So, you want to be
Socially Sustainable...

Exploring the Social Dimension of Sustainable Development
Author’s Note:

Congratulations on taking this important step! Whether you’ve taken a full dive into sustainability or are merely curious as to what social sustainability is all about, this document will serve as a guide through social processes and how you can get started.

This guidebook was inspired through work on a collaborative thesis examining the nature of social sustainability. It is the intention of this guidebook to further detail the concept of social sustainability and characteristics of processes that work towards it. The aim is to guide a reflective exploration of the way your organization or community functions. By taking a closer look at how processes within a community or organization are structured and knowing key elements of sustainable processes, practitioners will be able to effectively shape their organizations towards socially sustainable development.

Our sincere thanks go out to all those who have encouraged and provided their insights during the development of this guidebook.

Getting Started: Where am I?

In your journey towards social sustainability, it is important to know where you start. No matter what level you operate on; small business, multi-national, non-profit or government; it is a social system with similar characteristics. In our globalized world, a social system is, in other words, a network of stakeholders. Given this, it is important to remember that every organization is a social system unto itself which functions within multiple other social systems and ever-widening networks of stakeholders. It is in this commonality that we can begin to work towards social sustainability together.

Due to the nature of human interactions, the exact boundaries of each particular social system are blurred and will vary from one system to another. By defining them too narrowly or broadly, one runs the risk of omitting some stakeholders, either through exclusion or because resources have been over-stretched. In order to strike this balance, and encompass the majority of stakeholders without casting the net too widely, social system boundaries can be seen as an organization or community’s sphere of influence. This model centers on the organization or community and imagines its actions as having effects that radiate outward. The boundaries of any particular ‘sphere’ are set by the extent that tangible effects can be seen as occurring either directly or indirectly as a result of actions, decisions, or policies.

How does this guidebook apply to me?

As every business, community, or NGO is its own social system, this guidebook focuses on those systems and how they can be shaped towards greater social sustainability. It works to demonstrate the nature of processes within a sustainable society and outline how individuals, organizations, and the communities in which they operate can act in order to make systematic progress towards sustainability.
What is Sustainability?

The work towards sustainability is often referred to as ‘sustainable development,’ but what does that mean? The most widely accepted definition was put forth by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, who defined sustainable development as development which:

“meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.¹

This means that, when undertaking any action, its impacts on future generations need to be considered.

Sustainability is often pictured as the intersection of three spheres: environment, economy and society. This means that the best choices are those that meet the needs of society and are environmentally and economically viable. In recent progress towards sustainability, despite Brundtland’s emphasis on human needs, great attention has been paid to the environmental and economic spheres while the social sphere has been viewed as separate. Why is this?

What is Social Sustainability?

There are many reasons overall social sustainability has not been addressed by many organizations. The first is that the social dimension seems overwhelming. Unlike the environmental and economic systems where flows and cycles are easily observable, the dynamics within the social system are highly intangible and not easily modeled.

In the four consensus-derived sustainability principles² which outline the minimum requirements for a sustainable society, the social sphere is addressed through the assertion that:

“In a sustainable society, people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.”
This definition, much like that of Brundtland Commission, is based on the concept of fundamental human needs and describes a sustainable society in terms of encouraging processes and relationships which do not create barriers for others. From this, sustainable social development can be defined as the change, growth, or evolution of a social system which progresses towards an enhanced quality of life for all of its members without undermining the capacity of others to do the same.

**Why Social Sustainability?**

You may be thinking, what does it matter if my organization contributes to barriers or not? We’re just one out of millions! Though one organization or community does not always have the ability to influence issues at a global scale, you can enact meaningful change within your sphere of influence.

Every organization or community that makes a change towards sustainable development makes a contribution to social progress. In a complex system like society, no one actor will be able to claim responsibility for the entirety of the solution. It is the incremental measures taken by individual organizations that will help reach the ‘tipping point’ and finally turn the tide of development towards a world where everyone has the capacity to meet their needs.

