

Social Sustainability and the Development Process

What Is It, Why Does It Matter, and How Can It Be Enhanced?

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Abstract

Development debates frequently focus on making economic growth *sustainable* or ensuring that natural resources are used *sustainably*; such debates rest on longstanding scholarship and largely shared understandings of how such problems should be addressed. Increasingly, there are also calls for development to be *socially* sustainable. Yet the theory and evidence undergirding this third “pillar” are comparatively thin, focusing primarily on high-income countries and mapping only partially onto a coherent policy agenda. This paper seeks to help close these gaps by providing (a) a brief history and literature review of social sustainability, emphasizing its distinctiveness from economic and environmental sustainability; (b) a definition

and conceptual framework, identifying social sustainability’s key components; (c) empirical evidence linking these components to mainstream development outcomes; and (d) operational insights for promoting social sustainability—on its own and as a complement to economic and environmental sustainability. The scale and intensity of the world’s current development challenges—and their impacts not just on economies and the environment but entire societies—requires a more robust understanding of their social dimensions, what policies and programs should be enacted in response, and how such efforts can be implemented with local legitimacy and sustained politically over time.

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What Is It, Why Does It Matter, and How Can It Be Enhanced?**

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I. Introduction

The cause of global development is at an important crossroads. Despite remarkable gains over the last several decades, a growing number of persistent and emerging challenges are jeopardizing the prospects for continued progress. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, global growth and the pace of poverty reduction had slowed (Alvaredo et al. 2018; Lakner and Milanovic 2016; Schoch, Lakner, and Fleury 2020; World Bank 2016, 2022c, 2022d). During the pandemic, the number of extremely poor people (measured at 2017 purchasing power parity US dollars) increased by 71 million globally (World Bank 2022b, 2022c). Likewise, while inequality between countries has been declining for decades (see, for instance, Deaton 2013; Milanovic 2016; World Bank 2016), it remains high, and progress may be slowing for the first time in a generation (Yonzan, Lakner, and Gerszon Mahler 2021). Recent evidence suggests that a growing share of income is going to the world's top earners, widening the gaps between the ultra-rich, the middle class, and the poor (Alvaredo et al. 2018; Lakner and Milanovic 2016). Beyond poverty and inequality, nearly one-third of the world's population is at risk of social exclusion due to economic status, gender or gender identity, race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, age, or sexual orientation (Cuesta, López-Noval, and Niño-Zarazúa 2022). These challenges are compounded by the gnawing persistence of racism, prejudice, discrimination, and social injustice; globally, billions of people face deep-rooted structural barriers to participating equally in society.

In recent years, the 'three Cs' of COVID-19, climate change, and rising levels of conflict have enflamed these long-standing challenges and constrained efforts to address them — and the current global economic slowdown only threatens to make matters worse. The number,

frequency, and duration of violent conflicts have all increased in recent decades, often driven by inequality and exclusion and ultimately undermining global poverty reduction efforts (World Bank 2021; World Bank 2022a; United Nations and World Bank 2018; Stewart 2000; Østby 2013; Besançon 2005). Social unrest has also increased, particularly in middle-income countries, where the incidence has doubled since 2015 (ACLEED 2023; Barrett et al. 2020). Meanwhile, the manifestations of climate change are growing increasingly severe, further complicating efforts to address poverty, vulnerability, and inequality and increasing the importance of designing just transitions (Stern 2007; World Bank 2020c; Clement et al. 2021; Islam and Winkel 2017; Hallegatte et al. 2016). Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has erased years of global progress on poverty reduction and shed harsh light on long-standing inequities, as the costs have disproportionately been borne by poor, marginalized, and traditionally excluded groups (World Bank 2020b; Yonzan, et al. 2022; Sánchez-Páramo et al. 2021).

To achieve the global aspirations embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), all of these challenges must be urgently addressed. Yet they must be tackled amid another growing concern: the steady erosion of the social fabric that ties communities and nations together. Political polarization, declining trust in public institutions, and the adoption of narrower, more exclusive identities are also disrupting and dividing communities (World Bank 2020a). Evidence suggests that trust in public institutions is declining globally (Pew Research Center 2021) and people's trust in one another has reached the lowest point since 1984 (Inglehart et al. 2020), undermining the capacity of communities and societies to address crises and collective challenges (Bargain and Aminjonov 2020 and references therein). Similarly, social media as well as unequal access to the digital economy are driving wedges between groups, contributing to the erosion of the social fabric (World Bank 2020a; Adriano 2020). In other

words, just as global solidarity is needed more than ever to address an unprecedented array of global challenges, our collective capacity to work together for a shared purpose is becoming increasingly strained.

