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Meininghaus, Esther; Mielke, Katja

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Situated Sustainability:
A research programme for conflict-affected settings and beyond

Esther Meininghaus \ BICC
Katja Mielke \ BICC

Recommendations

\ Recognize that sustainability is always situated

Sustainability is not a universal concept. Instead, research should acknowledge that it is anchored and expressed in many different variations of local practices, understandings and imaginations of resource use across and within significantly different contexts.

\ Uncover local understandings and practices of sustainability at the micro-level

Presently, the SDG discourse supersedes other understandings of sustainability. Even where it claims to be participatory, it tends to streamline visions and practices of sustainable living along SDG-principles. Researchers should seek deep engagement with stakeholders and disadvantaged communities who are not being given a voice in these processes (slum-dwellers, undocumented migrants, etc.).

\ Acknowledge that sustainability entails a socio-political dimension

Researchers, policy and development practitioners should make efforts to balance the ecological bias in sustainability research and implementing practice and acknowledge insights from social science and interdisciplinary fields such as urban planning, peace and conflict research as well as forced migration/ refugee studies.

\ Engage in transdisciplinary knowledge-generation for sustainability

Situating sustainability means co-production of knowledge through input from academics and laypersons alike in research design, analysis, dissemination and implementing change. Urban spaces represent particularly fruitful sites for research because it is here that people of different backgrounds (e.g.migrants, the forcibly displaced, established communities) mix and competing as well as complementing ideas of sustainability might coexist.

\ Proliferate the research agenda of Situated Sustainability for societal change

By combining the three dimensions of the suggested research agenda, i.e., contextualizing sustainability, acknowledging alternative ideas beyond the SDGs and conducting transdisciplinary research, scholars could aid societal transformation that is not only ecological but will eventually call for socio-political changes towards more inclusive, equal and just societies. The research agenda of Situated Sustainability could mitigate associated ethical risks.

Situated Sustainability: A research programme for conflict-affected settings and beyond

Introduction: Why is there a need for situating sustainability?

Political crises with state failure, violent conflicts and renewed cycles of war that cause protracted refugee situations seem to be more common today than ever. Peace negotiations are hardly facilitating peace; in contrast, the political economy of conflict draws entire regions into war-like situations. The Middle East and the Horn of Africa are only two recent examples. At the same time, global socio-economic inequalities are on the rise and figurations of conflict are not limited to their place of origin. Instead, they affect populations and political dynamics at a global scale, such as the migration and refugee movements since 2015.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 16 attempts to speak to this dilemma with the idea of sustainable peace—'sustained levels of peace' understood as the sought-for absence of large-scale violence. Peace has thus become part of the sustainability agenda. However, the discourse and practical implementation of sustainability have long been dominated by environmental and ecological concerns, e.g., through various environmental movements and milestone publications. Sustainable development as a concept was first outlined in the Brundtland report in 1987, defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987). As a norm, sustainable development influenced the crafting of the largely quantitative and non-political Millennium Development Goals. It was not until the introduction of the SDGs in 2016 that more qualitative measures and new areas, such as peace, justice and economic equality were acknowledged.

Nevertheless, there are three major flaws inherent in the SDG-approach: First, other SDGs (e.g. on health) include no reference to fragile and conflict-affected settings, including displaced persons and protracted refugee situations (D'Harcourt et al., 2017). Second, it is a levelling concept because it is hegemonic in discourse and practice. With significantly higher

visibility through the United Nations and funding, sustainable development as promoted through the SDGs sidelines existing alternatives, such as Radical Ecological Democracy and de-growth (Kothari, 2014). Moreover, it exhibits implicit methodological nationalism, i.e., policies established and enforced in many countries' national frameworks according to national economic and socio-political interests. Problematically, these conflict with global human interests in protecting our planet. Third, the SDG agenda entails paternalistic elements in that it is perceived to limit growth in countries which, unlike the Global North, have not yet reaped the benefits of large-scale industry- based economic development, but strive to do so. For example, mainly critics from the Global South stress that CO_2 emission ceilings disadvantage their populations in these regions.

While we follow Brundtland's core idea of sustainability that takes into consideration the well-being of future generations, the following questions scrutinize the idea of sustainability as a universal concept:

\ Which other sustainability discourses and practices can be identified? In localities where different forms of sustainability coexist; how do these complement or compete with each other?

\ To what extent do competing or complementing ideas and practices of sustainability generate conflict or, to the contrary, mitigate tensions by fostering cooperation out of necessity, and how do they impede unleashing the transformative potential of sustainable practices?

