Chapter 11

Promoting Sustainability by a Paradigm Shift Towards Commons

By Jef Peeters

Author Biography:

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Learning Outcomes:
1. Describe a broad theoretical framework that could address the breadth of the complex challenges of sustainability.
2. Outline the connections between the concepts 'sustainability', 'transition', 'complexity', and 'paradigm shift'.
3. Analyze the idea of commons as an opportunity to engage in community based social work towards sustainability.

Lesson:

To address the subject of this resource workbook we require a proper conceptualization of the terms which are used. The public debate shows that 'sustainability' is not just an unequivocal concept. Its meaning is determined by differently used paradigms, which further can be connected to different social positions and interests. Therefore, it is indeed a 'political' term.[1,2,3] Consequently, 'sustainability' is assigned many meanings strongly determined by all dimensions of their context. Today's context is one of crisis and change. How, then, should sustainability be understood? How can we understand the relationship between community and environmental sustainability? And how can we relate them to the current social context? I will present some ideas for a general orientation on these issues from a social work perspective.

Sustainability and Sustainable Development

The use of both terms is not always clear. Generally speaking, we can say that, within the dominant discourse, 'sustainability' still has an anthropocentric bias. It refers to a pursued state of society and its relation to the earthly environment, which can be sustained over the long term. It's a state wherein human life can flourish on the basis of a continuous maintenance of earth's resources. Under this discourse context, 'sustainable development'[4] is seen as the process that will lead to that end, still with an emphasis on the need for economic growth. Yet, the concept of 'sustainable development' is an important reference point, because it represents the agenda of the world community to tackle poverty at the same time as environmental issues.[1,2,3] It is about a societal process of creating a just and livable world for everyone, including current and future generations. In this line, the United Nations accepted in 2015 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's).[5]

At the launch of the concept of 'sustainable development' in 1987 (WCED)[6] it was clear that this process requires an integrated, multi-dimensional approach, with the ecological, social and economic as the most mentioned, for example as the "triple P" of people, planet, prosperity (or profit). Ecological, social and economic sustainability are not separate themes, but

dimensions that only in combination with one another can lead to a desired result. Consequently, I argue that social work's view on sustainability should not neglect the economic dimension. Promoting community and environmental sustainability will not be possible without a vision of economic sustainability and accompanying actions.

The Actual Failure of the Search for Sustainability

So far, the connection of social objectives with the pursuit of ecological sustainability has not been successful because the dominant logic of the market economy obstructed it. Through the market logic of 'externalities',[7] both social and environmental measures are seen as costs for economic profit, leading to the balancing of different choices. Consequently, the principles of the social development movement (focused on human well-being, despite any ecological hazards inflicted) and the environmental movement (that focused on biophysical environmental well-being, despite the human needs) are positioned as competitors facing each other. The objectives of the respective movements often seemed in opposition to each other. In that context it was not obvious for social work to connect with the fight for the biophysical environment.

It is apparent that the current arrangements of capitalism to deliver sustainability in general have failed. O'Riordan[8] describes four distinct failures, beginning with the failure to recognize and anticipate ecological tipping points.[9] This means that crossing some thresholds will trigger irreparable, non-linear, abrupt environmental change, from continental- to planetary-scale systems.[10] For instance, it remains to be seen whether the Paris agreement, signed in 2016, will lead to decisive measures to combat climate change, because of a short-sighted vision about the economic costs that may affect economic growth in the short term. Instead, sustainability needs a view on the long term. O'Riordan further notes the over-optimism of corporate business to deliver sustainability; the immorality of the market; and the undermining of democracy by oligarchs of power, causing the increasing loss of public trust in democracy. His thesis is

> "that the vital organs of governing in politics, in business and in the markets are working against the grain of sustainability, and in

favour of the more rapid onset of perverse combinations of critical thresholds in both ecological breakdown and social conflict, and for the lucrative benefit of the few over the ill-being of the many. All these worsening trends are exacerbated by continuing recession and persistent austerity. Indeed, it is the perception of worsening and of unfairness of treatment felt nowadays by huge numbers of individuals and households which could lead to a further undermining of conventional democracy." (p.28)[8]

The words 'sustainable' or 'sustainability' are often used to misdirect from an inescapable need for economic and socio-political change. This is in part due to the fact that crises are seen as separate – environmental, social, economic – but are actually intertwined, and thereby require an integrated socio-political agenda of fundamental societal transformation. Because of the combined crises, a transformation is going to take place anyway, for better or for worse. Therefore, it is high time to look at proposals that can put us on the right track.

