OVERVIEW

SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN DEVELOPMENT

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Patrick Barron, Louise Cord, José Cuesta, Sabina A. Espinoza, Greg Larson, and Michael Woolcock

WORLD BANK GROUP
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NEW FRONTIERS OF SOCIAL POLICY

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Today’s global community enjoys greater access to education, health care, gainful employment, financial services, infrastructure, and basic services than its forebears. Yet, the gains remain fragile and incomplete. The recent COVID-19 pandemic dealt the biggest setback to global poverty in decades, showing how fragile progress is. Climate shocks and conflict among the world’s biggest food producers have hindered a swift recovery. To achieve the ambitions laid out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), much more needs to be done to ensure that the gains achieved to date become sustainable—particularly for those at greatest risk of marginalization and exclusion.

For this to happen, however, progress must be consolidated and today’s most pressing global challenges—including climate change, pandemics, threats to biodiversity, displacement and migration, and conflict—must be urgently addressed. Far too many countries and far too many poor people all over the world have already experienced severe “reversals of fortune” in recent years. Moreover, achieving sustainable development for all societies involves tackling complex challenges over many years in ways that are often highly contentious and ultimately disruptive. In poor and rich countries alike, the development journey always brings about difficult transitions: urbanization can erode rural communities and upend traditional ways of life; technology can render workers’ hard-won skills obsolete; changing norms and values can alter socioeconomic interactions, unsettling communities; and social media can widen divides across and within societies, undermining their ability to tackle challenges collectively.

These dynamics—and many more in the story of development—illustrate the vital importance of social sustainability to meet the SDGs and build the coalitions and programs to tackle global challenges. Over the last quarter century, the concept of “sustainability” has been frequently invoked, studied, and debated in the context of economic and environmental matters—to make inclusive economic growth sustainable, for example, or to ensure that natural resources are used sustainably. While there have also been many calls for development to be
socially sustainable, there is much less consensus over what social sustainability means in theory or practice, much less how it can or should be achieved.

What is uniquely important about the social components of sustainability? How can all societies—and development, in particular—promote social sustainability? Grounded in empirical findings, this book articulates a framework to begin answering these questions—and offers key principles and practical examples to guide policy makers, implementers, and community leaders seeking constructive ways to navigate development in ways that are socially sustainable.

A key message of the book is that the people, policies, and processes driving development need to be inclusive and legitimate, enabling communities to advance while remaining (or becoming more) cohesive and resilient in the face of development’s challenges. Social sustainability is undermined when development strategies and country conditions exclude large shares of the population, leave them vulnerable to exogenous shocks, and limit the voice and mechanisms people need to influence policies and programs.

Managing these and the many other difficult trade-offs that development entails requires a collective effort to better understand and promote social sustainability. Meeting the challenges of the 21st century may involve more than this effort, but it will be impossible without it.

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The World Bank
Acknowledgments

About the Authors

Patrick Barron is the Global Lead for Social Cohesion and Resilience within the Social Sustainability and Inclusion Global Practice at the World Bank. He was previously Lead Regional Adviser on Fragility, Conflict, and Violence for Asia. After working for local nongovernmental organizations in Cambodia and China, he joined the World Bank, where he ran the Bank’s conflict and peace-building programs in Indonesia. From 2005 to 2009, he led the Bank’s support for the Aceh peace process and worked across the region with a particular focus on Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Philippines, and southern Thailand. Before returning to the World Bank, Barron served for four years as the Asia Foundation’s Regional Director for Conflict and Development. He has published two books: *Contested Development* (Yale University Press), which was awarded International Development Book of the Year by the American Sociology Association, and, most recently, *When Violence Works: Postconflict Violence and Peace in Indonesia* (Cornell University Press). He has master’s degrees from the University of Edinburgh and Harvard University and a doctorate from Oxford University.