\ To what extent is the 'mainstream' understanding (practices, image and discourse/s) of sustainability a hindrance to actually achieving sustainability?

Situated Sustainability: Core concept

Existing alternatives of sustainable development encourage us to look for further varieties of the concept, which we suggest might differ depending on framework conditions manifest on the local level (e.g. (sub-)national policies, available resources,

international treatises, local governance) and personal disposition (the knowledge and worldviews of each individual). The intersection of framework conditions and personal disposition constitutes the sites where sustainability materializes in a situated manner.

This *Policy Brief* hence introduces the concept of Situated Sustainability:
Situated Sustainability comprises local practices, understandings and imaginations of resource use across and within significantly different contexts (spatial and other) and, possibly, forms of social ordering (e.g. pro equal participation) that enable future generations to meet their own needs within specific localities.
Contextual variety includes, for example, low-income vs. middle-/ high-income settings, war zones vs. post-conflict and peaceful societal contexts, the extent of environmental degradation, political regime factors, social inequalities, social diversity and the intersections these generate among each other. Personal dispositions depend on life trajectories (e.g., age, gender, race, class, education, learned economic practices, legal rights and status ascribed to individuals by local communities, etc.).

Introducing differentiation in sustainability: A research programme

We argue that researching sustainability requires differentiating between its situated manifestations in at least three dimensions:

1. Visions of sustainability beyond the SDGs
The way sustainability is framed in the SDGs has led to the emergence of generalized goals and measures tailored to achieve sustainable development.[1] The meaning of sustainability and its practical agendas are presently dominated by what can be called an

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1 \ In this *Policy Brief*, the authors—from an academic perspective admittedly shorthand—equate sustainability and sustainable development because a critical academic reflection of both terms goes beyond the scope of this publication format. For a powerful decolonial critique on the concept of (sustainable and unsustainable) development, pointing out that sustainability cannot solve global inequality, see Mignolo, 2004.

institutionalized SDG discourse (cf. Weber, 2017). Notably, it is not only driven by Northern/Western (I)NGOs, but also by their Southern partners who willingly subscribe to the aims and measures of this hegemonic notion of sustainability. Indeed, however, mainstream discourses on sustainability disguise inherent differences in how sustainable living is in fact already being practiced. With the concept of Situated Sustainability, we would thus like to raise awareness of the existing heterogeneous sets of understandings of sustainability that coexist, compete with or complement the dominant SDG discourse.

2. Inter- and transdisciplinary approaches
On the academic side, there is a clear bias in treating sustainability mainly from an ecological and natural science point of view. Sustainability research in social sciences and interdisciplinary studies, such as peace and conflict research or forced migration/ refugee studies, remains underdeveloped. This is surprising given that current environmental questions, employment prospects and social cohesion are closely interlinked. Against the background that socio-political and natural-environmental dynamics cannot be analyzed in isolation, interdisciplinary approaches to study them are needed. Moreover, we notice a lack of voices from academics that come from low-income and conflict settings themselves. Where these are present, they mostly form part of a localized counter-discourse (e.g. Ashish Kothari, 2014). Also, people who live in settings characterized by poverty and/ or violent conflict—slum dwellers, displaced people, environmental refugees, etc.—are rarely seen as partners in thinking about and living sustainability. Involving these groups would be a fruitful transdisciplinary approach. We argue that the realization of research and practical enactment of Situated Sustainability requires inter- and transdisciplinary approaches which encompass a physical-ecological dimension as well as its linkages to human well-being, questions of identity, values and norms.

3. Differentiation between sites: Ecological and social dimensions

In the Global North, public debates over questions on how the quality of life, integration or inclusion, and social peace can be maintained coincide with the strife for ecologically sustainable development that can succeed despite growing consumerism. It is generally assumed that in the Global South's low income and, in particular, in violent conflict settings, the question of how to live sustainably is not a priority as individuals and communities have to cope with poverty, displacement and disrupted livelihoods, large-scale lack of access to resources (water, land, energy, education, employment) and health constraints (infant and maternal mortality, spread of epidemics, war-related injuries). We question this perception and suggest scrutinizing whether this binary holds. We argue that while in some cases this might apply, a more differentiated analysis will possibly show that those who are exposed to such extremely challenging conditions exhibit their own practices, experiences and ideas [2] of sustainable living. Instead of a putative universal approach to sustainability, we emphasize the need to account for locally existing structural differences that relate to the availability of environmental resources, locally contextualized resource pressure (due to demographic characteristics and carrying capacity of local infrastructure, municipal governance, etc.) and the diversity of people's own coping and resources management skills inherent in largely personal disposition/s.

