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Sustainability in Organizations: New approaches and ways of understanding the concept

Graciela Carrillo Gonzalez[I],

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INTRODUCTION

The most significant antecedent of sustainability emerged with the emergence of environmental movements in the United States, which were catalyzed by Rachel Carson's work "Silent Spring," published in 1962. In this seminal work, Carson exposed the extinction of birds (particularly the bald eagle) due to the excessive use of DDT in crops. Subsequently, in 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm, Sweden. During this conference, the impacts of the prevailing economic model were scrutinized, and discussions revolved around environmental protection and the exploration of common ground between environmental concerns and economic issues related to capital, growth, and employment. This early 1970s discourse engendered a stance that juxtaposed economic growth with environmental stewardship, giving rise, for the first time, to the proposition of zero growth.

Fifteen years later, in 1987, an attempt was made to modify the vision of 1972, and the possibility of growth with development and care for the natural resources in the world was raised, resulting in the generalization of a concept closely linked to the idea of sustainability, which even came to be understood in many forums as a synonym, the "sustainable development" which appears with the publication issued by the United Nations called "Our Common Future" also called "The Brundtland Report", in this text, sustainable development

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I PhD in Economic Policy from the University of Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain. Research Professor in Economic Production at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Xochimilco Campus. Contact Information: gcarri@correo.xoc.uam.mx
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8969-5096 iD

III Translated by: Denise de la O

was defined as "the one that satisfies the needs of the present generations without endangering the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own needs."

Therefore, the debate about sustainability has been going on for almost 40 years, during which time the concept has evolved, manifesting itself in important nuances and diverse approaches. However, it is interesting to note that throughout this evolution, certain ethical principles have remained unchanged, such as harmony with the natural environment and human equity and justice.

REGARDING THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY

For a society, sustainability would mean the existence of certain economic, ecological, socio-cultural, and political conditions that allow the fulfillment of these two principles: harmony with nature and social justice, which implies a redefinition of the role played by human beings within the biosphere and a profound change in the relationships that are established between different social and racial groups.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, the idea of sustainability was focused on the relationship between humankind and nature, emphasizing the negative impacts that human activity generated on natural resources and people's health. However, towards the end of the 90s, economic, cultural, and social dimensions were added to the environmental dimension, which included as a basis for sustainability not only the harmonious insertion with the natural surroundings but also an internal social order that guarantees generational justice, acceptance of interculturality and poverty reduction.

In the ongoing sustainability discourse, two distinct approaches have emerged: one characterized by "strong sustainability," which critically examines how the current economic model dictates the utilization of natural resources. This approach advocates for the replacement of non-renewable resources and emphasizes the utilization of renewable resources only if their regeneration rates are respected. Moreover, it underscores the importance of our relationship as humans with energy flows to prevent an increase in entropy, drawing inspiration "from nature's example, which has integrated the biological behaviors of myriad species into a cohesive system, ensuring its longevity over billions of years. Nature has achieved this by maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between individual and collective interests, fostering cooperation among species or groups while allowing for individual self-competition, (never the other way around)."[IV]

Conversely, "weak sustainability" concentrates on mitigating the impacts of human activities and restoring certain natural environments. It permits natural resource extraction and is often implemented by companies and government institutions through environmental policies. This approach is rooted in sustainability notions developed in the years following the Brundtland Report, encompassing various aspects related to socioeconomic, political, technical, productive, institutional, and cultural processes linked to meeting human needs.

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[IV] www.bibliotecaverde.org

In the organizational context, sustainability is perceived as the responsibility to address existing needs. This encompasses considerations for the well-being of employees, communities, and environments at the micro level, as well as the welfare of the country and the global community at the macro level. Within this multifaceted framework, attributes, and activities with environmental, social, and economic dimensions are intertwined, aiming to strike a balance among them. Sustainability is intricately tied to daily choices and decisions, impacting individuals, institutions, ecosystems, and the planet as a whole.

Today, many companies associate the concept of sustainability with doing business by taking advantage of the global environment and the needs of new market niches and their stakeholders. These companies now pay particular attention to consumers who care for their health and/or are socially conscious, so companies that call themselves sustainable implement actions such as energy-saving programs, measurement of their ecological, water, or carbon footprint, recycling of various materials, adoption of cleaner production models and programs to improve the well-being of their workers or the quality of their products and services.

It could be argued that the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) approach is currently the most encompassing in terms of sustainability. Certified companies under this approach typically implement labor, environmental, and social measures closely aligned with the interests of their stakeholders. Moreover, they commit to monitoring their actions through a set of indicators.