If global development has a prevailing ‘solution’ to such overriding challenges, it is the broad and universal goal of ‘sustainability.’ Since at least the 2015 adoption of the SDGs, those engaged in the giving, receiving, implementing, and assessing development assistance have operated within a framework insisting that their activities be goal-oriented and sustainable. This framework, the result of history’s most globally consultative process, comprises the 17 SDGs themselves as well as their corresponding 169 targets; it seeks to provide “a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future” (United Nations n.d.).

When development professionals invoke the premise that development should be (or should at least aspire to be) sustainable, however, it is safe to assume they primarily understand this concept in economic and environmental terms. Though space for incorporating social dimensions into sustainable development strategies has been present for decades, and everyday development discourse is replete with calls for “environmental and social sustainability”, the theory, evidence, and practice of the latter aspect has been relatively overlooked and underdeveloped.¹ Many development professionals acknowledge that we cannot achieve the global goal of sustainable development – much less address climate change, reduce and prevent conflicts, prepare for the next pandemic, or navigate any number of other future unanticipated crises – without repairing the social fabric. Yet what is meant by social sustainability, and what actions can be taken to promote it, has received relatively little attention.

Today’s challenges are not isolated or temporary; and the headwinds are only growing more extreme. To overcome them and manage future tensions requires policies, programs, and

outcomes that are economically and environmentally but also *socially* sustainable. In this paper, we seek to contribute to closing the gaps in theory and evidence undergirding the concept of social sustainability and its links to a broader policy agenda. The paper unfolds in four parts. First, we review and reprise the prevailing literature on social sustainability – which is surprisingly limited and mostly centered on the concerns of high-income countries, even as the incidence of the term in policy discourse has increased markedly in recent years. Second, we propose a definition of social sustainability that is grounded in the literature but aligned with global development priorities:

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

Socially sustainable communities and societies are willing and able to work together to overcome challenges, deliver public goods, and allocate scarce resources in ways that are perceived as legitimate and fair by all 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 relatively new concept about *how* policies and programs are designed and implemented, ensuring that they are accepted as fair and credible by all stakeholders. We then outline an applied analytical framework for more formally connecting social sustainability to the development process. Third, we consider the empirical foundations for social sustainability, highlighting evidence from a range of sources and methods to illustrate why the concept and its key components matter. Fourth, we summarize insights from operational

experience of efforts to bolster social sustainability and outline the implications for development theory, policy, and practice. The final section concludes. This paper draws on a World Bank publication, [*Social Sustainability in Development: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century*](#). The narrative has been adjusted to better contextualize the evolution of social sustainability in the broader development agenda, including a comparative analysis between social, environmental and economic sustainability in the next section that was not included in the book.

II. What is social sustainability? Why is it distinctive?

Origins of the concept

Current efforts to articulate an agenda for socially sustainable development build on a long history. This history began to accelerate during the 1970s and 1980s, when increased global attention on exclusion and poverty elevated the role of social issues in development. For instance, the concept of vulnerable or excluded populations entered into political discourse during this period, amid increasing evidence that economic growth, urbanization, and development often excluded, displaced, or negatively impacted certain groups, necessitating more targeted assistance.ⁱⁱ Concerns about the link between poverty and the environment also emerged around this time, leading to an emphasis on the concept of sustainability; with the UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 being the first to highlight the link between human development and environmental sustainability. By the late 1980s, the concept of sustainable development was further defined by the UN's Brundtland Commission as

development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs – putting an explicit emphasis on the social dimensions of development and underscoring the interlinked and mutually reinforcing nature of economic, environmental, and social factors (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). The World Summit for Social Development in 1995 was an important milestone, creating the UN’s Commission for Social Development and attracting high-level recognition of social development as a professional field and global priority.ⁱⁱⁱ

Around the turn of the 21st century, a confluence of global factors deepened this explicit focus on the people-centric dimensions of development, leading to increased efforts to ensure that growth was inclusive and that it reached the poorest and most vulnerable. This shift was partly informed by ongoing concerns that structural adjustment policies had undermined vulnerable groups, as well as an expanded focus on the effectiveness of development aid in achieving poverty reduction, with increased attention on debt relief and debt forgiveness. As many economists and development practitioners increasingly questioned whether growth was sufficient to reduce poverty, the focus shifted towards other drivers of well-being, significantly broadening the development paradigm. During this period, development’s endgame expanded to include non-monetary measures of well-being (and better access to services) as well as voice and agency. In 1998, Amartya Sen won the Nobel Prize in economics and, the next year, published his seminal book *Development as Freedom* (Sen 1999), drawing attention to the importance and intrinsic value of individual freedoms – to be free from vulnerability and danger and able to access services, influence political outcomes, and reach one’s potential. Reflecting this broader concept of development, the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 went beyond monetary definitions of poverty, setting ambitious new targets for fighting poverty

and hunger as well as promoting inclusion, equity, and gender equality, with an enhanced focus on results and outcomes.