Louise Cord is the Global Director for the Social Sustainability and Inclusion Global Practice at the World Bank. Previously, she was the Country Director for Cabo Verde, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, and Senegal, based in Dakar, Senegal. Prior to her appointment as country director, she was Practice Manager in the Poverty Global Practice responsible for Latin America and the Caribbean, where she also covered gender equality. A US national, Cord joined the World Bank in 1991 as a Young Professional. She has since held various positions in the World Bank’s poverty reduction and sustainable development departments, working specifically on inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and rural development. She has worked in Africa, Eastern and Central Europe, and Latin America. Cord holds a PhD in development economics from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.
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Sabina A. Espinoza is a Social Development Specialist in the Social Sustainability and Inclusion Global Unit at the World Bank. She leads research and provides project support to foster the inclusion of groups at risk of exclusion or discrimination. She cowrote the World Bank’s flagship report on social inclusion (Inclusion Matters) and is coauthor of Inclusion Matters in Africa (World Bank) and “Economic and Social Inclusion in Development” in Untapped Power (Oxford University Press). Espinoza has worked for the United Nations Global Compact and the European Parliament. In Brussels, she worked for a network of nongovernmental organizations supporting migrants’ rights across Europe. Previously, she was a postgraduate teaching assistant at the School of Public Policy at University College London. Espinoza holds a bachelor’s degree in philosophy, politics, and economics from the University of Oxford and a master’s degree and PhD in political science from University College London.

Greg Larson is a consultant with the World Bank’s Social Sustainability and Inclusion Global Practice. He is a writer and consultant who supports organizations, leaders, and academics in the spheres of public policy, economic development, and social impact. He has worked with the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, Brookings Institution, Harvard’s Center for International Development, Yale’s Economic Growth Center, and other organizations and helped to write Pinelopi Goldberg’s The Unequal Effects of Globalization (MIT Press). Previously, Larson served as an international economist and senior adviser at the US Treasury Department for six years. He started his career in publishing before helping to establish the VAD Foundation, a nonprofit that supports community education in South Sudan founded by former refugee Valentino Achak Deng and author Dave Eggers. Larson has a bachelor’s degree from Stanford University and a master’s degree from the Harvard Kennedy School.

Michael Woolcock is Lead Social Scientist in the World Bank’s Development Research Group, where he has worked since 1998; for 17 of these years, he has also taught part time at Harvard Kennedy School. His current research focuses on strategies for enhancing state capability for implementation, on transformations in local social institutions during the development process, and on the use of mixed methods to assess the effectiveness of “complex” interventions. In addition to
more than 100 journal articles and book chapters, Woolcock is the author or coeditor of 13 books, including *Contesting Development: Participatory Projects and Local Conflict Dynamics in Indonesia*, with Patrick Barron and Rachael Diprose (Yale University Press), which was a coreipient of the 2012 best book prize by the American Sociological Association's section on international development; *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*, with Matt Andrews and Lant Pritchett (Oxford University Press); and was colead, with Samuel Freije-Rodríguez, of the biennial *Poverty and Shared Prosperity Report 2020: Reversals of Fortune* (World Bank). Most recently, he coedited three scholarly volumes on case studies, popular culture, and the future of multilateralism and a book for broader audiences on the role of development in both intensifying and (potentially) resolving humanity’s greatest challenges. An Australian national, Woolcock has a PhD in comparative historical sociology from Brown University.
Main Messages

1. Current crises—COVID-19, climate change, rising levels of conflict, and a global slowdown—are exacerbating deep-rooted inequities, with intense social repercussions ranging from polarization and declining levels of trust to social unrest.

2. Ensuring sustainable development and poverty reduction will require greater attention to social sustainability in addition to economic and environmental sustainability.

3. Social sustainability increases when more people feel part of the development process and believe that they and their descendants will benefit from it.

4. Communities and societies that are more socially sustainable are more willing and able to work together to overcome challenges, deliver public goods, and allocate scarce resources in ways perceived to be legitimate and fair so that all people may thrive over time.

5. Social sustainability has four key components: social cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and process legitimacy—the extent to which a community or society accepts who has authority, what goals they pursue, and how policies and programs get implemented.

6. Key priorities to foster social sustainability include
   - understanding the policy arena by identifying the key stakeholders, their objectives, and prevailing norms and values;
   - fostering space in the policy arena for all to provide input and voice concerns, especially those at risk of exclusion; and
   - engaging for the long haul: change can be slow, but staying engaged, deepening relationships, and building trust typically pays off.

