

27. Inequality and sustainability

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As the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) make clear, inequality and environmental unsustainability are both defining challenges of our age. They are also deeply linked in multiple ways, so that tackling one without addressing the other is unlikely to succeed.

In the Anthropocene, humans are the defining force shaping environmental change, from the global to the local scale, whether it concerns climate, biodiversity, the oceans, fresh water, or rural or urban landscapes (Steffen et al., 2015). Social–ecological systems, or coupled human–natural ones, can move along pathways that are unsustainable – leading to stresses, shocks and irreversible and damaging climate change, for instance – or sustainable, securing the integrity of ecosystems, and human well-being for current and future generations. In differing ways, current definitions of sustainability emphasize the integration of environmental, social and economic dimensions, and the need to steer within a ‘safe’ or ‘safe and just’ operating space for humanity, or to combine ecological integrity, well-being and social justice (Leach et al., 2013). To some extent, these definitions internalize a concern with equality as being intrinsic to sustainability. But understanding and action demand further unpacking of the ways in which multiple dimensions of inequality interact with different dimensions of environmental change, and of the distributional implications of different pathways towards sustainability or away from it. Deeply relevant here are ‘environmental inequalities’ – inequalities in access to and control over ecological space and resources, in experiences and impacts of environmental change, and in agency to shape environmental futures.

Inequalities affect how the ecological space and resources of a finite planet are shared. Debates over the limited carbon emissions budget that the world can afford if climatic warming is to be kept below 2 or 1.5° Celsius, for instance, highlight unequal shares in the past, and the challenge of building fair emissions regimes into the future among countries with different development paths and different stakes in an economically unequal world (Bulkeley et al., 2014).

On the global, national and local scales, environmental and resource scarcities are rarely problems of overall availability, but rather of distribution amid economic and political inequalities. For instance, threats to the sustainability of food systems for growing populations relate less to the overall availability of productive land and water and more to how these are distributed and used, especially the dominance of unsustainable industrial production and wasteful consumption practices. Global food production (and the global cropland it requires) is theoretically sufficient to feed twice the planet’s current population (Lundqvist et al., 2008), but access is deeply unequal. And as has long been known, hunger and food insecurity are principally matters of access and entitlement, not availability. In relation to land, water and other resources, scarcities are often manufactured, as elites with economic and political power command and concentrate resources at the expense of others (Mehta, 2011). Environmental inequalities in resource access and control, shaped by various forms of social, economic and gender inequality and discrimination, can create deprivation, driving downward spirals that in turn intensify inequalities further.

Exposure and vulnerability to environmental stresses and shocks are also affected by inequalities. As the environmental justice literature has long made clear, the impacts of climate change, pollution, or degradation of land, vegetation, water or fisheries are often experienced differently according to differences of class, ethnicity, or where people live. The costs of environmental change also fall differentially between women and men, affected by gender inequalities in control over labour, land and decision-making. Women often bear the brunt of coping with declining water, food or fuel resources, and with the health effects of climate change and pollution, adding to their burdens of care work, and undermining opportunities for empowerment and economic advancement (Leach, 2015).

Inequalities also undermine sustainability, and compromise the addressing of environmental challenges. Economic, social and spatial inequalities, and discrimination against certain groups, can push those at the bottom into unsustainable practices that worsen environmental degradation, inequality and unsustainability. For instance, where land and water grabs linked to elite-driven commercial developments dispossess indigenous people onto marginal lands, they can be forced to 'mine' soils and vegetation unsustainably merely to eke out a livelihood. Environmental inequalities can work directly against sustainability, for instance when people deprived of secure tenure over natural resources lack incentives and abilities to conserve them for the future. More significant, though, are the ways in which inequalities of wealth, privilege and power have enabled those at the top – wealthy businesses and consumers – to pollute and degrade environments with impunity, confident that they will have the wealth and alternatives to escape the consequences. A growing awareness that in a deeply interconnected world, unsustainability will undermine economies and societies for everyone everywhere – wealthy and poor alike – is only just beginning to impinge on this pattern.

Meanwhile, inequalities of many kinds work against sustainability by making cooperation more difficult. Environmental issues require cooperative institutional arrangements to manage public goods at different scales. Effective local regimes to manage common property resources such as forests or fisheries have often been undermined by horizontal inequalities or class differences (Ostrom, 1990). Globally, inequalities between countries have compromised cooperation on challenges such as climate change and biodiversity. Nationally, unequal societies are less able to address sustainability challenges in the long term, as their ability to form a common commitment or compact for change is compromised (Wilkinson et al, 2010). Inequalities can also drive competition for status, which if linked to material consumption can drive unsustainable practices and lifestyles.

Underpinned by growing environmental concerns, policies and interventions to address unsustainability and build more sustainable paths are multiplying. These too interact with inequalities, so that tensions and trade-offs, as well as synergies and alignments, are evident. For instance state, market or technology-led approaches to the 'green economy' are a major focus of much sustainability policy and investment

in areas like renewable energy and payments for ecosystem services. These initiatives may reduce employment for some, increase the costs of resources and environmental services, encourage elite capture, and divert resources and create barriers to poverty-reducing livelihood change (Levidow, 2014). As Dercon (2012, p. 17) argues, the poor 'should not be asked to pay the price for greening the planet'.

Market-led schemes to conserve forest carbon through selling credits and offsets, in Africa and beyond, have been associated with 'green grabs' that dispossess local forest users of livelihoods and resource rights (Leach and Scoones, 2015). These build on a long history of interventions in the name of environmental sustainability which misinterpret the dynamics of change and label people as resource destroyers, in turn justifying restrictions that contribute to social and economic inequalities. Such processes often increase knowledge inequalities. Local ways of knowing and living with environments – whether in rural or urban settings, or among pastoralist, agricultural or forest communities – are ignored or undermined. Yet approaches that build respectfully on local knowledge, practices and institutions in managing forest landscapes offer the prospects of enhancing both climate change mitigation, and environmental and economic equalities.

Policies that are good for sustainability and economic equality may also have gender-differentiated effects. A focus on women can risk casting them as 'sustainability saviours', adding 'environment' to women's already heavy unpaid care and work burdens, but without conferring rights, resources and benefits. Yet gender equality and sustainability can also reinforce one another in alternative pathways built on women's knowledge, agency and collective action. Forms of local forest governance in India and Nepal, involving women's full participation, have been shown to improve conservation, livelihoods and gender equality simultaneously (Agarwal, 2010).

Sustainability can thus be achieved through different means and pathways, each with their own synergies and trade-offs with different dimensions of inequality; the choices amongst these are deeply conditioned by political economy (Schmitz and Scoones, 2015).

Arguably the dominance of political and economic decision-making by powerful elites, driven by market profit at the expense of the environment, has underlain our planetary predicament. Citizen-led movements and claims to voice and power have been central in pushing for pro-sustainability change. Yet some argue too that effective sustainability will only be realized at the scale, depth and urgency required if there is strong, directive, top-down leadership (Hickman, 2010), prioritizing environmental sustainability above political inclusion and democracy. Counter-arguments are that non-inclusive sustainability solutions will ultimately flounder or be resisted, and that effective, long-term sustainability will only emerge when democratic inclusion and citizen participation are assured (Stirling, 2015). Tackling political inequalities emerges as a crucial contributor to sustainability, intrinsic to notions of sustainability that also encompass social justice.

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