However, interpretations of CSR vary among different types of organizations—private, public, or social enterprises—since the adoption of sustainability-focused actions is influenced by different interests. One trend is that private companies often label themselves as sustainable entities, as this positively impacts their reputation within the community. Some of these companies genuinely undertake actions that benefit labor, environmental, and social areas. However, there are instances where companies merely comply with minimum requirements to avoid sanctions from environmental or labor authorities, or they feign sustainability to cultivate a positive image without genuine commitment.

Pablo Frederick, manager of sustainability and climate change at Deloitte, emphasizes that for a company to be truly sustainable, it must add value and enhance competitiveness through the management of its operations and relationships. Otherwise, it faces tangible risks of losing market positions or being excluded from certain markets. Public companies, on the other hand, are subject to the mandates of public policy in each country. In Mexico, initiatives like the use of eco-friendly paper and certified wood furniture in government offices, waste separation efforts, etc., have emerged gradually. There appears to be a growing trend towards incorporating more sustainability measures within public sector entities.

Civil organizations typically operate with altruistic motives and focus on specific local actions, although some have expanded their scope to the national level. However, within this sector, there are interpretations of sustainability-driven by practical interests, as it serves as a means to access national and international funding and enjoy fiscal advantages.

By following a management model that incorporates CSR as a real and committed pillar, companies embark on the journey of corporate sustainability or the so-called "triple sustainability", which implies being "a highly competitive and economically successful company (economic sustainability), while at the same time doing everything possible to have a minimum impact on the environment beyond any environmental legislation (environmental sustainability) and contributing to equal opportunities and poverty reduction, either through its products or services or through specific actions (social sustainability).

In this regard, the aspiration of organizations that position themselves along that line is to advance towards a cultural reform that leads the various agents to rethink the causes of social, economic, and environmental deterioration, to modify the cognitive structures and symbolic relationships of human beings among themselves and with their environment, which implies consolidating a profound cultural change that expresses itself in the day-to-day actions within the organizations.

This 27th edition of the Management and Organizations Journal is intended to discuss both at the theoretical level and in the specific experiences of all types of organizations, the different interpretations and positions on sustainability, as well as the results and applications achieved. In the second part called miscellaneous, there are two interesting articles related to other problems of organizations, and finally, a review of an interesting book is presented.

MEASUREMENT AND SUPPORT OF SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability as an aspiration or as a concern of society incorporates, despite its dynamic nature, a series of principles and ethical supports that have remained over time and that have been strengthened with a social and cultural dimension in recent years, when the economic aspect also becomes relevant, and a coincidence is sought between the objective of profit in the company and its participation in equity and environmental care.

In the first article Alma Patricia Aduna, Epifanio García, and José Régulo Morales present a discussion on social capital as a promoter of interaction between individuals and as a facilitator for achieving collective and individual goals through the reinforcement of social structures. It is seen as a mechanism that strengthens human capital, generating an important potential that can have an impact on the perception and commitment of citizens to the environment and sustainable development.

The researchers Ruth Noemí Ojeda and Olivia Jiménez-Diez address the current issue of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to define and identify how certain companies take initiatives to contribute to actions compatible with sustainability. Their work focuses on the review and application of conceptual models to evaluate the performance of companies in this area. They apply the Boston College Model to two companies of different sizes to compare their outcomes in improving their corporate citizenship.

SUSTAINABILITY IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

Nowadays, public organizations also try to align themselves with the principles of sustainability through different mechanisms, either from the consideration of their objectives in their strategic planning, by adhering to the regulations, or by incorporating the topic as a knowledge base for the generations in formation. The following articles present three cases of this type of organization that seek to influence sustainability through their fundamental activity.

Martha Chávez Cortés and Gilberto Binnqüist make an analysis of how the topic of sustainability is implemented in the CFE, they point out how the need for a cultural change places the productive systems in front of a new context, more problematic and richer, in which producing efficiently is no longer enough. They highlight the new social, regulatory, legal, and political demands that are forcing a change in the productive systems towards a model that is more responsible, committed, and supportive of development and explain, in this area of sustainability integration, how the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE in Spanish) incorporates it through the Institutional Strategic Plan for Sustainable Development (PEIDES) and its implementation. Sustainable development is recognized as "the pillar of the transformation of the institution and the country". Consequently, it explicitly declares its intention and commitment to adopting this paradigm as the axis of its structure and operation.