7. How development occurs matters greatly: How governments and development organizations manage social change has important implications for achieving and sustaining poverty reduction and inclusive growth.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>COVID-19</td>
<td>coronavirus disease 2019</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESF</td>
<td>Environmental and Social Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goal</td>
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<td>SOGI</td>
<td>sexual orientation and gender identity</td>
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<td>SSGD</td>
<td>Social Sustainability Global Database</td>
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Overview

Introduction

Development is a dynamic, transformative process that fundamentally changes how people live. People are the means and ends of development—the goal of which is to equip, link, and enable groups of people to create something new and different for the benefit of society. This process is often slow and nonlinear as well as inherently complex and challenging; by changing how people live, development affects social systems in often unpredictable and destabilizing ways. When sustained over time, however, it can promote cohesive, inclusive, and resilient societies in which all people can participate and thrive. However, the change process, particularly its social aspects, can be complex, challenging, and even contentious.

There is growing recognition that how development occurs matters greatly. How governments and development organizations navigate and manage the social dynamics of change has important implications for achieving and sustaining poverty reduction and inclusive growth.

Yet continued progress toward sustainable development is not guaranteed. More than two decades into the 21st century, a perfect storm has gathered force: the overlapping crises of COVID-19, climate change, rising levels of conflict, and a global economic slowdown are inflaming long-standing challenges and exacerbating inequality, persistent structural barriers, and deep-rooted systemic inequities. These challenges have intense social repercussions, including polarization, declining levels of trust, social tensions, and unrest, and addressing them will require social sustainability in addition to economic and environmental sustainability.

For much of the last 75 years, social sustainability has taken a backseat to growth and, more recently, the environment. Despite growing recognition of its importance, however, there is less clarity over what social sustainability is and how it can best be pursued. This book aims to advance the concept of social sustainability and sharpen the analytical foundations on which it rests. Specifically, it offers a clear definition of, a coherent conceptual framework for, and initial operational guidelines regarding social sustainability for the global development community to engage with, respond to, and use. In particular, the book explores three critical questions: What is social sustainability? Why does it matter? And how can it be operationalized?
Chapter 1 starts by putting social sustainability in historic context. Current efforts to articulate and enact a social development agenda began in the middle of the 20th century, when today’s global institutions were established and important proclamations like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were signed. However, that era’s prevailing model of economic development often saw social dynamics (for example, countries’ traditional practices and cultural beliefs) primarily as obstacles to accelerating “progress” toward modernization. While attitudes eventually evolved, the social dimension of development remained largely peripheral for many years.

Development theorists in the 1960s began to underscore that local context and social factors influenced the success of development efforts, with particular focus on infrastructure projects. Social concerns took on a more explicit and operational focus in the 1970s and 1980s, as more targeted programs reflected growing recognition that excluded and vulnerable groups often did not benefit from development or were even undermined by the process. At the World Bank, this recognition coincided with an increased focus on women in development and efforts to manage social risks better (that is, “do no harm”), particularly in projects involving resettlement issues and indigenous peoples.

The social agenda broadened in the late 1980s and 1990s, as concerns about the impact of structural adjustment on the poor and vulnerable amplified demands to link development more explicitly with poverty reduction. A consensus emerged around putting people at the center of development. Early World Bank efforts to operationalize these principles included social funds, a growing focus on gender equality, and community-driven development, which emphasized participatory approaches and local decision making. In practice, however, these efforts remained relatively circumscribed, with the primary focus during this period still being to ensure that development projects “do no harm.”

The new millennium was a turning point for social development. In 2000 the United Nations Millennium Development Goals reflected major shifts in mainstream thinking about development, moving beyond narrow monetary definitions of poverty and promoting social concepts like inclusion, voice, empowerment, equity, and gender equality. At the World Bank, years of path-breaking social development research culminated in a 2013 corporate strategy emphasizing all three pillars of sustainability—environmental, economic, and social—as being critical for the twin goals of ending extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity (figure O.1).1

In the past decade, important strides have also been made to elevate and operationalize social sustainability. In 2015 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) further enshrined social issues as central to development. Throughout the 2010s, the World Bank took concrete steps to embed social factors in its operations—including the Global Partnership for Social Accountability, the Strategic Framework on Citizen Engagement, and the Environmental and Social Framework (ESF), which applied a comprehensive package of social standards to all investment projects. More recently, responding to the COVID-19 crisis in 2021, the Green, Resilient, and Inclusive Development framework acknowledged the importance of inclusion as a strategic priority alongside resilience and growth.

