

The Art of Social Sustainability

Like you, someone on the other side of the world has spent time wondering “why.”

An infinite number of “why” questions are being asked at any given moment, and there is incredible power in understanding that many people’s questions align with yours. No one has found all of the answers, but these subconscious connections can spark movement in the right direction.

A sustainable global society, at its core, is made up of people: authentic, unfiltered human beings who strive for mutually beneficial coexistence. Sustainability, as a whole, is about our interactions with Earth’s ecosystems — which humans are fundamentally part of. Living sustainably, then, requires distinct focus on both the natural environment and other people. Recognizing humanity’s ability to connect across vast distances is the first step toward creating the kind of world that we dream of. The next step is enacting the foundations of an emerging concept known as *social sustainability*.

I first learned of the term in one of my discussion-based classes at university. While there, I was encouraged to critically analyze how global movements are spread and explore the vital importance of building relationships based on respect and understanding. If you are wondering why I place so much significance on connection in relation to sustainability, it is because connection — and disconnection — are two of people’s greatest motivators.



Why do people act in certain ways? This “why” is the hidden force that actually gets things done. It is that which gives us reason for taking action, and what will ultimately make global sustainability possible. To fully answer this question, we must determine what it is that motivates individuals and the people surrounding them.

People everywhere desire to be satisfied and understood. That is why we subconsciously seek out connection, success, pleasure, and happiness through our endeavors. Human beings attribute their own definitions to these aspects of life based on their unique lived experiences and perspectives. Thus, these elements are manifested differently across continents.

Communities are formed based on common motivators. Becoming aware of them enables us to relate to one another despite our differences and we can use them to build relationships that are founded on mutual respect. As change-makers, we must challenge ourselves to understand and learn from people with differing viewpoints. People’s intentions often unknowingly contrast with their actions. Practice replacing judgement with an honest attempt at seeing things from another’s point of view. Facilitate conversations that fundamentally relate back to pertinent common motivators. Doing so is an effective tactic in

encouraging and inspiring people from all walks of life to act in ways that benefit a sustainable global society, as well as their own communities.

It is important to remember that shifting the minds and behaviors of people is unlikely to be achieved if anyone feels disconnected or belittled during these conversations. Self-interest can be overpowered by collective interest, but only if authentic connection and mutual respect are highly prioritized. We must also recognize that not everyone has that same privilege and ability to live sustainably in the ways that we choose to; thus, social sustainability involves additional focus on working collaboratively to improve this on both local and global levels.



Human beings have quite a lot in common, despite the plethora of recognizable variances. Contemplating the distance and difference between people around the globe can push us to invoke necessary change within our local communities. Intersectional connections have the power to motivate us to engage in concrete, sustainable practices.

No one else knows about where you come from as well as you and your neighbors. That is why it is important to spread your acquired knowledge within your place of origin, while remaining open to that which is offered by other people. Instead of dreaming about big changes worldwide, channel your energy into attainable, positive improvements on a local level. Build a strong community around you and organize practical actions. Over time, these shifts will be felt internationally.



So how can we be better members of a socially sustainable society? We all have different capacities to live sustainably, so start out by discovering what works for you personally, keeping in mind your own well-being and self-sufficiency. Then, practice cultivating social awareness by engaging in conversations and actively reaching out to people. Facilitate a space within your local community that welcomes all people and celebrates diversity. Support equitable opportunities, and fight for those who may not be able to do so for themselves. Openly discuss the reciprocal relationship between human beings and the natural environment, thoughtfully and respectfully.

Acknowledge your responsibility for the impacts that you have on other people and the space in which you live. If you so choose, join a local chapter or organization that fights for a cause that you believe in. Through these endeavors, learn as you go, and find out what social sustainability means to *you*. It is all of these small, conscious lifestyle changes that provide us with agency and purpose. There is so much value in strengthening the world's connections, no matter where we are.



A truly sustainable world is one in which all people are supported and justice is upheld. That is why social sustainability is critical to the achievement of sustainability as a whole. It is something that is tangible, possible, and still, never-ending. I like to think of social sustainability as an art form — something that is dynamic, meaningful, and ever-changing, as are we. Let us call ourselves artists who constantly create and adapt to this process, as the world around us transforms. Remember this: people have always been the catalysts of change itself. Our seemingly small choices will send ripples through the fabric of society. We simply need to trust in our own power. After all, successful movements throughout history have transformed the world into what it is today — and they were all started by individual people, like you.