Not only is addressing social concerns an important thing for the whole of society, it also has positive impacts on the organization or community that takes the initiative. By implementing changes within your sphere of influence, you begin to strengthen the relationships that connect you and your stakeholders. These connections and relationships define how complex systems work; an organization is its relationships, not its flowchart. Ensuring good relations within your organization or community can be beneficial in good times and in bad. A reputation for respecting and listening to others projects the image of a great place to work, raise a family, or develop as an individual.
**How do we get there?**

On this one planet, there are: 6912 living languages, 1500 different culture-groups and thousands of types of religions that exist in every region from the poles to the Equator, existing in such extremes as the desert and the rainforest. This immense diversity and individuality makes it difficult to precisely measure or predict the impacts of our actions. Because of this variation and unpredictability—there is, of course, no single prescription or scenario for being a sustainable society.

While the exact details of what a sustainable society looks like may not be known, progress can still be made towards sustainability if the principles outlining the minimum requirements to preserve society and the environment are followed. By aligning organizational processes to be within these constraints (i.e. not creating conditions that undermine others’ capacity to meet their needs) the outcome will be a shift towards a sustainable society.

So what are the minimum requirements for creating a sustainable society? In answering this, one step is to become aware of the overarching characteristics of living systems. Through this, one can begin to see how systems react and begin to define their organization or community’s sphere of influence. It is also important to explore the dynamics of human societies to understand fundamental human needs and process characteristics that will help to align society within the constraints of sustainability.

**Social System Characteristics**

The study of living systems teaches us that, from bee hives to businesses, systems at all levels share the same traits of being self-organizing, interdependent and diverse. These characteristics, derived from the work of physicists such as Fritjof Capra, have been observed in living systems at all levels which impart a level of natural resilience.

To be self-organizing means having the ability to choose actions and adapt to different situations and contexts rather than acting only in a pre-
established way. Social systems have differing levels of interdependence among themselves, their members and with their environment which come about through dynamic relationships. The diversity of a society, its differing skills, perspectives, abilities, and weaknesses, contributes to the overall fitness and resilience of a system, which allows societies to develop and adapt.

**Human Needs and Social Systems**

If all living systems share these traits, what traits are specific to human societies? What accounts for the subjective elements of well-being? Human societies were not established with the sole purpose of being self-organizing, interdependent, and diverse. What then, was their purpose and how does one account for why humans have self-organized as they have?

A social species by nature, humans originally began developing their societies with the purpose of fostering well-being and meeting some level of human needs for its members. What then, are human needs? The economist Manfred Max-Neef has identified nine fundamental human needs which do not vary between or within cultures (see Fig. 1). This concept of human needs is similar to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in that both put forth that humans share the same fundamental needs cross-culturally. The very nature of a hierarchy however, places some needs as more important than others. In contrast, Max-Neef’s conception of needs asserts that while all needs carry equal weight, some take longer to erode well-being than others. Though these needs are universal, the ways in which they are satisfied varies between societies, individuals, and cultures.

**Human development: actualizing needs through processes**

While human needs themselves are universal, the action taken to satisfy them is a continual process. Therefore, it is more appropriate to speak of needs as being realized or actualized as opposed to being met. This is a slight difference in language, but an important one.
This means that needs are actualized by more than just having something, it is about being in a process (being, doing, and interacting) that enables the actualization of needs to emerge. The ‘deprivation’ of a need is not simply the absence of an object: it is a lack of the capacity to fulfil it. For instance, a paintbrush does not work to realize the need of creativity; rather, it is the act of painting, using the paintbrush, which can. By creating the conditions that allow for the act of painting, the actualization of the need of creativity can happen over time. Since needs require a process in order to begin to be realized, an unsatisfied need is a source of potential for creative and meaningful action. Organizations and communities can

**Figure 1: Nine Fundamental Human Needs**

- **Subsistence** – The perpetuation of physical health through such means as shelter, safe drinking water, food and ability to clothe oneself.

- **Protection** – Care for the individual in the form of physical protection from harm, access to preventative medical care and the like.