In the following paper, according to the Logic of Public Organizations, Roxana Muñoz presents an analysis of the reconfiguration of public hospitals in Mexico in the light of sustainability, based on two aspects: the institutional framework that promoted organizational changes in hospitals; and the application of standards for the sustainable management of biological and chemically hazardous waste. The article addresses the case of the Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Médicas y Nutrición Salvador Zubiran (National Institute of Medical Sciences and Nutrition Salvador Zubiran). Concludes that the analysis of sustainability in public hospitals should give special emphasis to institutional dynamics rather than on compliance or non-compliance with regulations.

Isabel Correa's research article presents the results of a quantitative investigation on the contents referred to sustainability that are incorporated in the programs in the Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration at UAM-Iztapalapa, by interviewing 128 students. The purpose was to define which educational strategies have the greatest impact on student's development to strengthen those that best meet the objectives of education for sustainability.

SUSTAINABILITY IN PRIVATE AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS

From the perspective of private organizations, two positions have been presented regarding regulatory initiatives and new markets related to sustainability, for some of them, this becomes a threat and implies a high cost, others see it as an opportunity to compete and an opportunity that in the case of social organizations is perceived as necessary to generate networks and increased social participation seeking to influence public policy decisions. The following two articles discuss these positions for the case of MSMEs in Aguascalientes and the case of a social organization.

The paper by Roberto Gonzalez and Luis Aguilera "Perception of MSMEs in Aguascalientes on environmental regulations and their influence on competitiveness" analyzes the appreciation of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises in Aguascalientes on the influence of environmental regulations within the competitiveness of the companies. The results show that the perception of companies with more than 10 years of operation and continuous growth is that regulations have an impact on their competitiveness and therefore they need to modify and reorient them rather than sanctions towards incentives.

The work by Teresa Magallón and María Teresa Montoya explores the case of several small organizations situated in the Sierra Nevada Region, which exhibit characteristics blending rural and urban lifestyles, tradition, and modernity. Through collective action, these organizations have integrated into a network of agro-producers with the primary goal of cultivating organic products. Known as the "Origen Volcanes Network of Eco-Producers and Consumers" (Origen Volcanes Network), it comprises ten small family-based production groups that, through resource exchange (such as advisory services, inputs, and support in cultivation and harvesting tasks), have ensured their development within this region.

These organizations are committed to cultivating organic crops, driven by the families' inclination toward environmental stewardship, deeply embedded in their production and marketing methods. While each productive unit operates autonomously and independently, they maintain strong bonds of solidarity as a network, initially forged around the Centro Incalli Ixcahuicopa (CENTLI). The study aims to illustrate how small, family-based organizations acquire special significance and the circumstances that lead them to evolve into cooperative networks with a focus on environmental concerns.

MISCELLANEOUS

Diego René González presents a reflection on some considerations to apply Neurolinguistic Programming, currently positioned as a mandatory topic within organizations, but especially within the management level, where its application is being strongly promoted as a complementary tool to enhance the skills of senior management.

They recover the subject to analyze in detail the idea of programming individuals and present a series of arguments that derive from the critical positions of this method, pointing out some questions such as: what are the consequences for the individual of the application of NLP in the organizational field? This work intends to provide the reader with a framework of reference on the objectives and methodology of NLP, and a forum to discuss the scope and implications of its application to individuals within organizations.

Arturo Hernandez and Guillermo Ramirez present in the anthology the work titled "Management Control: An Anthropological Perspective," wherein they conceptualize management control as an administrative tool utilized to uphold organizational oversight and ensure the directed allocation of efforts towards goal attainment. Their objective is to demonstrate that the techniques, norms, and structures employed for achieving management control not only stem from administrative theory but also draw from other disciplines such as anthropology, thus offering novel avenues for analyzing this administrative construct.

Furthermore, a critique of the book authored by Rubén Molina Sánchez, Ricardo Contreras Soto, and Alejandra López Salazar, titled "Entrepreneurship: Social and Cultural Dimensions in MSMEs," published by Pearson and the University of Guanajuato with support from the Integral Program for Institutional Strengthening (PIFI), is provided. The book emanates from a study conducted in 2007, bolstered by substantial fieldwork encompassing 420 organizations categorized as Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in the Celaya area of Guanajuato. The text is deemed significant due to its incorporation of three elements typically overlooked in such studies: socio-cultural components and processes within the domain of economic analysis, diverging from the rationality and market-driven adjustment paradigm; a sociological examination of habitus, field, and capital; and the value attributed to fieldwork in capturing empirical evidence that buttresses assertions within the field of Administration.

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