



Proceeding Paper

Sustainability as an Aspect of Societal Quality [†]

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Abstract: Sustainability and quality have many connections and commonalities. Conceptually, they are ambiguous and subject to interpretations. They multi-disciplinarily relate to many application areas. Quality relates to products, organizations, people, and societies, whereas sustainability to societies or the entire planet. The development of sustainability and the quality of society take place through the actions and diffusion of people and organizations. Organizations apply sustainability in their business by social responsibility. Problems in sustainability are born from its conceptual ambiguity and broad economic and political interest. The article examines sustainability as a subset within a societal quality, and society as a scale-free network.

Keywords: sustainability; quality; management; social responsibility; conceptualization

1. Introduction

Various writings, including general newspaper articles, corporate publications and scholarly articles, often deal with quality and sustainability in the same context. These concepts have many connections and commonalities but, conceptually, they remain elusive, and their meanings can vary widely in various sources and relations. In connection with these terms, one can emphasize either the state of affairs, properties, or activities. The word quality can be used as a noun or an adjective [1]. Instead, the adjective sustainable or sustained is used in combination with a noun, for example, plan, planning, or development. The expression of sustained success is also used as an important concept in international standardization as the goal for organizations following the quality management principles [2].

It follows from all of the above that many texts related to our subject are easily confusing and unclear in content, and subject to interpretation. This trend has intensified recently. The ambiguity is further increased when the aspects of management, innovation, risks, and resilience are combined with quality and sustainability in practical situations. Management and innovation come to the fore when quality and sustainability are being realized by the organizations. Sustainable development takes place through continual diffusion of the results of the quality activities, lifelong learning, and innovation of the individuals and organizations in society [3]. In this context, risks are related to the effects of uncertainty [4] including the deficiency of information to understand the situations or events, their consequences, or the associated likelihood. Resilience implies adaptive capacity in a complex and changing environment and relates to toughness and the capacity to recover from difficulties.

Quality is an age-old concept, and its content for professional use has become well established and internationally standardized over the past hundred years [5]. Sustainable development thinking originated in the late 1960s in the context of the meetings of the UN about striving at improving the human environment. The concept then evolved under



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the influence of many different parties and finally today embraces almost anything with a wide range of content. As a result, the content of sustainability has become blurred, and related activities have become differentiated and fragmented among many different interested parties, which has also generated widespread economic and political interest and opportunities for influence.

The purpose of this article is to clarify sustainability in a quality context conceptually as well as in practice. In this context, the authors present a broad view of the quality of society and the role of sustainability in this context. The issue is examined from the perspectives of related positive and negative development.

2. Object of Examination

Quality can relate to a wide variety of objects, including materials, physical and intellectual products, people, processes, organizations, conditions, communities, and societies, etc., that are results of the activity of nature, man, or organizations. Quality implies the fulfillment (i.e., satisfaction) of the needs and expectations of all related parties [6]. In this sense, nature, human individuals, organizations, and societies are very different actors.

The concept of sustainability in a professional context had originally been aimed at societies or the entire planet and at their characterization, particularly from the human point of view. The quality of the society is based on all inherent characteristics of society, also including all sustainability aspects. Hence, sustainability is a subset of the quality of society. We have used the terms quality of society and societal quality as synonyms.

3. Conceptual and Substantive Development of Sustainability and Related Concepts

The concept of sustainability has a long and varied history of development; however, it has no general and undisputed definition yet. Therefore, the concept is difficult to understand unambiguously, and its content is vague [7,8]. This has resulted in conceptual and practical problems. In order to understand the issue, we need to go to the roots of the subject and look at the different stages of the development on that basis.

3.1. The Global Drive for Sustainable Development

Worldwide sustainability discussion has its roots in the meetings of the UN General Assembly in 1968–1969 [9–11] regarding the quality problems of the human environment, including air and water pollution, erosion, soil deterioration, waste, noise, and biocides. The problems were seen to be due to the increasing population and urbanization, and in particular, industrialization, heavy industry, mining, and transport. The focus was on the consequences of human activity in the physical and biological environment, leaving out purely natural phenomena. Forestry and fishery were the addressed topics. Human harmful consequent effects were related to man, his physical, mental, and social wellbeing, his dignity, and ensuring human rights. Hence, the goal was to deal extensively with the economic, social, cultural, and health aspects. Since then, the issue was addressed continually in many consecutive UN conferences. Hence, these conferences have then later had a significant influence on the content and interpretation of the concept of sustainability.