From Crisis toward Transition
According to many scholars, the current economic crisis is a serious systemic crisis, but also one that creates opportunities for change.[11] Therefore, both new economic practices and discourses about different economic models and process(es) are emerging. Since it concerns fundamental systemic changes the term 'transition' is often used, similarly to 'transformation', without decisive differences in meaning.[12] Analogous to Karl Polanyi's study, *The Great Transformation*[13] about the transition from the feudal to the capitalist economy, a growing global network of scholars, intellectuals, civil society leaders, and activists are speaking of a 'Great Transition' to a future of equity, solidarity and ecological sustainability. Among these are the New Economics Foundation[14,15] and the discussion network, the Great Transition Initiative.[16]

Polanyi[13] particularly contested the now dominant notion that markets are ubiquitous and an invariable form of economic organization; and that

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economic organization determines social organization and culture in all societies. In his historical study, he proves that it was never the case before industrial capitalism. Historical economies were characterized by a mix of different forms of exchange, embedded in different kinds of human relationships. With 'Great Transformation' he is referring to the dis-embedding of economic exchanges from social relations. Today, with 'Great Transition' the reverse process is meant, the re-embedding of economy in social and ecological relations. That implies disconnecting important economic factors and practices from the functioning of the market, in particular labour, land, money, and knowledge.

In creating this new economy, we can learn from the mix of different forms of social-economic exchange in historical economies. One of the most important of them are *commons*, shared resources managed by communities. In my view, the proposals for a commons transition[17]– a transition towards an economy centered on commons – are the most promising.[18,19] To overcome the reductionism and bias of looking for market solutions for all problems is a basic entry point for action. That points to a more fundamental level of change concerning our modern culture.

Paradigm Shift

The necessary connection between the various dimensions of sustainability requires an overarching story, a vision of a cultural shift that sets out the expectations and aspirations again, in short, a paradigm shift. We need a worldview that redefines the relationships of humans between themselves and with the world. What I called a 'relational' or 'ecological' worldview[1,3] involves many aspects, but the core includes at least two linked characteristics: connectedness and complexity. This stands opposite an individualistic and disconnected vision of man and world, characterized by linear causality, and reductionism. Instead, 'complexity' is a matter of system dynamics characterized by intrinsic connectedness, mutual interactions among parts, and between parts and the whole, non-linearity and emergence.[20] This view of complexity implies the recognition that natural processes and human actions are unavoidably intertwined. So, our

'ecological' worldview encompasses thinking in terms of 'social-ecological' systems as 'complex adaptive systems' and of 'resilience' as basic for sustainability.[18,21,22]

That implies a worldview of a 'common destiny' with all beings, and an ethics of 'shared responsibility'. In practice, this means not just the recognition of mutual dependence, but a positive vision of the interaction with others and with the world as the source of a meaningful life and living together. In addition, instead of competition, engagement in collective action, cooperation and sharing come into view as core elements of a new practice, recognizable today in bottom-up forms of sharing economies, new cooperatives and commons. Within the growing diversity of social-economic exchanges, complexity is an inherent characteristic.

The intended paradigm shift is underway, but not yet dominant in culture and policy, and thus may not be made in time, or may not even happen at all. It is therefore important to explicitly articulate it, both through practical stories and theoretical elucidation. This articulation needs to be open to the actual pluralism in society, so that people may join from different inspirations. This openness is all the more necessary since the recent increase in migration and refugees, resulting in an increasing super-diversity, are an undeniable feature of the world's reality.

Commons and Communities
In summary, to promote community and environmental sustainability, we have to start from a broader, and integrated perspective on the challenge of sustainability, which implies a paradigm shift in modern thinking. Once we see the intrinsic connections between the different dimensions of sustainability, the current economic crisis may provide some opportunities for transformative action towards sustainability, as in actions that divert society from the domination of the capitalist market. These newly developed economic practices may become the connecting knot that ties together all dimensions of sustainability.

Complaints are often vocalized that the social dimension is the weakest pillar of the dimensions of sustainability. But, we must not forget that society is the ultimate source of all social action, and so "*the* fundamental engine of the sustainability system"(p. 142).[23] This is illustrated by many practices that bring community and economy again together (e.g. community gardening, social restaurants, neighbourhood workplaces), which leads also to a plea for social work to engage in community-based economy as a way towards eco-social transition.[24] This transition comprises a reversal of the dominant *for-profit*-logic of the current economy toward an orientation on the *common good*. This makes clear that the choice to look in particular to the relationship between sustainability and economy is not merely strategic, but is connected to the heart of the intended paradigm shift.