- **Affection** – Having sufficient levels of self-esteem, love, and healthy and respectful relationships with family and friends.

- **Understanding** – Being critically conscious, rational and satisfying curiosity through literature, mentors, media, investigation, study and experimentation.

- **Participation** – An association with others to share in the decisions, processes, and outcomes.

- **Leisure** – Time off from the demands of work or duty, to have free time to reflect, relax, or play games.

- **Creation** – The releasing of ingenuity, passion and imagination through working, inventing, building, designing, composing or interpreting.

- **Identity** – A sense of self image defined in relation to others; awareness of oneself raised by self-reflection and self-development.

- **Freedom** – Autonomy, self-determination, assertiveness, open-mindedness through the ability to choose, dissent, be different, run risks and develop oneself.
capitalize on this potential by shaping their processes to result in the creation of conditions where needs can be realized.

By identifying both the processes that inhibit (or ‘create barriers’ to) the actualization of needs as well as those that allow for the actualization of needs to occur, it is possible to determine the characteristics that must be encouraged in order to progress towards sustainability.

So, what are the characteristics of processes that facilitate actualizing human needs and work to build a sustainable society?

**Processes Characteristics**

As sustainable social development describes the processes of change and growth, it is through removing barriers and applying key aspects of sustainable social processes within your community or organization that one can take steps towards becoming socially sustainable. Through our research, five main traits of processes that promote/actualize needs were identified. The characteristics of cooperation, involvement, inclusiveness, transparency and openness work both individually and collectively to actualize needs. By intentionally shaping processes so that they do not create or contribute to barriers, organizations and communities can begin fulfil the minimum requirements of social sustainability.

**Cooperation** is one of the possible ways interdependent parts can relate to each other. To cooperate within a process is to have each party contribute what they can in order to best serve their needs in a mutually beneficial way. Through actively cooperating, individuals can further actualize their: understanding of a situation, identity of self as defined by the relationship, creativity by applying it to an issue, and participation in a project through positive reinforcement.

**Involvement** is the taking or being part of some action or attempt; a sharing, of tangible or intangible things, as in benefits and profits or as in culture and values. Individuals are involved actively in the form of bringing their unique ideas, talents and energy to a project. By involving
all parties in an action, individuals have a greater personal investment in the outcome. Involvement can serve to actualize multiple other needs at once, such as participation and identity.

**Inclusiveness** is ensuring the needs of stakeholders are acknowledged and respected even if they do not actively contribute to the process. This acknowledgement helps the organization/community to shape its processes in such a way that they are not creating barriers to the needs, even for those not directly connected to it.

**Openness** means that a community or organization has the willingness to rethink and review its own values and processes. In the social sustainability context, this means that they are open to change in their processes in order to better meet the needs of members and remove barriers that make it difficult for others to meet their needs. Through being open to change, organizational and community adaptability, diversity, and cooperation are promoted, helping to actualize needs of creation, understanding, and participation.

**Transparency** refers to an ideal of communication and accountability in organizations and communities where motivations, driving factors, and impacts of all decisions and actions are made publicly available. This is meant to lead to more member involvement, hold officials accountable, and eliminate corruption. Within organizational processes, transparency can serve to remove barriers to individuals’ understanding of the processes that affect them. It can also ease and promote participation within processes as well as build trust and goodwill.

It is important to realize that, since they are interrelated and mutually reinforcing concepts, they are not completely separate. Though they all share the same basis of individual relations, the characteristics do play different (yet complimentary) roles within processes as shown in Figure 2.

Involvement and inclusiveness, for example, are both related to the concept of participation. However, as participation is such a vast concept as well as a human need, it was felt that it contained traits distinct enough to warrant separation. By separating its two aspects, the full spectrum of
participation is able to be encompassed. It is in this type of interplay between characteristics that they serve to cover most facets of organizational and community processes.