The Club of Rome [12] is a high-level informal international think tank forum for the research and planning of the future and consists of notable scientists, economists, business leaders, and politicians around the world. Many representatives of the academic, political, financial, and aristocratic elite (“Committee of 300”) have been associated with the activities of the Club of Rome [13]. The Club was founded by a group of like-minded thinkers who shared profound concern for the long-term future of humanity and the planet, and it has been active since the early 1970s. They have addressed a wide range of issues, such as environmental issues, resource adequacy and energy issues as the factors of the sustainable world system. According to their report in 1972, “The Limits to Growth” [14], population and economy do not grow at the same rate, and to survive in the future, humanity must change its direction of development. Applying a cybernetic approach, they presented that population, agricultural production, non-renewable resource depletion, industrial output,

and pollution ultimately limit growth on the planet. If the world system is not made sustainable, a sudden and uncontrollable collapse results. For their aspirations, the key figures of the Club of Rome have also become involved in a wide range of global politics, for instance, by warning about the crises of energy and food and environmental catastrophe, and seeking the New World Order (or One World Government) where zero-growth and population reduction are at its core [13,15].

The UN Conference in Stockholm 1972 [16] published the Stockholm Declaration that defined a common outlook and the common principles to inspire and guide the peoples of the world in the preservation and enhancement of the human environment. It also presented a framework for environmental actions and a long list of recommendations for governments and the international community consisting of the measures designed to safeguard and enhance the human environment for the benefit of present and future generations of man.

Despite the significant efforts of the Stockholm Declaration, global environmental challenges had not been adequately addressed since the Stockholm Conference, although these challenges had increased in many ways. That is why, in 1983, the UN set up a commission independent of the UN, focusing on environmental and development problems and solutions. This Commission, known as the Brundtland Commission [17] or more formally the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), defined sustainable development as *social and economic progress to ensure people's healthy and productive lives, but without compromising the ability of future generations to respond to their needs*. This had a clear societal focus from a human point of view. The term sustainability was not yet used as a separate concept in the report.

The Rio Declaration of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, "The Earth Summit" [18], reaffirmed the Stockholm Declaration. At the same time, new principles were defined for an equitable global partnership and cooperation among states, key sectors of societies, and people. The central role of humans was emphasized in sustainable development and their rights to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature. States shall enact effective environmental legislation, and environmental standards, management objectives and priorities should reflect the environmental and developmental context to which they apply. Environmental impact assessment, as a national instrument, was required for proposed activities, which are likely to have a significant adverse impact on the environment. This also is subject to a decision of a competent national authority. In particular, the conference was frightened of the patterns of production and consumption in the industrial world and the increasing overpopulation of developing countries to save the world.

From 1997, the UN's definition of sustainable development [19] has referred, according to the Brundtland Commission, to development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The Kyoto Protocol [20] created by the UN Climate Change Conferences presented legally binding obligations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on the basis of the notion that (1) dangerous global warming is occurring and (2) anthropogenic carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions are driving it.

OECD [21] has been actively involved with sustainable development since the Rio Earth Summit (1992). They also defined the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development in the same way as the UN. The World Bank began to interact with civil society in the 1970s through dialogue with non-governmental organizations around environmental concerns. Later, they especially have promoted corporate responsibility plans based on the UN sustainable development goals, sustainability reporting, and international standards [22].

The UN General Assembly adopted in 2000 the UN Millennium Declaration [23], which defined the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and were based on the OECD International Development Goals agreed by Development Ministers in the "Shaping the 21st Century Strategy" [24]. The MDGs aimed at:

1. Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger;
2. Achieving universal primary education;
3. Promoting gender equality and empower women;
4. Reducing child mortality;
5. Improving maternal health;
6. Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases;
7. Ensuring environmental sustainability;
8. Developing a global partnership for development.