One can find important elements of this transition in a diversity of movements such as the <u>solidarity economy</u>[25] and the <u>cooperative movement</u>.[26] However, when searching for a new socio-economic paradigm, the growing, new commons movement rises to the fore. In the first place, the intrinsic link of commons with communities can be emphasized, as evidenced by the following definition: commons are "paradigms that combine a distinct community with a set of social practices, values and norms that are used to manage a resource. Put another way, a commons is *a resource + a community + a set of social protocols*. The three are an integrated, interdependent whole" (p. 15).[27] As such, they constitute an alternative for social-economic organisation beyond market and state, based on another logic than that of *scarcity*.[28] Commons rather set forth a logic of *abundance*: there will be enough produced for all if we can develop an abundance of relationships, networks, and forms of co-operative governance (cf. exercise 1).

Community Work, Sustainability and Social Innovation
With the above focus on communities and social practices, commons offer a logic with opportunities for social work. That also means that for a transformative social work towards sustainability, community work is a crucial point, and the place where casework and political work are cross-

linked with each other. So, the quest for sustainability brings structural social work to the forefront.[29]

Because a transition is a complex process, we must understand that social work can also have its own contribution, pursuing complementarity with actions by other social actors on all societal levels. Community work through local economic initiatives that have a real impact for people includes a strategy of community empowerment, such as when facing the social program cuts of neoliberal social policy. Such a strategy of 'local resilience' will have more impact, while on the broader structural levels the transition towards a new mode of production – for example centered around commons – gets more élan.[30]

Community-based economic practices are especially suited to pursue the behavioural change needed for sustainability. Since humans are social beings they are prone to social sanctioning. In a positive sense, they are willing to cooperate more when others cooperate more, and that provides processes of social learning of personal moral responsibility through observing the behavior of others.[31] Thus, concrete transformative work can be organised through cooperative practices of 'social innovation',[32] which can be conceptualized as a "(new) combination of (new) social practices and/or social relations, incl. (new) ideas, models, rules, services and/or products."[11] What is changed by social innovation is social practice, or the way people decide, act and behave, alone or together. As such, it has a high potential for cross-fertilization with sustainable development, as we need to address social practice to affect sustainability goals.[33] Moreover, since social innovation is based on another type of social exchange, it is spreading in a different way than market based innovations, which is interesting for the aimed economic transition.

Since social learning is important in transformative work, the idea of 'communities of practice' may be interesting for practice. It concerns groups of people who share a concern for something they do and through regular interaction are learning to do it better.[34] The kind of participation will determine the nature of learning. Yet, negotiating learning objectives

and their meaning, establishing rules of engagement, developing the necessary capacity for meaningful participation and learning, dealing with relationships of power and expertise, and building trust all take time. Nevertheless, established communities are more appropriate for long term learning and rapid mobilisation in extreme circumstances than ad hoc networks, making them suitable for building resilience.

As a final note, I would like to warn against an overly 'romantic' view of community. The intensification of the global flows of people via migration creates increasing social and cultural diversity, resulting in a new level and kind of complexity, called 'super-diversity'. The increase of a multiplicity of diverse and often antagonistic forms of life in one neighborhood is a source of stress on living together in a shared space, besides the already mentioned political disagreement about sustainability issues.[35] Therefore, social workers always have the responsibility not to choose the easy way of the majority, but to look what is needed for the most vulnerable people from a view of environmental justice.

Application:
Instructions: After reading the above lesson, complete the following exercises, individually, as pairs, or in a group. If working as an individual, we strongly encourage you to seek a partner with whom you can discuss and digest these concepts.

Exercise 1: Silke Helfrich constructed a chart to compare and contrast the logics of the Market and the Commons.[36] Discuss this chart to deepen your understanding of the essay.

Exercise 2: *Patterns of Commoning*[37] contains many examples of actual commons. Look for examples that are interesting in social work practice near you, or from other parts of the world. Further examine them with the following definition of social innovation: "A social innovation is a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than current solutions. The value created accrues primarily to society rather than to private individuals."[38]

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Exercise 3: Create a "mind map",[39] which is a diagram to visually organize your understanding of the main concepts of the essay. Then try to relate that mind map with concepts of your social work practice.

Summary Notes:

According to the given definition above, commons cover a very wide variety of practices, not only to the nature of the shared good, but also depending on the historical and geographical context, from local to global. Some well known traditional commons are those of natural resources, such as common land or common management of water. Recently, knowledge commons became very important, with Wikipedia as an example. But also many new community activities are organised as commons, such as community gardens, neighbourhood workplaces, and community land trusts. For inspiration, it may be interesting to look at initiatives of the Transition Network.[40]

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