Fig. 2: Sample Roles of Identified Characteristics as Satisfiers of Human Needs

To support and reinforce the interactions of these characteristics, there are a number of process traits, two of which are honesty, and commitment. For example, the ability to be honest with oneself and with others is engendered through and creates the space for transparency and openness while commitment to a process, decision, or action results from and perpetuates involvement. As all of these characteristics and supportive traits deal with the relations between individuals and the strengthening of interpersonal bonds, they serve the good of the entire community or organization. This is because, when individuals care for each other, they truly work together to do what is most mutually beneficial for those directly and indirectly involved.
Guiding Questions

Foreword

The ‘social sustainability’ of any organization or community is the result of how it conducts itself— from its employee relations, interactions with suppliers and other external stakeholders, to how it works with businesses and the larger community. Knowing this, in their work to eliminate contributions to barriers to people’s capacity to meet their needs, an organization or community needs to take stock of where they are today and how they relate with their entire network of stakeholders.

When going through the questions, you will notice two types. The first asks targeted questions and uses a spectrum so that you can better visually gauge where your organization/community is today and monitor progress in the long term. By assessing where you are today, it will outline the ‘gap’ between your current situation and your desired state of sustainability. The second type of question is more open-ended for you to reflect and review your processes. Through answering these, you will gain a clearer picture of the reason for your score in the first questions. It must be noted that, while some questions are more specific to one sector than another, all are key elements to consider in order to see the relationship to the greater overall system.

In performing this exercise, it is important to remember that these questions are meant to provide a lens for looking at processes in relation to human needs. As such, they were designed as a reflective exercise to focus attention on the identified characteristics and the degree to which they are reflected within current practices. By assuring these characteristics within processes, it is believed that the space will be created and maintained for people to have the opportunity to actualize their needs. The questions are not meant to be overly critical; rather the intent is for practitioners to take a deep and honest look at the nature of the organization’s internal processes. By going through this exercise, you will gain a deeper understanding both of where your organization is headed and the nature of the processes that are pushing you in that direction.
Guiding Questions

1.0 Determining your sphere of influence

Who are the people and/or organizations who are influenced by your operation in any way?

- Customers
- Employees
- Suppliers/supply chain
- Tax payers
- Government/authorities
- Society at large
- Other

2.0 Openness

A) Your organizational power structure could best be described as:

- Hierarchical, with upper management, some layers of middle management and rank and file members (Top down)
- Fairly flat, but with an imposed leadership body (directed from above, but members are free to choose their methods)
- Flat, or with leadership coming from some sort of a council chosen by all members (directions are taken by a representative body but initiated by organizational members)
- A series of semi-autonomous workgroups or task forces that meet regularly to coordinate, without direction from above. (bottom up, grassroots)

B) How does your organization/community recognize and incentivize new ideas and new forms of organization?
C) How does your organization/community provide support for the exploration of new ideas?

D) How are feedback and general ideas listened to and incorporated within your organization/community?

From last 3 the questions above, your organization could be described as:

Minimal channels for input

Very encouraging,
Supporting, integrating

E) What ways can initiatives be developed without going through formal channels or procedures?

Given your reflections above, how could your operations be inhibiting the actualization of human needs?

(Subsistence, Protection, Identity, Creation, Participation, Understanding, Freedom, Affection, Leisure)

How can these barriers be removed?

3.0 Involvement and Inclusivity

A) To what extent do you think individuals feel part of the organization/community?

Not at all
Somewhat
Completely

B) How are the general direction and major priorities of the organization/community determined, and who was involved in determining them?

C) What percentages of members regularly participate in community/organizational governance and decision-making?

D) Does everyone feel safe to express their opinions?

None
Some
All

E) Within your organization/community, how is individual expression encouraged?

- Discouraged?
F) What are the formal channels for all members to discuss important decisions and add their input?

G) What percentage of members would say that they have a significant say in the major decisions of the organization?

- What has contributed to this?
- What has detracted from this?

H) What percentage of members would agree that decision-making system is successful in difficult decisions or situations?

I) Do all members feel a personal sense of responsibility for the outcomes or direction of the organization?

J) How is commitment to and ownership for decisions established among all stakeholders?

Given your reflections above, how could your operations be inhibiting the actualization of human needs?