Later, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development [25] resulted in a political outcome document that contains practical measures for implementing sustainable development. This launched a process to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which built upon the earlier MDGs. In this way, the concepts of “sustainable development” and “green economy” sought to bring together the interrelated concerns of societal development, on the one hand, and the environment on the other. Hence, both development and environmental policies had important implications for human rights. MDGs and SDGs are collections of many various aspects and, hence, they marked a very significant extension in the content of the concept of sustainable development.

The SDGs were understood as a “blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all” and they were set in 2015 by the UN General Assembly and are intended to be achieved by the year 2030. They are included in the UN Resolution of the 2030 Agenda [26]. The SDGs are an extension of the MDGs and consist of the following goals:

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere;
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture;
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages;
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all;
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls;
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all;
8. Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all;
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation;
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries;
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable;
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns;
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts;
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans and marine resources for sustainable development;
15. Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss;
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels;
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

Some of these very cross-cutting objectives have also differentiated into their own more limited specialist areas, and therefore they have also begun to be overemphasized over others. An example is the climate change area, which was started by the UN climate meetings in the 1990s, and which has become a striking and prominent specific factor also from the point of view of sustainable development. A political body, The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [27], created by the UN, provides policymakers with

information on climate change, its implications, and potential future risks as well as puts forward adaptation and mitigation options. In supporting its work, the IPCC has also initiated extensive international scientific research [28] on the physical phenomena of climate change and their natural and anthropogenic causes and effects.

With international development, the scope of sustainable development has expanded over the years towards a wide-ranging and almost all-encompassing agenda for Planet Earth and humanity [22,29]. For instance, the UN uses the phraseology of “Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” [26]. In general, the development perspective has been reactive, with special attention paid to existing problematic aspects.

3.2. Sustainability Development as the Target or State of a Society

Previously presented UN-related references deal with the human environment or sustainable development. The concept of sustainability was not used explicitly but it was clearly introduced by World Bank research [30] as a *requirement of our generation to manage our resource base such that the average quality of life we ensure ourselves can potentially be shared by all future generations*. In this context, ideas on the relationship between sustainability and quality were also raised. Development is sustainable if it does not involve a decreasing quality of life on average. The UN’s definition of sustainability [19] refers to (a) *use of the biosphere by present generations while maintaining its potential yield (benefit) for future generations and/or (b) non-declining trends of economic growth and development that might be impaired by natural resource depletion and environmental degradation*.

There is no single international standard for sustainability, since this concept is so multidisciplinary and related to a great many different fields and their standards. For this reason, specific international guidelines for sustainability have been developed to be applied in preparing standards for various sectors. This guidance is presented in the document ISO Guide 82 [31]. However, different standards have provided different definitions of the concept, but most commonly in the international standards, sustainability means the *state of the global system, including environmental, social and economic aspects, in which the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. Here, sustainability is also understood as a feature of society. The sustainability of society is always relative. It is not a question of whether or not there is sustainability, but it is always a matter of degree.

The word sustainability is also sometimes used in everyday language. According to Lexico, the word has two different meanings—the general one and the specific one. In general, sustainability means the *ability to maintain something at a certain rate or level*. As a particular meaning, it highlights *avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance*. The word sustainability is etymologically [32] derived from the Latin word *sustinere*, to hold (from *tenere*—hold; keep; comprehend; represent; support), and it was regularly used in medieval French. The word sustainable dates back to the 1610s referring to “bearable”, to 1845 in the sense “defensible”, and dates back to 1965 with the meaning “capable of being continued at a certain level”. Sustainable growth is recorded from 1965. Correspondingly, since 1907 sustainability originates in reference to a legal objection. In a general sense, it has been used in economics, agriculture, and ecology since 1972.

Since its early definitions and practices, sustainability has emphasized global scope and human aspects and the action plans of societies at large [29,33,34]. Later, sustainability aspects have also begun to be seen as business advantages and challenges [35], and through it also collaboration with organizational stakeholders becomes emphasized [36]. This is strongly highlighted in the widely referenced and used three pillars of sustainable development [37], which include: (1) economic development; (2) social development (including labor practices, human rights, society, and product responsibility); and (3) environmental protection [38]. Other references in this context are the organizational evaluation and reporting practice of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the international standard

ISO 26000 for social responsibility [39]. Sometimes the four pillars of sustainability are also mentioned including human, social, economic, and environmental [40]. Other aspects, for instance, culture, may also be added to the pillars of sustainability.