Urban and urbanizing settings as a lens for where Situated Sustainability is tangible

By 2040, two-thirds of the planet's population are expected to live in cities (IOM, 2016, p. 15). Migration is a major factor in speeding up urbanization (IOM, 2016, p. 95), not least because most displaced persons, whether displaced within one country or across borders, do not return to their place of origin but to cities, where economic and livelihood prospects are consid-

ered to be better. [3] Given that it is there that individuals from very different backgrounds share dense spaces, urban and urbanizing settings provide a particularly fruitful lens where the degree to which sustainability is situated can be studied and its potentials explored. Within one city, but also comparing across cities, we find a highly heterogeneous population with different experiences, expectations, agency and limitations, knowledge and visions. This can include practices of sustainable living which are temporarily abandoned for the sake of survival, but which research can recover from the memories of individuals. In the following, we propose one example of how the three-dimensional research programme on Situated Sustainability could be implemented in the field of migration and forced displacement.

Situated Sustainability, migration and forced displacement

SDG 16 lacks operationalization for war and conflict-affected settings ("Without peace, stability, human rights and effective governance, based on the rule of law—we cannot hope for sustainable development"). However, forced displacement and the subsequent relocation of 65.3 million people around the world count among the most powerful drivers of social change in the 21st century. The high influx of refugees to Europe in the summer of 2015 exemplified the challenges arising from rapid demographic changes even for big cities in high-income states. Yet in low or middle-income countries, where two-thirds of those displaced seek refuge, pressures on urban ecology, social participation and political representation are even higher. We stress that in urban settings especially in the Global South, but also in the North, either these pressures could exacerbate conflict and increase competition—e.g. for access to resources, economic and

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2 \ Including understandings, imaginations and knowledge.

3 \ This is one of the findings of BICC's research project "Protected rather than protracted. Strengthening refugees and peace" conducted at BICC between 2015 and 2018, with financial support of the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). [Cf. https://www.bicc.de/research-clusters/project/project/protected-rather-than-protracted-strengthening-refugees-and-peace-122/

socio-political participation (*Teilhabe*)—or foster solidarity and collaboration among local communities at one point in time. In high-density urban neighbourhoods, pressures are generated by the inflow of new arrival populations (regular or undocumented migrants, internally displaced people (IDPs), returnees and refugees) that represent the hotspots for change, negotiation and new ideas. It is here that conventional norms are being contested and the question arises: Whose sustainability is it actually about? Underlying this question are different notions of justice and sustainability that find expression not only in different norms and values but also in knowledges and habits of sustainable living.

While those who have just arrived in urban migrant spaces are at times perceived as a threat, migrants and refugees could be seen as a unique source of knowledge and as possessing different skills derived from their place of origin. Upon migrating, these could be newly applied or transformed to respond to the pressures of their new environment. Equally, it is possible that prevailing practices and ideas negatively reinforce power hierarchies, including discrimination and unequal participation, through competition. Socialization probably does not only matter in terms of resource use but also in how individuals interact with neighbours and the wider community (e.g. exposure to violence, enforcing one's will by force, ability to negotiate and compromise, etc.). Resource use and practices of social ordering could thus reveal (new) sustainable and /or continue wholly unsustainable forms of living. Particularly in situations where people seek refuge from acute violence, the fact that they will initially have to cope with their immediate situation under high pressure might appear to outweigh questions of sustainable living. While the Brundtland-understanding of sustainability would discount such practices as mere coping mechanisms, a situated sustainability perspective allows differentiate prioritizing, namely to infer that ensuring immediate survival (e.g. avoiding starvation) comes first because it is a precondition for being able to consider second-generation needs in the future. Hence being able to

cope, too, can reflect a locally unique understanding of sustainable living, whereby social science emphasises a long-term perspective, which acknowledges that practices can change towards sustainable living after the mere coping with the situation ends.

To trace and analyze forms of Situated Sustainability, an interdisciplinary approach which brings together practitioners and researchers from (urban) planning and architecture, social and political science, engineering and environmental science and data analysis (GIS) among others, would further strengthen research and knowledge production on Situated Sustainability in this field. Situated Sustainability could, for instance, be explored by comparing urban spaces with different socio-economic and demographic backgrounds. Here, a research design comparing low, medium- and high-income settings with varying degrees of (violent) conflict would yield valuable insights. Sites as diverse as Kabul, Amman and Berlin are likely to differ in their resource use and understandings of sustainability. The differences manifest not only between these research sites but also among communities from different backgrounds within the same location. Where migration and forced displacement occur, it will be insightful to observe to what extent any 'imported' ideas of sustainability travel, are transformed or how new ideas are being generated.