(Subsistence, Protection, Identity, Creation, Participation, Understanding, Freedom, Affection, Leisure)

How can these barriers be removed?

4.0 Quality of Relationships

A) In what ways do you/your organization/community try to understand and assess the needs of others?

B) Describe how you try to understand Stakeholders’:

i) Chosen methods to accomplish goals
ii) Decisions of end goals or targets
iii) Underlying assumptions and values
C) How are conflicts usually resolved...

   i) When there is a difference of end goals

   ii) When there is a dispute over the means to reach an agreed-upon end

D) To what extent do you use dialogue to find an agreement?

Never  Sometimes  Always

E) How do relations within your organization/community promote tighter connections between people?

F) What types of spaces are available for formal and informal gatherings?

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Given your reflections above, How could your operations be inhibiting the actualization of human needs?

(Subsistence, Protection, Identity, Creation, Participation, Understanding, Freedom, Affection, Leisure

How can these barriers be removed?

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5.0 Satisfaction, Quality of Life

A) What estimate of community members/stakeholders would say they experience non-monetary fulfilment in their life?

□ All, very few exceptions
□ Most
□ Some
□ Few/none

How does your organization contribute to this fulfilment?
B) What estimate of individuals would describe their role within the community/organization as meaningful and fulfilling?

- All- very few exceptions
- Most
- Some
- Few/none

C) What amount of members would say they see a rewarding and satisfying future within your organization or community?

- None
- Some
- All

D) When applicable describe in what ways organizational/community processes work towards human needs through:

- Making work meaningful
- Encouraging people to take part of visioning processes
- Involvement in day-to-day operational processes
- Salary and payment (employees)
- Service or product to customers, consumers, or citizens
- Stimulating the creation and implementation of ideas
- Promoting a light (relaxed/open) work environment

5.1 Personal Growth/Learning

A) What percent of members of your organization/community feel that their qualities/skills/living experience has improved form involvement with your organization or community?

- 0
- 20
- 40
- 60
- 80
- 100

B) In what ways do the actions of your organization/community help stakeholders to develop themselves personally and/or professionally?

How might these opportunities be impeded?
What conditions would serve to better foster improvement?
C) In what ways does your organization/community demonstrate that education and learning are valued?

- Mentoring, internships and/or apprenticeships offered by those with special skills/expertise
- Hold gatherings for information exchange and group learning
- Hold gatherings to discuss and learn from issues and mistakes and make changes to improve what is not working well
- Input and contributions of community elders/senior partners are sought, respected
- Learners determine the focus and content of their educational programs
- Youths are included in community activities of all kinds
- No or low drop out rate of children from their educational system

6.0 Cooperation

6.1 Use of all skills and knowledge

A) How does your organization/community proceed when common effort or team work is required?

B) In which ways does your community/organization acknowledge and integrate the specific skills and qualities of its members?

C) To what extent does your organization/division/community work as a whole?

Isolated Sectors/Divisions Complete Integration

- In what ways are sections integrated?
- In which ways are divisions specialized to the point of isolation of one another?
D) In to which extent does your organization/community seek to participate, promote and partner with local initiatives?

E) How are your partnerships mutually supportive and beneficial?

F) In which ways are your partnerships actualizing multiple needs at the same time?

G) How do your organizational processes help to develop the organization or its members through involvement?

H) Do you view your organization as:

- □ A machine - each part/member working towards a specified goal by doing their own role.
- □ An ecosystem – consisting of many different types of interdependent and self-organizing performing a common task as a whole, while evolving.
- □ A brain – an interconnected, entity, constantly learning
- □ A culture – an evolving entity with collective values, beliefs
- □ A government – a complex and interconnected power structure

### 6.2 Integration of Purpose

A) In which ways does your product/service contribute to your client? How does your product have a positive impact in the overall society?

B) How does you organizational process helps others to actualize their needs of subsistence and quality of life (human needs)?

C) In which ways could the organizational process be improved by enhancing the relationships that are established now within it? (employees and stakeholders)

Given your reflections above, how could your operations be inhibiting the actualization of human needs?