In 2006, the UN Secretary-General launched the Principles for Responsible Investments (PRI) [41], which emphasizes that investment decision-making should sufficiently reflect environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) considerations [42]. Therefore, ESG thinking has gained interest especially among companies. Davos Manifesto 2020 of the World Economic Forum, titled by the Universal Purpose of a Company in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, was accelerating the ESG to an organized framework for companies in a new “stakeholder capitalism” approach [43]. This was seen to be in alignment with the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development through centering around four key areas: principles of governance, planet, people, and prosperity.

The European Commission’s sustainable growth strategy 2020 deals with sustainable growth as a “Green Deal” and defines competitive sustainability through four dimensions: environment, productivity, stability, and fairness. The European Union also has regulations on sustainability-related disclosures in the financial services sector [44], in which the sustainability factors consist of environmental, social, and employee matters, respect for human rights, anti-corruption, and anti-bribery matters. These also increase political pressure and financial opportunities to influence the organizations’ asset management and the investors’ business.

According to its motto, the International Academy for Quality (IAQ) strives for “Quality for Humanity” and also integrates quality with environmental questions as humanistic applications for society. In fact, this very closely implies the idea of sustainability. IAQ has recently published the new Global Quality Manifesto [45], which unites the IAQ quality professionals of the world to commit themselves to revitalize quality and transform the quality profession to increase its relevance for the world. The IAQ recognizes two critical foundations for quality: the discipline of science coupled with mutual respect for all human beings.

Often, sustainability issues are directly or indirectly linked to social security, societal energy supply, legal safety and protection of the law, and freedom. In addition, many other perspectives and methodological tools [46,47] are considered together with sustainability, including innovation, corporate social responsibility [48], risks [49], and resilience [50,51].

4. Dark Clouds on the Road to a Positive Sustainable Development

The UN Millennium Project was created to implement the UN MDGs, and a large number of global and regional partner organizations were involved in promoting and implementing the goals. Progress was reported annually and significant positive results had been achieved by the 2015 deadline, but the project also learned that further progress will require an unswerving political will, and collective, long-term effort. We need to tackle root causes and do more to integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development [52].

However, very generally people have got a rather bleak picture of the world through public communication over the last decade. This has related to terrorism, beggary, and deadly epidemics, which have seemed to become worse all the time and lead people to wrongly adopt an overly dramatic, stereotypical, inflexible, and pessimistic worldview. In his famous book [53], Rosling showed with many examples, independently from the UN programs and the general sustainability thinking, that this perception is not correct. In fact, according to him, things are much better than people think. However, it should be noted that often people overestimate the near future and its threats and underestimate distant issues.

Global sustainable development is always influenced by many existing global mega-trends, including urbanization (rural-urban migration), disruptive technological development (digitalization), geopolitical contradictions, refugee migrating, multicultural encountering, economic uncertainty and crises, epidemics, natural turbulent events and their

consequences, the relativity of truthfulness, etc. None of these phenomena are completely independent today, but they all interact, and they all also have an impact on the sustainable development of societies. These phenomena can reinforce or mask consistent sustainable development.

As examples, we look here at current problems in sustainable development in more depth from the viewpoints of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the distribution of wealth. These global issues are very broad and topical and have strong implications for all three pillars of sustainable development. Sustainability is an extensive issue as a concept and as content and also includes these three specific phenomena, which people, organizations, and authorities have experienced worldwide. The SARS-CoV-2 virus and the CO₂ gas molecule have had a big role in global communications as well as in socio-economic connections of societies, and hence, they have strongly affected the operations of private, public, and third sector organizations, and the lives of people, and led to measures where the principles of constitutional states have been relaxed with regard to individual freedom and rights. Many other issues including the economic aspects seem to surge around these two tiny particles in an uncontrollable way. For instance, in this context, the influential parties have been able to guide the development of society with economic factors strongly and in accordance with the intentions of specific ideologies, which can be considered detrimental to positive sustainable development.