While important progress has been made, much work remains to be done, and social sustainability is now at a crucial point. The world is becoming more divided, polarized, and unequal, with exclusion and vulnerability compounded by persistent shocks, discrimination, conflict, and climate change. After slowing in recent years, the pace of poverty reduction reversed in 2020 and remains threatened by economic slowdown, the lingering effects of COVID-19, and the war in Ukraine.
Progress on global inequality also has deteriorated, and the gaps between the ultra-rich, the middle class, and the poor continue to widen—all increasingly exacerbated by climate change (Alvaredo et al. 2018; Islam and Winkel 2017; Lakner and Milanovic 2016). In the decades ahead, climate effects are expected to push hundreds of millions of people into poverty and forced migration (World Bank 2020).

Efforts to respond to these issues are increasingly challenged by rising tensions, social fragmentation, and a weakening social contract. Conflicts are becoming more common, complex, and long-lasting (World Bank 2021), and nearly half of the global poor now live in economies affected by fragility, conflict, and violence (United Nations and World Bank 2018). Evidence suggests that social unrest is rising (Barrett et al. 2020), trust in public institutions is declining globally (European Union 2021; Perry 2021; Pew Research Center 2021), and social media as well as unequal access to the digital economy are driving a wedge between communities and eroding the social fabric (Adriano 2020; World Bank 2020). More broadly, an estimated 2.3 billion people—approximately one-third of humanity—is at risk of social exclusion due to economic status, gender and gender identity, race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, age, sexual orientation, or disability (Cuesta, López-Noval, and Niño-Zarazúa 2022).

Addressing these challenges requires socially sustainable solutions. Growth, while necessary, is not sufficient; the social sustainability of policies, programs, and outcomes must also be central. Although many known policies are effective at promoting these goals (for example, fiscal redistribution, low-carbon growth strategies, and human capital investments), they are unlikely to emerge on their own in sufficient scope. This book seeks to move the agenda forward, proposing new approaches and initial operational guidelines to accelerate momentum and inspire action in support of social sustainability.

**What Is Social Sustainability?**

Social sustainability is a more elusive concept than environmental or economic sustainability. While the latter can be measured with objective indicators like greenhouse gas emissions or debt dynamics,
measuring social sustainability is more complex. An emerging and diverse literature offers some initial principles—focused on community connections, well-being, resilience, and engagement (Dempsey et al. 2011)—but the analytical foundations of social sustainability remain underdeveloped.

Chapter 2 seeks to fill that gap. It proposes a definition of social sustainability that is grounded in the literature but aligned with global development priorities and World Bank institutional objectives:

**Social sustainability increases when more people feel part of the development process and believe that they and their descendants will benefit from it.**

Communities and societies that are more socially sustainable are more willing and able to work together to overcome challenges, deliver public goods, and allocate scarce resources in ways perceived to be legitimate and fair so that all people may thrive over time.

This definition highlights four critical components of social sustainability: social cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and “process legitimacy.” A cohesive society has high levels of trust, enabling it to work together to overcome challenges. An inclusive society is one where all people can thrive. A resilient society can withstand shocks without significant losses to the well-being of current and future generations. Process legitimacy—a relatively new concept—is about how policies and programs are designed and implemented, ensuring that they are accepted as fair and credible by all key stakeholders. The four components are in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, more specifically, with the human rights principles of nondiscrimination, inclusion, rule of law, dignity, participation, accountability, transparency, and empowerment.

Figure O.2 presents a conceptual framework for these four components. It illustrates that the baseline levels of inclusion, cohesion, and resilience in a given community or society are affected by how programs and policies are designed and implemented and how, over time, efforts to strengthen these components can enhance social sustainability.

In spite of the framework’s simplicity, the interactions it portrays are, in practice, highly complex, nonlinear, and context-dependent, reflecting the rich dynamics at play in all communities and societies. The framework functions within a conceptual space known as the "policy arena": the institutions and forums where public resources are allocated and decisions are made among individuals, government, and stakeholder groups through debate, negotiation, and compromise, with ample potential for disagreement, tensions, or even conflict (World Bank 2017). Expanding access to the policy arena, especially for marginal and vulnerable groups as well as sharing information and building in feedback loops and other social accountability measures are important for resolving tensions. A key contention of this book is that where process legitimacy exists, the policies and programs designed and implemented in the policy arena will promote greater inclusion, cohesion, and resilience.

Social sustainability and its components are important objectives in and of themselves, but they are also important drivers of development. Chapter 2 considers each component in turn.