In the years that followed, the concept of sustainability became increasingly important for global development, but this focus typically emphasized economic and environmental concerns rather than sustainability's social dimensions. While the UN and other multilateral institutions often referred broadly to the importance of "environmental and social sustainability," such references did not define, analyze, or develop social sustainability as a distinct concept or objective (United Nations 2012). The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, however, enshrined social issues as central to the development challenge. The majority of the 17 SDGs reflect the importance of the social dimension and stress broader concepts of accountability, safety, inclusion and voice. Several underscore that development benefits should be shared equitably by all, including: poverty eradication (SDG 1); eliminating hunger (SDG 2); health and well-being (SDG 3); education (SDG 4); water and sanitation (SDG 6); affordable and clean energy (SDG 7); decent work (SDG 8); and inclusive, safe, and resilient cities and settlements (SDG 11). Notably, three SDGs are squarely focused on social sustainability: reduced inequalities (SDG 10), gender equality (SDG 5), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).

These developments have helped to incorporate social sustainability into the post-2015 development agenda (United Nations 2012). In 2016 the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) published an extensive study on the social aspects of sustainable development, arguing that market-based mechanisms and green economy policies can only flourish if the rights of individuals and communities are protected (UNRISD 2016). Likewise, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) has well-developed

institutions for promoting social sustainability in all its forms, including the long-running Commission for Social Development (UNDESA 2021). Many country governments have also promoted the concept or its underlying principles, including the European Union (McGinn et al. 2020), municipal governments in Canada (City of Maple Ridge n.d.), and China’s renewed emphasis on “common prosperity” following a period of rising inequality.

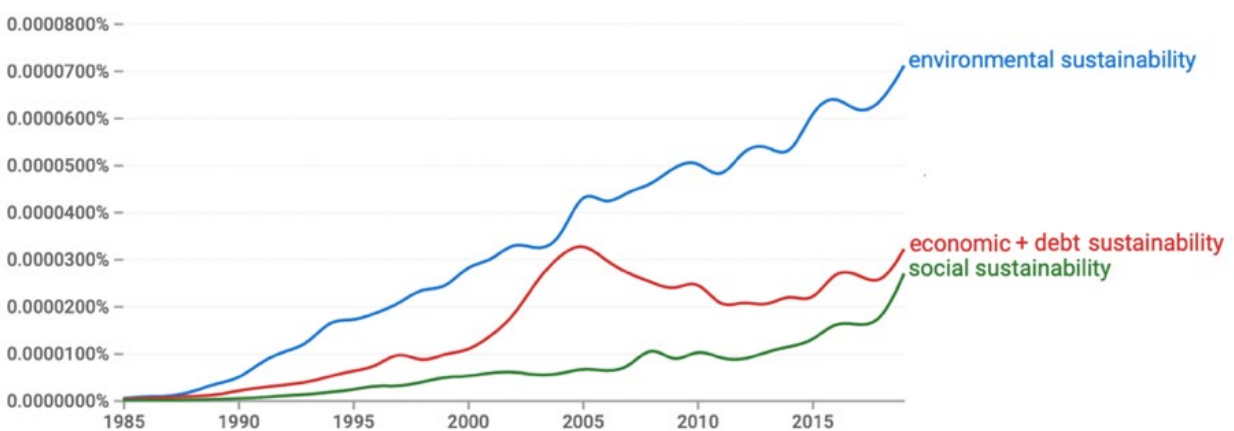
The last half century has seen important progress across the development community to acknowledge the influence of local context on development outcomes, recognize that vulnerable groups need special protections, and advance a paradigm that honors the intrinsic values of agency, empowerment, and non-monetary well-being, underpinned by the principles of nondiscrimination, right to safety, and voice. However, this progress has only begun to be operationalized. In most development toolkits and theories of change, the social dimension remains much less prominent than its economic or environmental counterparts. These gaps partly reflect that the barriers to social sustainability are highly complex and context-specific, driven by factors that can be difficult to identify, deeply embedded in cultural practices and norms, and costly to address – but they also highlight that reform efforts are long overdue. Social factors have always been important to the development process; but in the face of today’s growing list of challenges, they are urgently important now.

