

Editorial

Sustainability – a concept that became a societal value

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In science, concepts qualify situations or phenomena that catalyse attention and/or constitute objects of study. Concepts are words, like any others in our everyday lives. However, they translate generally complex content whose understanding requires many words. Concepts are, therefore, syntheses of ideas.

The same term is often used in different scientific contexts, expressing different contents. For instance, economists use the idea of *development* to refer to processes associated with improving a society's *well-being* and quality of life. Urban planners use the same word with another meaning: *development* as a way of organising and valuing a specific territorial space. This same word can have a more general meaning in medicine: developing resistance to a certain medication. In biology, *development* is a process of differentiation, growth and formation of living beings. What for one scientific field is a concept may be just a word for another.

In practice, concepts are words that summarise content that requires many words to describe. In her work, *Economic Philosophy*, Joan Robinson states that not everything understood by a word's meaning represents a concept. She argues that we cannot, for example, define what an elephant is but only describe it. An elephant has four legs, two ears and a trunk, but so does the tapir. Elephant is, therefore, not a concept.

Using concepts simplifies communication between scientists from the same area of knowledge. When a physicist refers to *quantum*, his peers know what he means. Nevertheless, when the same scientist seeks to present his ideas to uninitiated people, he must use many words to refer to the same term.

Some concepts popped up with the claim of universality as something that could (or should) be understood and assimilated by everyone, regardless of each person's speciality. Perhaps, because of this broad scope, these are sometimes fluid concepts, which sometimes require additional qualifications to be correctly understood. Well-being is one of these concepts. We are generally forced to point out what type of well-being we refer to, such as material, physical, social, spiritual, etc.

Universal and widely understood concepts tend to constitute values, which are beliefs and convictions defining what is important and is a priority for people and societies. Therefore, values also guide principles that determine individual and collective behaviour rules. Some examples are honesty, freedom, and respect for others. As derived from universal concepts, these values also inherit their fluidity and universality. Freedom, previously mentioned, was brilliantly portrayed by Cecília Meireles in her *Romanceiro da Inconfidência*: "Freedom, that word that the human dream feeds, that there is no one who explains and no one who does not understand...". However, specifying the term to not continue in a state of not explaining ourselves is increasingly fundamental for everyone to understand it in the same way so that, for example, this freedom is not used as an argument for carrying out coup acts or conveying denialist untruths. The same must apply to the term sustainability.

The concept of *sustainability* formally emerged at the end of the 1980s, when it was incorporated as the central axis of the *Our Common Future* report, prepared under the coordination of Gro Harlem

Brundtland. It is never too much to remember here the definition of *sustainability*, as stated in the Brundtland Report:

"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"

The document would serve as a reference for the debates that would take place at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. As a new idea which evoked the importance of the ecological dimension in consideration of economic development, the concept of *sustainability* launched in 1987 also brought a new and additional element: the consideration of future generations as an integral part of human decisions. This would mean notable changes in attitudes and even the need to review values until then considered the social ethos of modernity, such as freedom. After all, how far can some people's freedom go in the present, given the risks of compromising the right to exist (the imperative of the *continuity of life*) of someone who has not yet been born?

In a way, the formulation of what *sustainability* is should rescue the *imperative of responsibility*, launched by Hans Jonas in 1979, and which established the commandment "that there should be humanity" among the rights and duties to be considered in the social contract (Bartholo Jr.; Bursztyn, 2001). In this sense, even though it was launched as a concept, sustainability was already born as a principle proposal since it postulated changes in human behaviour, indicating how people should behave. It is worth saying that the concept was not quickly and deeply understood and assimilated.

For years, the difference between sustained growth and sustainable development pitted economists against environmentalists. The time scale of business management (an area of interest to economists) and political decisions (of interest to public managers) is very different from that of nature (of interest to geologists and biologists). Geological eras are measured in millions of years, while the economy's time is measured in years, and that of politicians is measured in legislatures of 4 or 5 years. It was necessary for phenomena such as the scarcity of raw materials, degradation of the seas, water pollution, climate change, and the energy crisis, among others, to emerge for an understanding that different time scales have a high degree of synergy. The economy affects nature, and nature affects the economy!

In this context, we can infer that sustainability is no longer simply a concept of interest to those interested in nature; it has become a value that concerns our society. As a human value, sustainability must guide the principles of attitudes and behaviours of all people, interest groups and categories of social actors everywhere on the planet.

It is from a societal value that SiD presents itself as an interdisciplinary academic space.

In this edition 14, number 3, SiD publishes ten articles, seven of which are from the Dossier "A Just Energy Transitions" and three more in the *Varia* section.

Firstly, Paulino *et al.* discuss the advances in wind energy in the Brazilian Northeast with a focus on the socio-environmental conflicts that affect the population living around the plants, followed by Araújo and Gorayeb, who address the problem of social acceptance of wind generator technology and the perception of members of a community on aspects that concern procedural and distributive injustices. González *et al.* present a comparative discussion on the consequences of different institutional arrangements for the advancement of "energy communities", and Baigorrotegui *et al.* address problems related to the maintenance of the energy network in Puerto Edén, the extreme south of Chilean Patagonia.

Finally, as the last articles in the "Just Energy Transitions" Dossier, Costa *et al.* discuss the relevance of transmission lines for promoting access to renewable energy sources within the scope of SDG 7. Araújo *et al.* seek to demonstrate the applicability of spatial modelling in the local planning of transmission

projects, and Wolffenbüttel talks about how individuals mobilise "functional and symbolic" values as criteria for the acquisition of electric cars.

In our *Varia* section, Zulkifli *et al.* present a financial viability study of a state-owned sugarcane company in Indonesia by employing a financial viability analysis approach. Canãr and Loor address the social and environmental repercussions on Amazonian communities from gold mining after the end of official concessions, emphasising the need to incorporate sustainability principles into concessions to prevent such effects. In the last article of this edition, Amaral *et al.* present a comparative study on air quality legislation, comparing the technical standards in force on air quality in Brazil to international standards.

We wish you all a good read and a new year of health and peace.

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