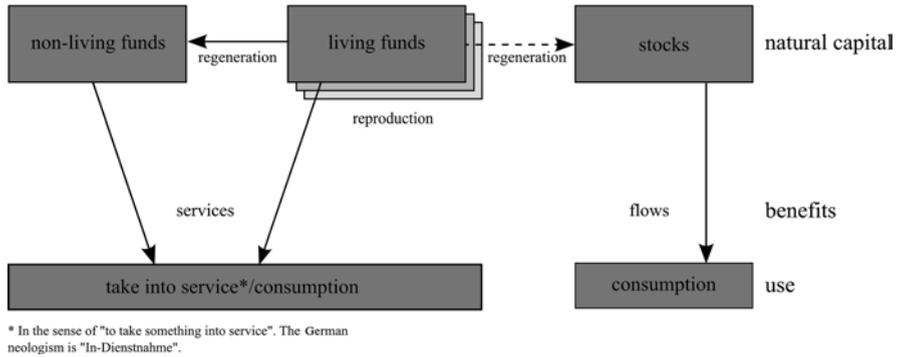


Fig. 2.1 Theory of funds (Source: von Egan-Krieger 2005)

- Pollutant emissions may not exceed the absorption capacity of environmental substances and ecosystems, and emissions of non-biodegradable pollutants are to be minimised, whatever the extent to which unoccupied storage capacity remains available.

The rule of preservation is to be understood as a prohibition of degradation and the rule of investment as a mandate for improvement and creative planning.

Conclusion

At first glance, a strategy for defining sustainability that is oriented to the factual use of words in everyday societal language seems most viable for the task of communicating about sustainability. However, as emphasised in the introduction to this chapter, this approach raises first and foremost the problem of unequal balances of power as well as the interest-influenced positioning that participants in communication processes are exposed to. Therefore, common sense and ordinary language should be taken as a point of departure for communication strategies but not as their final outcome. Instead, the theoretical concept formation proposed here is open to discursive intercourse on all levels, i.e. arguments can be examined, exchanged and improved.

Processes of reciprocal understanding about sustainability objectives and strategies belong to the category of ‘epistemic-moral hybrids’ (Potthast 2005) because they constitute an interface between science, ethics, economics and politics. An ethical perspective can provide, among other things, practical knowledge to guide action and provide some orientation for defining objectives. This knowledge is decisive for participatory decision-making processes. The theory of strong sustainability offers a feasible alternative to the popular three-pillar model, which has few proponents in academic discourse (Paech 2006). Moreover, the theory of strong sustainability can serve as a critical benchmark for a number of national and international

activities such that their goals can no longer be determined arbitrarily. On the contrary, they should include programmes and strategies in those fields of action that are decisive for the preservation of critical natural capital.

With regard to sustainability communication the following consequences arise from the theory of strong sustainability. It is highly doubtful whether such concepts as the theory of strong sustainability, and related fields of discourse, will attract the attention of contemporary mass media in the short term. One should not however commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness by identifying communication with mass media resonance. There are many platforms and arenas for communicating sustainability in the general and rational public sphere, in realms of civil society, academia, organisations and politics. A deeper understanding of the rational public sphere and its structures (Habermas 1992) might prevent communication strategies from promoting trivialization, ‘anything-goes attitudes’ or a ‘race to the intellectual bottom’.

It is easy to argue that the regulative ideal of sustainable development is difficult to communicate since it is too vague, imprecise and cumbersome to be able to easily popularise. It is less easy to withstand this very danger. There are strong tendencies for the idea of sustainability to collapse into a platitude subsuming all possible (and impossible) sorts of issues under its umbrella. From a logical point of view, enlarging the scope of a concept comes at the price of a loss in meaning. Communicators should be aware of the logical relationship between scope (‘extension’) and meaning (‘intension’) threatening the meaning of sustainability. The theory of strong sustainability counters these tendencies by identifying more precisely the normative field constituting the very core of the sustainability concept, while avoiding a too narrow understanding; the theory of strong sustainability leaves the field open to and accessible for different perspectives, including intuitions, immediate experience, disciplinary approaches, non-formalized forms of knowledge and the like. Moreover, since the theory of strong sustainability does justice to the ecological view of the complexity of ecosystems and natural processes and allows for grounds for valuation and value considerations not restricted to a sheer economic view, it offers a range of arguments open to different actors in the field while also delivering a strong defensive ground against the risk of a colonization of our experiences and views by mainstream economic standards.

The theory of strong sustainability and sustainable development (a development that leads to sustainability as the ultimate regulative ideal) can be easily used to develop systems of objectives in fields corresponding to paradigmatic and even confirmed applications. This rectifies the vagueness of the term ‘sustainable development’ as currently used (and criticized) and offers new possibilities for sustainability communication. Communication strategies should take advantage of work by researchers and policy advisors to specify the concept of strong sustainability in different fields of environmental policy-making.

A thorough study of the sustainability debate and of the arguments delivered at different levels by researchers as well as by stakeholders plays a major role in the empowerment of citizens against manipulation by media and lobbies. A too vague and nebulous understanding of sustainability works to the advantage of those who have

the factual power of establishing a definition of the term for decision-making, while discursive work on the concept based on a rational formulation of moral intuitions in the face of other real or virtual discourse participants challenges power-holders to deliver well-founded arguments and to reveal their assumptions and personal interests as well as the implications of their activities. Sustainability communication, which works through persuasion, can be considered an essential ‘soft instrument’ for implementing sustainability. However, it is important to note that persuasion can be accomplished in different ways. Following the theory of strong sustainability, the right balance for persuasive discourses is the so-called reflexive equilibrium between one’s own basic intuitions and reasonable, rational arguments (including both common sense and a rational reflection transcending instrumental calculus), which take place in an intersubjective setting. Reflexive equilibrium requires a constant examination of one’s own deepest beliefs in the face of the beliefs held by others, even when those others are not actually present. It enables a participatory process of learning and facilitates the further development and reinforcement of one’s own ethical and social values while strengthening one’s own sense of ‘making a difference’. Lifestyles are also the outcome of habitualization processes, which can lead to a reduction of one’s own options for social action. The reflexive process described here can thus have an emancipatory power and open to individuals new paths for the shaping of social patterns relevant for a sustainable development.

Promising ways to specify a concept are to make use of frames, images and visions, since they open the field for widely accessible ‘story lines’. These seem necessary if the guiding principles and myths sustaining prevalent institutional practices that impede the diffusion of new concepts are to be challenged (see Brand in this volume). Sustainability will thus cease being a platitude and become a complex discursive field that provokes and even polarizes (see contributions in von Egan-Krieger et al. 2009).

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