**Social Cohesion**

Social cohesion is a sense of shared purpose, trust, and willingness to cooperate among members of a given group, between members of different groups, and between people and the state for a common good.
Social cohesion allows people to work together and respond to challenges, while avoiding conflict, crafting solutions, and forging sustainable compromises (Chatterjee, Gassier, and Myint 2022). Different forms of cohesion matter at different levels. Cohesion between individuals in a community is bonding cohesion, while cohesion across groups is bridging cohesion—the "horizontal" forms of cohesion. "Vertical" relations between citizens and people or institutions in power, which help to establish and protect the social compact, are linking cohesion.

Cohesion is increasingly seen as both a means and an end for development and as important for a range of outcomes, including peace, trust, and prosperity (OECD 2011). While particularly vital for addressing fragility, conflict, and violence, cohesion offers broad development benefits; it facilitates beneficial change processes and enhances resilience for many types of crises (Aldrich 2012; Gates 2002; Migdal 2001; Staniland 2014; Townshend et al. 2015). Weak cohesion, by contrast, is linked with social discontent, political instability, and social tensions (Alesina and Perotti 1996; Esteban and Ray 2011).

### Inclusion

Inclusive societies are those where everyone has access to basic services and markets as well as to political, social, and cultural spaces in order to participate in society with agency and live with dignity.

Many individuals and groups face constraints to socioeconomic participation beyond poverty and inequality. Exclusion and discrimination can be due to gender, age, location, occupation, race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship status, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), or other drivers and are sustained through formal and informal norms, behaviors, laws, and institutions. The costs are often significant both for individuals, including less education, lower lifetime earnings, and worse health outcomes (Buehren, Gonzalez, and Copley 2019; Lamichhane and Sawada 2013; Male and Wodon 2017; Turner 2013; Wodon and de la Brière 2018; World Bank 2014), and for societies overall, including lost human capital and economic output.

By enabling all members of society to thrive, inclusion has large development benefits, ranging from reducing conflict to bolstering productivity. Inclusive socioeconomic participation promotes
more efficient human capital accumulation (Rauch 1991) and more equitable financial access, which often leads to better outcomes in terms of income growth, poverty reduction, and entrepreneurship (Freire et al. 2020; World Bank 2013b, 2020). Addressing SOGI exclusion alone would increase global output by an estimated 1 percent (Badgett 2020), while achieving gender parity in labor markets would generate global economic benefits of an estimated US$28 trillion over a decade (Madgavkar, Ellingrud, and Krishnan 2016).

Resilience

Resilient societies are those where everyone, including poor and marginalized groups, are safe and can withstand shocks and protect the integrity of their culture.

Resilience is the ability, capacity, and flexibility to prepare for, cope with, recover from, and adapt to shocks over time. Risk reduction and mitigation are preparation measures that aim to lower the probability that shocks will occur or to mitigate their negative impacts if they do (Obrist 2010; World Bank 2001, 2013a). Coping measures, by contrast, aim to relieve the impact of shocks after they occur without resorting to unsustainable strategies like reducing consumption, taking children out of school, resorting to illegal activities, or exhausting finite resources (Garschagen, Renaud, and Birkmann 2011; Tawodzera 2012; World Bank 2001, 2013a). Transformative resilience—less common and more challenging—is society’s broader ability to strengthen, transform, or create new institutions that better prepare citizens to weather major shocks in the future (Béné et al. 2012; Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013; Lorenz 2013; Smith and Frankenberger 2018; Voss 2008), as has been attempted amid the COVID-19 epidemic and the climate crisis (Moshy, Bryceson, and Mwaipopo 2015; Mozumder et al. 2018; Solórzano 2016).

Resilience is particularly important for poor and marginalized groups, who are more frequently exposed to shocks, lose a greater share of their wealth when hit, and typically have less external support (Hallegatte et al. 2017). Resilience has strong links to cohesion and inclusion: building and maintaining social relations and network structures enhance resilience, while exclusion and discrimination leave people more vulnerable. Resilience also matters for economic and environmental sustainability; when shocks occur, resilience can determine the difference between swift recovery and prolonged crisis.

Process Legitimacy

Cohesion, inclusion, and resilience are the core components of social sustainability, but a fourth component—which this book calls process legitimacy—is a critical driver for achieving social sustainability in practice.