The Secretary-General of the UN has paid attention to how the COVID-19 pandemic disease and the related societal interventions have had negative, even dystopian, effects on sustainable development [54] with regard to individual freedom and rights. He brings out many phenomena that have occurred in the field of human rights. According to him, disagreement, vulnerability and inequality have deepened, and new fractures in human rights have been revealed. Women, minorities, persons with disabilities, older persons, refugees, migrants, and indigenous peoples have lived through a disproportionate toll. Young people have struggled and have been directed to distance learning instead of schooling. The vicious circles of violations have been identified all around the world. The heavy-handed security and emergency measures of the authorities have reduced the political and civil rights and civic space by crushing dissent, criminalizing basic freedoms, silencing independent reporting, and curtailing the activities of non-governmental organizations. Human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, political activists, even medical professionals have been detained, prosecuted, and subjected to intimidation and surveillance for criticizing government pandemic responses. Additionally, electoral processes have been subverted, opposition voices weakened, and criticism suppressed. Access to life-saving information has been concealed, and deadly misinformation amplified. The growing reach of digital platforms has made possible the abuse of data, including information being assembled about individuals without knowing how this information has been collected, by whom, or for what purposes. Data are being used commercially and commodified and sold like futures contracts, and also being used to shape and manipulate our perceptions, without our realizing it. Governments exploit that data to control the behavior of their own citizens, violating the human rights of individuals or groups. The recognized representatives [55–58] of the scientific communities in different countries have also justified and confirmed these adverse phenomena by arguing, referring to data-based analyses, and commenting on measures against the pandemic from political and medical authorities at the national and international level. Many international and national lawsuits have also been initiated against COVID-19 measures taken by various organizations and persons, which have been widely covered in the media [59–61]. In addition, large numbers of people have staged demonstrations around the world against society's oversized measures to control the pandemic (e.g., [62]). In these contexts today, all-encompassing information and communication technology also makes it possible that the different involved parties can manipulate people and circulate false information effectively in accordance with their own purposes. In this case, certain results of science and research can also be falsified or concealed.

Political climate change measures have had wide-ranging societal impacts around the whole planet. The focus has been on global warming, which is alleged to be due to atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) originating from anthropogenic activities. Political decisions of the authorities have had massive repercussions on international and national economic and societal activity and consequently even on the behavior and lives of human individuals. This has even led to declarations of climate emergencies. However, all these measures represent only a small part of the whole area of environmental protection for sustainable development. In the scientific community, this issue has been widely debated [63], and the matter is not unambiguous at all. Deliberate or intentional misrepresentation of scientific results of the practical climate measurements has also been featured in these discussions worldwide. The total amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere is very small, only about 0.04%. It comes mainly from terrain microbes and gas dissolved in ocean water, and its amount follows the temperature of the earth's surface, which is mainly caused by the influence of the sun. Human activity accounts for only about 4.6% of atmospheric carbon dioxide and thus 0.002% of all atmospheric gases. Water (gas and vapor) is the most significant gas in the atmosphere that affects temperature and other weather conditions. In addition, methane's aerobic emissions [64,65] and its decomposition into carbon dioxide also influence the anthropogenic portion of the atmospheric CO₂. The recent studies of the methane cycle point out the fact that there is still a great deal of ambiguity and a need for research in atmospheric phenomena as a whole. For example, current theoretical climate models are not well compatible with empirical measures. Carbon dioxide is a gas with a small heat capacity and thus does not have the ability to heat the atmosphere significantly [66]. On the other hand, CO₂ is a vital factor for the planet's vegetation and will influence its positive development crucially [67]. Despite all this, there are authoritative national and international financial contributions and plans to reduce or compensate for anthropogenic CO₂ emissions, the influence of which on global warming is not justified by one accord, but however is harmful to the functioning of society and also to sustainable development.