Methodological approaches

Interdisciplinary analyses benefit from transdisciplinary methodological approaches. The critical engagement and collaboration with residents of different urban quarters—established and new arrivals, but also community initiatives, businesses/ entrepreneurs, local administrators, and service providers—yield tremendous potential for co-production of knowledge about Situated Sustainability. The combination of social action research and qualitative research designs (with participant observation, narrative interviews, transect methods led by residents, etc.) on the one hand and quantitative and spatial analyses on the other allows us to identify everyday practices as well

as governance approaches. These encompass a range of sustainable practices, such as individual water use, sewage systems, waste disposal, power generation, land use and employment potentials linked to these fields. However, such a mixed method approach equally enables scholars to grasp the social relationships, including conflict, hierarchies, knowledge production and imaginations of individuals and communities with whom they would work.

Research designed in this manner could become a first crucial milestone in creating a kind of transformative literacy—for all actors involved and affected— that contributes to a better understanding of societal change processes and could allow for bringing about change. Along the lines of a new (increasingly called-for) understanding of research that takes on the role of providing orientation and related knowledge to tackle great societal challenges (climate change, migration, and protracted conflict and displacement situations), there is great potential for innovation through co-production. Through transformative science (Schneidewind & Singer-Brodowski, 2014), scholars would prioritize accompanying research and the transfer of findings to residents, stakeholders from municipal authorities, private enterprises, social workers, planners, etc. Thus, research could not only shed light on the causes and processes of transformations to sustainability, but it also becomes part of these processes.

Transformative research and transfer might be less contested in contexts where decision-making, consultation and governance mechanisms in principle ensure inclusivity. Yet, this is not the case where such mechanisms do not exist ('might makes right', including settings of war) or are not working because they are overburdened by everyday challenges such as rapid urbanization, underfinanced municipalities, natural hazards, criminality, etc. Here, potentially envisaged change would be likely to encompass social as well as technical re-organization, which should be subject to negotiation among research participants. Where questions of social ordering touch upon

questions of participation, human rights, etc., this also requires a normative positioning of researchers, who should be transparent about their own agendas from the onset of any project to allow for informed consent by participants.

Preempting ethical risks

The proposed research agenda should guard against a number of ethical risks involved in changes towards sustainability. First, the analysis of situated sustainability should make bottom-up knowledge transfer possible that respects existing capabilities and ideas, rather than "teaching" other forms of sustainability in the interest of business purposes and allegedly universal norms. Above outlined co-production of knowledge can have empowering effects if it offers options and values local choices, but it must avoid trying to impose the externally perceived "best" choice for change.

Second, acknowledging Situated Sustainability must not be exploited to create "optimal" conditions in the interest of the Global North/ powerful actors and prioritize international agendas over immediate needs. This would apply for instance, if conditions of energy use in refugee camps were improved to reduce donor expenses and/or to increase the likelihood of preventing migration towards Europe. In other instances, planting trees in water-scarce settings as a mere 'beautifying' measure in line with the goal of creating more habitable urban environments can conflict with preserving water aquifers. These examples show that a Situated Sustainability approach would instead take into consideration both ecological and socio-political local needs.

Third, the concept of Situated Sustainability can highlight heterogeneous ideas and practices if researchers are sensitive to their own positionality and the fact that their educational background will tend to have an impact on their choice of questions and research participants. As pointed out by critical development research, it is crucial to transcend local

power structures (rather than e.g. only interviewing alleged "representatives" of certain communities). Highly diverse urban and urbanizing settings will exhibit vastly different communities, whereby, for instance, single migrant worker communities (often gender segregated depending on the type of labour) will differ from poor informal settlements with extended families. Here, a balanced approach is required that does not privilege more accessible groups and those with better access over highly disadvantaged ones.

Fourth, it must be acknowledged that transformative approaches are inevitably political. Especially in non-Western settings, the organization of change processes does ultimately scrutinize existing power hierarchies. In such cases, researchers will face the difficulty of positioning themselves clearly regarding their modalities of engagement: will they aim for equality, democratization, cultural sensitivity, a mixture of these, or non-involvement? Thus, discoveries of specific forms of Situated Sustainability depend on the foci researchers choose (heuristic interest and analytical framework).

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International Center
for Conversion \

AUTHORS
Dr Esther Meininghaus
Senior Researcher, BICC

Dr Katja Mielke
Senior Researcher, BICC

JRF

MEMBER Johannes-Rau-
OF Forschungsgemeinschaft