Process legitimacy is the extent to which a community or society accepts who has authority, what goals are formulated, and how policies and programs get implemented. It also encompasses the approaches for reconciling disagreements or tensions, especially among those who stand to bear the greatest cost.
Process legitimacy concerns the “how” of policy making, program design, and implementation and the extent to which these components are consistent with a given context. When successful, process legitimacy ensures that who has authority, what policy and program goals are pursued, and how those policies and programs get implemented are broadly accepted by all and that disagreements or tensions are accommodated, especially among those who may “lose out” as a result. Process legitimacy concerns what happens in the “policy arena”—the space for collective public decision making where groups interact and bargain, resulting in agreements that lead to change.3

Process legitimacy has five key sources or drivers (figure O.3). First, public decision-making authority often derives from explicit mandates (for example, elections, designations, or technical expertise). Second, all communities and societies have agreed-upon rules and approaches (for example, legal precedents, professional standards, or traditions and customs) that lend legitimacy to policies, programs, and authority figures. Third, shared principles or beliefs about what and how things should be done (for example, religious and ideological convictions or widely accepted conventions like international law) serve a similar function. Fourth, when key stakeholders believe that they are better off (for example, due to rising incomes or greater security), perceived benefits can imbue legitimacy in ways that some may regard as dubious or morally fraught. Fifth, legitimacy is often derived via participation and transparency (for example, dialogue, engagement, and feedback between authorities and key stakeholders, coupled with open and transparent decision making).

In the best-case scenario, the authority is deemed legitimate, its goals are accepted, and implementation is seen as fair, beneficial, and culturally resonant, with high levels of participation and transparency. In the worst-case scenario, illegitimate authority seeks goals that few accept

**Figure O.3 Drivers of Process Legitimacy**

Note: The five drivers of process legitimacy are related and can reinforce one another; they also can function independently of one another. They are dynamic and change over time.
through strategies regarded as unfair and nontransparent, with little to no engagement with affected populations. The more “typical” scenarios, however, are mixed and highly dynamic, where some members and groups disagree (to varying extents that change over time).

Process legitimacy shapes how stakeholders experience the development process and the extent to which they accept its outcomes. Often, development itself alters the types and sources of process legitimacy, influencing who has authority, what goals they pursue, how policies and programs get implemented, and the rules, norms, values, and principles on which their legitimacy rests. In practice, such changes can be complex, contentious, and challenging to navigate. The development process can often help to resolve disagreements over these issues, but it can also intensify them. Enhancing participation and transparency, particularly by bringing new groups (especially vulnerable and marginal groups) into the policy arena, often plays a crucial role in forging broad acceptance, especially around policies and programs that are not fully consistent with agreed-upon rules or shared principles. Moreover, such efforts are typically most effective when the process is seen as endogenously driven. Several types of interventions offer evidence on the positive effects of process legitimacy. Efforts to strengthen social accountability, for instance, have various benefits for socially sustainable development (for example, see Mubarak et al. 2020).

**Links to Poverty, Inequality, and Human Capital**

Social sustainability and its key components have both intrinsic and instrumental value: while they have unique innate value in much the same way as peace, freedom, or sovereignty have inherent value, they also have instrumental value for supporting poverty reduction and inclusive growth. To this end, the book documents recent progress toward an empirical understanding of social sustainability. This understanding includes a small but growing body of micro-level evidence as well as the World Bank’s new Social Sustainability Global Database (SSGD), which finds that inclusion, cohesion, resilience, and process legitimacy are all correlated with poverty reduction, human capital, human development, and inequality at the macro level.

The SSGD constructs indexes for each component, using 71 indicators for 236 countries and territories from 2016 to 2020. The inclusion index focuses on access to basic services and markets and political participation; the cohesion index includes measures of trust; the resilience index compiles sources of income, savings, and financial access indicators; and the process legitimacy index combines measures for rule of law, access to justice, and government effectiveness. Cross-country SSGD analysis finds that inclusion, cohesion, resilience, and process legitimacy are all correlated with poverty reduction, human capital, human development, and inequality (figure O.4). Several of these correlations are strong—namely, inclusion and process legitimacy with poverty reduction and human capital as well as process legitimacy with inequality—but some are weaker. This variation likely reflects data shortcomings and measurement challenges (including the need to refine SSGD indicators) as well as the inherent difficulty of unpacking complex social relationships that are often affected by long-standing structural factors. A key finding of this book is that more efforts are needed to measure, analyze, and understand the role and impact of social sustainability and its components. Beyond data considerations, a weak correlation also implies that progress
Figure O.4 Correlations between the Four Components of Social Sustainability and Development Outcomes