The economic development pillar of sustainability has a very central impact on how and to what extent society can meet the inherent needs of its individuals and organizations. One of the core issues is wealth and its distribution and utilization in society, which have been under consideration for centuries [68]. Several SDGs of the UN 2030 Agenda address these aspects, such as SDG 1 (Poverty), SDG 8 (Economic growth, employment, and decent work), and SDG 10 (Inequality). The pandemic measures, as described earlier, have had detrimental effects on economic development through lost jobs, huge mounting debt, and steep falls in income, and rising poverty, and huge economic arrangements. Many big investments for reducing CO₂ emissions have been implemented at the expense of the overall development of the economy and other environmental issues. In general, economic paradigms have varied over time [69,70] from one ideology to another in societies. The paradigms have lent added weight in favor of some solutions and against others. In this case, political extremes often become emphasized, or people want to highlight them in a positive or negative way. For the most part, however, members of society are anything but extremes [53]. When a paradigm ceases to be helpful in understanding the societal phenomena and solving practical problems there is a period of political and ideological turbulence until a successor emerges and structures our political imagination differently. Right now we are living in such a time again. A particular threat, in this case, is that those who hold economic and political power threaten the free and balanced sustainable development of society. When in a difficult socio-economic situation, the indebtedness of households, companies, and states grows too much, and the domination of central banks increases. When the situation is strengthened by the influence of political or elite power and promoted by introducing digital money by central banks, the freedom of action and even privacy of various members of society will be disrupted. This can become dangerous from the perspective of human rights if artificial intelligence applications and a social credit system are integrated into the system [71,72]. Free capital markets are a source of wellbeing [73,74].

Big economic and social challenges are associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Hence, the interest of political movements, multinational global institutions, organizations, and influential individuals have been enhanced in order to take advantage of the situation. This includes that the political solutions of governments at the country level and the strategic intrigues of large corporations globally have been strengthened, and wide-ranging power games have emerged. The so-called The Great Reset [75,76] includes the goals of a comprehensive change of the entire world order. This orientation has strengthened recently, for instance, due to the technological opportunities of the 4th industrial revolution, but the phenomenon has long ideological-historical roots [77]. It also involves huge financial stakes and power aspirations, and therefore has received much criticism [78].

5. Sustainability in the Quality of Society

Sustainability has conceptually and in practice evolved over time with the influence of many different parties and, finally today, it embraces almost anything possible and includes a wide range of content aspects. As a result, the issue has become blurred, and related activities have become differentiated and fragmented among different parties, where also they can emphasize the different details according to their own interests. Hence, the effectiveness of the overall development of the topic will also be disrupted. To avoid this all, the following previously mentioned, non-reductionist, and widely consensual standard definition [31] is useful: *state of the society, including environmental, social and economic aspects, in which the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. This is a compact definition that focuses directly on the core content of sustainability. From a practical point of view, we want to examine here the definition flexibly from the viewpoint of society, where society can mean regional societies as well as the whole globe.

The quality concept is widely used in professional societal and business contexts by engineers, marketing people, business leaders, authorities, civil service officers, lawyers, media, and architects, etc. but it also is an everyday and philosophical concept. Quality belongs to the basic concepts used for characterizing the performance of human individuals, organizations, and societies. When quality is applied to a society, it means [6] the *degree to which a set of inherent characteristics of the society fulfills requirements*. This definition emphasizes the relative nature of quality (“degree”) that also highlights its subjective perception. Society has its inherent characteristics that consist of all of its features or attributes. “Requirement” means needs and expectations, which are related to all interested parties [6] of society and their interactions. Future expectations should also be included. Many theories have been developed to understand human needs, which study and classify them for instance from three motivating drivers—need for achievement, power, or affiliation [79].

It is obvious that the concepts of the sustainability and quality of society have many connections and commonalities [80]. Both concepts consist of many various characteristic dimensions of society. The quality of society includes all recognized sustainability factors, especially its core pillars of economic viability, environmental protection, and social equity. Hence, sustainability can be understood as a subset of the quality of society.

Quality is a more well established and broader concept than sustainability, which makes it possible to link sustainability with the extensive professional discipline of quality-thinking. The quality approach also provides a lot of proven managerial and technical tools for sustainable development and, additionally, it emphasizes a focus on human perception of the inherent characteristics of society. The interested parties of society consist of resident and visiting people of the society directly or via different organizations. We have reasoned and conceptualized the “quality society” comprehensively as a concept that implies a society with high quality, or a well-functioning and well-developing society, which is good for all its interested parties [81]. This is the target of sustainability, too.