Literature review

This recent history of shifting perspectives in development is reflected in the growing importance placed on social sustainability and its key features over time. Figure 1 shows the growth in prevalence of the three pillars of sustainability between 1985 and 2019, as measured

by their appearance across millions of English-language books digitized in the Google Books database (Michel et al. 2011). The incidence of “environmental sustainability” in the database steadily increases starting in the late 1980s, and by 2019 the term is invoked more frequently than the other two pillars combined. “Economic sustainability” peaks in in the early 2000s—paired here with “debt sustainability,” which spikes in prevalence after the debt crises of the 1980s and 1990s—and only begins to rise again starting in the early 2010s. “Social sustainability” may be the least prevalent pillar in the Google Books database, but references to it have accelerated in recent years, and by 2019 it had nearly caught up with economic (and debt) sustainability.

Figure 1: Appearance of key “sustainability” types in published English books, 1985-2019



Source: Michel et al. (2011).

In recent decades, a limited but growing academic literature on social sustainability has emerged. Previously, the broader literature on sustainability often treated the social pillar as secondary to (see, for instance, Daly 1996; Kunz 2006; Locke and Dearden 2005; Partridge 2005; Vifell and Soneryd 2012) or subsumed within (Sachs 1999) environmental and economic sustainability, but a more contemporary view is that no pillar can be understood in isolation and

that all three must be considered relationally. The social sustainability literature spans multiple academic and professional disciplines, with diverse applications, definitions, and connotations across the public and private sectors and the global, national, and local levels (see, for instance, Åhman 2013; Boström 2012; Boyer et al. 2016; Colantonio 2007, 2009; Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017; Griessler and Littig 2005; James et al. 2013; Koning 2001; McKenzie 2004; Sachs 1999). As a result, social sustainability emerges from the literature as a highly dynamic concept—neither absolute nor constant, but subject to change, context, and scale (Murphy 2012; Vallance et al. 2011). Nonetheless, at a high level, a certain set of broad, recurring themes emerge.

The social sustainability literature is united by an emphasis on connected communities, well-being for all, durability or resilience over time, and meaningful participation and engagement (Dempsey et al. 2011). Connected communities manifest in the literature with a frequent focus on social capital, social cohesion, and themes of identity and sense of place (Cuthill 2010; Dempsey et al. 2011; Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017; Fiszbein, Kanbur, and Yemtsov 2014; Glasson and Wood 2009; Griessler and Littig 2005; Lehtonen 2004; Schlosberg 2007; Siisiäinen 2003; Weingaertner and Moberg 2014; for a recent literature review, see Ballet, Bazin, and Mahieu 2020). Well-being for all is articulated as both a positive value (basic needs, capabilities, quality of life, equality of opportunity) and an absence of discriminatory practices (racism, xenophobia, ageism) that hinder individuals' meaningful participation in economic, social, and political life (Pierson 2002; Ratcliffe 2000). Durability and resilience focus on the stability and security of communities over time. Some literature characterizes these principles as safety, resembling but going further than resilience by emphasizing reduced vulnerability *before* shocks occur (Adger 2000). Meaningful participation and engagement reinforce the importance of connected and cohesive communities, underscoring the value of a strong social contract.

These core strands combine in the literature to describe the arrangements that enable individuals, groups, and societies to exist together in harmony through time and collectively tackle common challenges. Given the intertemporal and future focus of social sustainability, the literature frequently connects current generations to future ones and links historical events and processes—such as chronic injustice or inclusion—with present and future considerations. Some scholars consider social sustainability to be about the process itself of moving toward a just society for current and future generations (Castillo et al. 2007; Partridge 2005). At the local level, social sustainability is conceived as a process for creating sustainable and thriving places that promote well-being, as defined by the people who live and work there (Woodcraft et al. 2011). Sustainable communities constitute a setting for long-term human activity and interaction that is equitable, inclusive, and sustainable in the broad sense of the term (including all three pillars), thus delivering democratic, diverse, and connected communities (Bramley and Power 2009).

While the literature continues to grow, there remains no widely agreed-upon definition or framework for social sustainability or its key features, nor any set of well-accepted empirical approaches to measure them. Moreover, the emerging literature is largely focused on developed country contexts; applying the concept of social sustainability to the unique realm of international development is a key gap where more research and collaboration is needed. The current moment presents a critical window of opportunity to advance this concept within development theory and practice and sharpen the analytical foundations on which it rests.

What is distinctive about social sustainability?