a. Correlations with poverty reduction

b. Correlations with human capital

(continued)
Figure O.4 Continued


Note: The figure shows the following: all components of social sustainability are correlated with poverty reduction (panel a); all components are correlated with human capital (panel b); all components are correlated with human development, but some more so than others (panel c); and most components are slightly correlated with inequality, except process legitimacy (panel d).
on the twin goals of ending extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity can be achieved in a way that is not socially sustainable (even though that progress might well be short-lived). Ultimately, social sustainability matters by itself, intrinsically, for its ability to deliver development and not exclusively for its instrumental value in contributing to poverty reduction or economic growth.

**Interlinkages**

While they function independently of one another, the core components of social sustainability can be mutually reinforcing: the presence of all four components offers a virtuous circle, which, in turn, helps to drive poverty reduction and shared prosperity. In reality, however, the components often work at cross purposes. Some of the least inclusive societies, for example, are also the most resilient, and they may appear to be cohesive only because minority groups are suppressed or marginalized. Likewise, resilience often entails significant trade-offs: highly resilient communities can be too tolerant of adversity, for instance, and efforts to enhance inclusion can generate resentment from groups who fear losing out. Such instances can undermine social sustainability, leading to heightened tensions or conflict.

Moreover, there may be consequential trade-offs between social sustainability and the other two pillars of sustainability. Lack of economic or environmental sustainability can stoke social tensions and exacerbate other social challenges, while the presence of economic or environmental sustainability can enable and support social sustainability—and vice versa. Without cohesion, for example, societies may find it difficult to agree on policies to promote economic or environmental sustainability, and those policies will be less effective when certain groups are excluded or vulnerable. Often, the trade-offs can move in both directions. For instance, failure to address climate change may undermine resilience and worsen exclusion by affecting certain groups more than others, but policies to address climate change (such as higher taxes, subsidy removals, and coal exits) can often trigger social unrest.

Communities and societies would ideally pursue social sustainability while managing these trade-offs. Indeed, process legitimacy helps to ensure that such tensions are meaningfully accommodated, especially among those who stand to bear the greatest costs from a given policy or program. In practice, however, stakeholders and policy makers may choose or prioritize one component or dimension over the others. Likewise, development actors hoping to support social sustainability often face competing priorities, budget constraints, and limited time frames, complicating efforts to translate aspirations into action. Figure 2.9 in chapter 2 presents three stylized scenarios of how societies experience such trade-offs. The book contends that efforts to achieve poverty reduction and shared prosperity or the SDGs are best enhanced when all three dimensions of sustainability are present.

**Closing the Implementation Gap**

Chapter 3 discusses key insights from development practice on what works to foster and support social sustainability, including examples of interventions that have proven effective at supporting cohesion, inclusion, and resilience and key priorities for promoting process legitimacy.
The chapter begins by acknowledging five common operational challenges around social sustainability. First, progress is often nonlinear and time-consuming, particularly regarding efforts to promote deep social change, where achievements are often followed by setbacks. Moreover, the factors that drive or impede social sustainability are nonuniform and context-dependent, varying across countries and communities. Likewise, the obstacles are often complex, multidimensional, and entrenched, involving deep-rooted social norms, structural barriers, or elite resistance, so solutions must work across sectors to address constraints where they exist. Similarly, progress may involve normative changes, which can be difficult to generate and occasionally are contentious or even destabilizing, aggravating deep-rooted social tensions. Finally, the context is always evolving, as new challenges arise and norms, values, behaviors, and practices change. Social sustainability will thus always remain aspirational and continue to inspire progress.

Despite these challenges, many approaches have proven to be effective, and recent decades have generated a wealth of experience on which policies and programs can enhance social sustainability:

- **Cohesion.** Local and community platforms, cash transfers and livelihood support programs, social accountability mechanisms, and other interventions can improve trust, bolster group dynamics, and help to resolve or reduce conflict in contexts both with and without fragility, conflict, and violence.

- **Inclusion.** Legal reforms, targeted benefit programs, efforts to bring groups at risk of exclusion into the policy arena, and affirmative action or quotas for groups that historically faced discrimination have all shown promise at expanding access to markets and services and fostering voice and agency for excluded groups.