As the quality of society also consists of many multidisciplinary aspects, it has also led to practices where the many parties have considered, evaluated, or compared the quality of

societies in a fragmented way through many specific aspects, including municipal activities, environment, nature, culture, family issues, feminist issues, migration, employment, education, industry, agriculture, tourism, innovation, welfare, wellbeing, happiness, aging, health, sport, communication, food, security, religion, etc. All of these issues also overlap, at least in part, and there are vague relations between them. This has conceptually confused the quality of society and prevented us from obtaining a clear picture of its practical holistic development. Often, the topic has also been considered from institutional viewpoints and with generally standardized criteria. In this case, the dispersion of the needs and expectations of individuals is not taken into account, which, however, is absolutely crucial for quality. During the past ten years we have been pondering and have developed a systematic approach to categorize the inherent characteristics of society from the viewpoint of human individuals. This consists of the following elements:

- Societal services and their effectiveness and integrity;
- Serviceability (i.e., service accessibility and retainability), including capability and availability;
- Security regarding property, belongings, information/cyber security, societal stability, and local, regional and national defense;
- Human identity and intimacy, privacy, self-esteem, self-actualization, and respect;
- Human rights and equality;
- Morality and ethical performance;
- Social performance (*), including education, creativity, connectivity, interactivity and sharing, and incorruptibility;
- Nutrition, cleanliness and health;
- Esthetics;
- Ecology (*);
- Economy (*) and efficiency and cost of poor quality.

Sustainable development pillars (*) are here included in the concept of quality as the subset.

In order to address the quality of society and sustainability, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the concept of society. Society is not a system but a scale-free network [81] of independent but interactive actors of distinct identities and development status, and consist of citizens, visitors, institutions, private companies, organizations of public civil service, and the not-for-profit third sector. People have a central role in all societies. Human individuals institute society and the same individuals are influenced and developed by the instituted society [82]. Hence, human aspects are crucial in order to reach a high and sustained quality of society. In this context, we also approach the concepts of good life and quality of life. The countries of Northern Europe in particular are generally described as *welfare societies* [83] with democratic institutional foundation. There is widespread prosperity in these countries, but in its implementation, the state does not necessarily play as great a role as in the *welfare state*. In addition to the public service providers, individuals, companies, and other communities operate alongside or and hence there are non-state-centered ways of organizing the realization of prosperity. If one wants to emphasize the role of people in the welfare society, it would be better to use the term *wellbeing society*.

The interests of society as a whole and of the individual often come to the fore as opposing perspectives in the examination of sustainability and sustainable development. The strength of societal quality is that it focuses proactively and directly on the views and perceptions of individuals.

6. Managerial Aspects

Societal quality and sustainability are the results of awareness and determined measures in the organizations, where individuals can be seen as a singular case of organizations [6]. Professionally this can be achieved in organizations by the business integrated quality management, where sustainability management is a part of it. Conceptually *qual-*

ity/sustainability management can be defined as *management with regard to quality/sustainability* [Ibid.], which should take place both at the strategic and operational levels in the organization. In practice, however, the term sustainability management is not commonly used but social responsibility is preferred instead. When organizations take sustainability as an impressive element in their strategic and operational business planning and realization, international standards [84] and especially ISO 26000 [48] can advise them to apply the approach of social responsibility for their sustainable business models [85,86]. For this, the standard provides guidance and defines *social responsibility* as the *responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behavior* that:

- Contributes to sustainable development, including health and the welfare of society;
- Takes into account the expectations of stakeholders;
- Is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behavior;
- Is integrated throughout the organization and practiced in its relationships.

These activities relate to products, services and processes, and relationships refer to the organization’s activities within its sphere of societal influence. One example of such an activity is sustainable procurement, which is addressed in the international guidance standard ISO 20400 [87]. The UN, through its large Global Compact Initiative, also promotes and supports the inclusion of sustainability within corporate strategies and operations [88]. To this end, ten principles have been defined for the topics of human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption.

According to the corresponding international management standards, social responsibility and quality management are complementary (Table 1).

Table 1. Guiding principles of social principles and quality management.