(Subsistence, Protection, Identity, Creation, Participation, Understanding, Freedom, Affection, Leisure)

How can these barriers be removed?
7.0 Transparency

A) To what extent do our communications/marketing reflect our actions?

- Not at all
- Sometimes
- Usually
- Always

B) To what extent are driving forces behind decisions communicated to stakeholders?

- Not at all
- Somewhat
- Completely

C) In what ways are these communicated?

- General postings
- Updating emails
- Personal notifications, etc
- Other________________

D) Is information about the organization/community available for others (general public) in some form?

To what extent?

- Detailed reports are available online
- Detailed reports available upon request
- Overview of actions available online

E) How easily accessible and usable is information about decision topics for stakeholders and community members?

- Always- very few exceptions
- Sometimes
- Rarely/never

Given your reflections above, how could your operations be inhibiting the actualization of human needs?

(Subsistence, Protection, Identity, Creation, Participation, Understanding, Freedom, Affection, Leisure)

How can these barriers be removed?
8.0 Equity, Distribution and Living Conditions

A) In what ways does your product or service promote health and well-being?

B) To what extent are those benefits available to different levels of society?

- Available to few
- Available to everyone

C) In which ways is overall well-being promoted and distributed by your organizational process?
   i. Within your organization
   ii. Throughout your stakeholder chain/network

D) How does your organization contribute to the overall health of its members?

E) To what degree are people subject to unhealthy work or living environments in your organization/community?

- Never
- Occasionally
- Sometimes
- Often

How is this being addressed?

F) What are some of the health risks associated with your operation and how are they being addressed?

G) To what degree is healthcare available locally, easily accessible, and affordable?

- Inaccessible
- Limited Access
- Good Availability
- Absolute

H) Does your organization provide assistance/service for those in need?

I) Does your operation rely on processes that create economic conditions which hinder people from meeting their needs?

(Dangerous conditions, child labour, one-sided trade agreements)

K) How would your organization have to change if labour standards worldwide were increased to levels common in the west?

Given your reflections above, how could your operations be inhibiting the actualization of human needs?

(Subsistence, Protection, Identity, Creation, Participation, Understanding, Freedom, Affection, Leisure)

How can these barriers be removed?
9.0 Reflection

A) To what extent are processes and actions visited/considered:

i) while they are occurring

- Rarely/Never
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

ii) once they have taken place

- Rarely/Never
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

What Next?

Now that you have gone through the questions and reflected on your organizational processes, you may have begun to detect aspects and trends that you hadn’t before. These questions were a way for you to look at your organizational processes in relation to human needs and alongside the main characteristics of processes that lead to social sustainability.

In doing so, the objective was for you to identify the extent to which these characteristics are currently embodied within your organization and begin to see how to direct organizational processes towards social sustainable development. The final question of each section was a reflection on the human needs and what barriers your organization may be creating through the nature of its processes. This was intended to encourage further examination of the specific ways your organization may be inhibiting the capacity of others to actualize their needs and encourage, through a transformation of organizational processes, the removal of those barriers.

The areas of your organization in which the characteristics are least integrated, and the most barriers are being created can be thought of as your ‘areas of concern’. These are the areas in which your organization should focus on in order to proceed toward social sustainability. It is important to remember that the integration of these characteristics is about quality rather than quantity. Though some questions ask you for a value estimate, they are not merely check boxes. Rather, they are intended to
provide a momentary snapshot of where you are on your journey towards social sustainability.

By going through these questions, you have taken the first step. It is now up to your organization to decide how to best embody these new qualities and address any identified areas of concern. The incorporation of these characteristics within organizational processes is no small task. The reflections you just generated are a valuable insight, in order to build them into your organizational processes, it is necessary to have a dedicated and knowledgeable individual devoted to (overseeing) their evaluation and integration. This being said, we all have the power to make a difference. If actions are kept aligned within the constraints of sustainability and based upon the organizational processes characteristics discussed, we will realize our vision of a sustainable future.

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