- **Resilience.** Efforts to improve peoples’ livelihoods, reduce their risk exposure, strengthen access to information and services, invest in climate change adaptation, and promote agency and self-organizing capacity building can be particularly effective at strengthening resilience.

Cutting across these examples, enhancing process legitimacy is also critical. A useful starting point is recognizing that development efforts have the potential to be socially disruptive and that supporting process legitimacy involves proactively addressing stakeholder concerns or grievances. More broadly, process legitimacy (and socially sustainable development in general) is supported when development actors embrace three high-level and overarching priorities:

1. **Understand the policy arena.** Promoting social sustainability starts by identifying key stakeholders, their objectives, the prevailing norms and values, and other political or policy realities—for example, existing power structures, incentive systems, or vested interests (Fritz, Levy, and Ort 2014). In some cases, shortcomings can be addressed; in others, it may be better to avoid direct investment and find alternative ways to engage.

2. **Work with all key stakeholders.** Socially sustainable development fosters space in the policy arena for all key stakeholders to provide input and voice concerns, especially vulnerable groups, those at risk of exclusion, and those who may lose out from a given policy or program. Engagement also creates opportunities for real-time feedback loops, emergent learning, and efforts to promote positive norms and behaviors through iterative and participatory efforts (Appiah 2010).
3. *Engage for the long haul.* Social change tends to happen slowly, and windows of opportunity are often difficult to anticipate. But staying engaged, investing in relationships, and building trust typically pay off (Green 2016, especially ch. 1). This slow process can pose challenges for development actors, who often face pressures to deliver results in shorter time frames amid incentives for growth, efficiency, and measured effectiveness, but it enhances the social sustainability of their efforts.

This book is not meant to be the final word on social sustainability. Rather, it seeks to promote discussion and research, to refocus the development agenda on this critical concept, and to highlight the ambitious agenda ahead. By articulating the key components of social sustainability, identifying interventions that work to promote them, and highlighting the evidence of their links to key development outcomes, it provides a foundation for understanding the concept and identifies opportunities to strengthen the analytical framing and evidence base for it. There is much work to be done, particularly regarding efforts to measure social sustainability and its core components, to capture trends over time, and to understand their links to key development outcomes. Such efforts could help to motivate policy makers, development institutions, and other stakeholders to adopt and implement policies to foster and support social sustainability.

To address the challenges of the 21st century, including climate change, conflict, the need for sustainable growth, inequality, and erosion of the social fabric, it is critical to elevate social sustainability as a key pillar of development and an equal partner with economic and environmental sustainability. In practice, this effort means drawing greater attention to the concept and deepening the collective commitment to cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and process legitimacy. Above all, it means elevating social sustainability as a local, national, corporate, and global priority and committing time, resources, and collective energy to pursuing it.

**Notes**

1. Economic sustainability refers to fiscal and debt sustainability.
2. The terms bonding, bridging, and linking social cohesion are drawn from Woolcock and Narayan’s work on social capital (Woolcock and Narayan 2000).
3. The concept of the policy arena was first developed by the *World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law* (World Bank 2017).
4. Annex 2A includes a full list of each index’s indicators and details on their construction.
5. In this sense, the World Bank’s ESF, and instruments like it, is a key tool for process legitimacy.

**References**


All development is about people: the transformative process to equip, link, and enable groups of people to drive change and create something new to benefit society. Development can promote societies where all people can thrive, but the change process can be complex, challenging, and socially contentious.

Continued progress toward sustainable development is not guaranteed. The current overlapping crises of COVID-19, climate change, rising levels of conflict, and a global economic slowdown are inflaming long-standing challenges—exacerbating inequality and deep-rooted systemic inequities.Addressing these challenges will require social sustainability in addition to economic and environmental sustainability.

*Social Sustainability in Development: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century* seeks to advance the concept of social sustainability and sharpen its analytical foundations. The book emphasizes social sustainability’s four key components: social cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and process legitimacy. It posits that

• Social sustainability increases when more people feel part of the development process and believe that they and their descendants will benefit from it.

• Communities and societies that are more socially sustainable are more willing and able to work together to overcome challenges, deliver public goods, and allocate scarce resources in ways perceived to be legitimate and fair so that all people may thrive over time.

By identifying interventions that work to promote the components of social sustainability and highlighting the evidence of their links to key development outcomes, this book provides a foundation for using social sustainability to help address the many challenges of our time.