Principles of Social Responsibility (ISO 26000) [48]	Quality Management Principles (ISO 9000) [6]
Accountability	Customer focus
Transparency	Leadership
Ethical behavior	Involvement of people
Respect for stakeholder interests	Process approach
Respect for the rule of the law	System approach to management
Respect for international norms of behavior	Continual improvement
Respect for human rights	Factual approach to decision making
	Mutually beneficial supplier relations

Individuals’ influence for societal quality and sustainability takes place through self-management, whose challenge is [48]:

- To be aware of one’s own mental process and its performance in personal environments;
- To consider situation unbiasedly;
- To act straightforwardly without prejudice;
- To develop continually oneself in practical everyday activity.

The effectiveness of the societal investments and satisfaction to the achievements of the social development can be analyzed with different methodologies and from different viewpoints [89,90].

The methodological traditions of quality professionalism can be of great benefit to organizations in managing sustainability and the quality of society. Sustainability and the quality of society can be analyzed for instance with the Kano model [91]. This can be performed by individual factors taking into account the “vital few, trivial many” principle [92]. For the analysis, measurements are required, which presupposes an ontological and epistemological basis of the related phenomena and through it an appropriate measurement

methodology [93]. Quantitatively, the complex phenomena of the societal characteristics can be examined comprehensively by a vector approach or a demerit system procedure [94].

7. Conclusions

Sustainability has been around for a long time with its many manifestations, and it is still a very topical issue throughout the world and is linked to many contexts. However, its conceptual ambiguity and pragmatic fragmentation due to the development of the subject over several decades and the influence of many different parties has made the subject difficult to unambiguously understand and manage. In this article, we have sought to bring concreteness and practicality to the conceptual and methodological consideration of sustainability through the quality of society based on an established professional quality tradition. In this context, we focus on the needs and expectations of individual human beings, because institutional, ideological, or standardized criteria do not solve the prevailing problems. The essence is on freedom and individualism in perceiving the societal environment. With this approach, we also have the connection of sustainability to the recently revitalized Global Quality Manifesto, whose ultimate goal is the essence of goodness in all dimensions of humanity's experience [45].

Some aspects of sustainability and their interactions have recently come to the fore in discussions, research, and societal contributions. These include, in particular, epidemiological, climatic, and economic issues. These have also been intertwined much with national and international politics, resulting in escalation, confrontation, and power plays, which have also had a disruptive effect on the implementation and utilization of scientific means. As the issue has become a society-wide and worldwide issue, the need to redefine policies and ideologies for society as a whole has emerged. On the one hand, the necessity of creating a new centralized world order, "Novus ordo seclorum" (The Great Reset [76]) has been highlighted, and on the other hand, the necessity of philanthropic pragmatism [69]. These also involve a crisis of confrontation, showing top-down and bottom-up, institutional and human, socialist and liberal, as well as global and national confrontations. The whole world seems to be in a complex state of upheaval, which, however, can also be seen as the starting point for the birth of something new, as has happened through the ages.

The complexity is important for the success of renewal. Creativity and innovation originate in this area, and transition to the new forms of activity is made possible. Operation in a complex situation cannot only be led by rational control and based on fact. According to Ashby [95], a successful operation in complex circumstances requires sufficient ability to accept and manage differences and diversity ("requisite variety"). One can receive the benefit from such effects particularly through the wide range of networks and collaboration.

Often, the modern living environment of people and organizations seems to be desperate. However, as Toffler [96] stated, whenever the situation seems to be the hardest and easy solutions are not seen, it is possible to enter a new, more sophisticated level of performance. In the phases of mankind, we can observe long periods of steady development. They are not associated with great development leaps. Toffler noted about the exceptionally difficult circumstance that this is the era of despair—this is a time of opportunity. Sorokin [97] also confirmed in his time that in spite of all the inherent cruelty and the turmoil of the time, however, we are moving towards a better world. In his view, the current culture already contains in its beginning a toxic virus. The current crisis is due to this secret virus and its continuous evolution. A radical change and transformation should be achieved in our operational attitude and habits in the situation of overly matured systematicity and rationality. This would require replacing the existing modes of operation with better culture and expertise. In this context, the quality of society and sustainability as its component are developing.

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