The three pillars of sustainability are increasingly seen by academics and practitioners alike as inter-dependent. The lack of economic or environmental sustainability can stoke social tensions and exacerbate other social challenges, just as the presence of economic or environmental sustainability can enable and support social sustainability – and vice versa (Becker et al. 1999; World Bank 2013c; Purvis, Mao, and Robinson 2019). Nonetheless, it is useful to consider what makes each distinctive. Table 1 provides a high-level description of the notable differences between economic, environmental, and social sustainability across five key dimensions: the type of ‘goods’ each involves, the relevant coordination mechanisms, the timeframes under which policy impacts can be expected to materialize, the level of shared policy consensus each enjoys, and the key ‘metrics’ for measuring each pillar.

Table 1: The three elements of sustainability

	Economic sustainability	Environmental sustainability	Social sustainability
Primary type of 'good'	Private	Public/Common	Club
Coordination mechanisms	Markets	Regulatory commitments	Legitimacy
Policy impact timeframe	Short and Long	Mostly Long	Variable (and highly uncertain)
Shared policy consensus	Strong (on 'fundamentals')	Strong (experts), weak (public)	Weak (on ends), contentious (on means)

Key 'metrics'	Inclusive growth, poverty reduction	Use/replenish, carbon emissions, regulatory fidelity	Inclusion, cohesion, resilience, process legitimacy
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While there are important exceptions, private goods are the primary unit of market exchange for economic sustainability (Spangenberg 2005). Notably, there is broad agreement on the range of policies and institutions needed to establish the incentives for maximizing economic sustainability, starting with strong property rights to define who has access to a resource or activity. Markets are thus the dominant coordination mechanism for bringing about economic sustainability, although the extent to which other institutions should accompany, compensate, or correct market dynamics is subject to dispute across theoretical and ideological camps. While the impacts of some policies adopted to ensure economic sustainability surface in the short term (e.g., policies to curb inflation), others take longer to materialize (e.g., investments in structural transformation or trade models). There is strong policy consensus on the technical fundamentals needed to deliver economic sustainability, including efficiency, sound debt management, optimal taxation, and distribution. According to this consensus, economic sustainability is achieved when there is sufficient market competition, balanced macroeconomic policy, optimal taxation, and redistribution to the poor. When such policies are not sufficiently implemented, economic sustainability remains elusive. The key metrics for success with economic sustainability often combine progress on the economic and social fronts, though the social dimension in this context is typically dominated by monetary metrics: that is, growth that reduces poverty and inequality or improves working or living conditions.

Environmental sustainability often involves public goods, which are non-exclusive (i.e., they cannot be owned by any group or individual) and non-rival (i.e., their benefits can be shared by many without reducing their value) – such as clean air (Daly and Cobb 1994, Tirole 2017). It can also involve common goods, which are typically non-exclusive but often rival (i.e., their use by some decreases their availability or value for others) – such as fishing or groundwater resources. In both cases, there is often not enough investment to ensure environmental sustainability – given that their benefits are not exclusive, while in the case of common goods there are often efforts to capture the benefits for a select few. The science to manage environmental sustainability may be clear, but the policies needed to achieve it are more challenging and disputed. Likewise, given the nature of public/common goods, collective action to pursue environmental sustainability (whether at the local, national, or supranational level) is often unlikely unless compelled by regulations. As has often been seen, well-intended political agreements without legal binding often lead to underwhelming outcomes in terms of progress on environmental goals, reform commitments, or the mobilization of financial resources.

Environmental and climatic impacts are typically expected to materialize in the long term, though the failure to adopt sufficiently bold measures may risk more severe impacts sooner. Consensus building around environmental sustainability works at two different levels: while experts have strong and compelling scientific evidence on the severity of the risks and the effectiveness of policy options, the public is more divided. Perception surveys from around the world show large variations in the extent to which individuals are aware of, concerned about, or ready to act upon environmental risks. The key metrics for environmental sustainability include objectively measurable factors like carbon emissions, the fulfillment of legal or policy obligations and commitments, and natural resource usage and replenishment levels.

Social sustainability, by contrast, involves what theorists call ‘club’ goods, which are exclusive (i.e., groups and individuals can be excluded from accessing their benefits) but non-rival for those who do have access (indeed, their benefits may even be enhanced when shared by more groups and individuals). (See Corns and Sandler 1996.) Maximizing social sustainability is thus about broadening the size of the club and strengthening trust so that everyone feels part of it, believes that they benefit from membership, and accepts the change process that is sought. The key metrics for social sustainability relate to its main components, described at greater length below: social cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and the concept of process legitimacy, which reflects the extent to which decisions are made and implemented in ways that all members of the community or society accept. Legitimacy is thus the coordination mechanism that drives progress on social sustainability; it ensures that club members perceive that decisions made on their behalf are fair, even when they may not personally benefit. The extent to which legitimacy can be established is determined by a broad range of social factors, including trust, identity, and cultural or religious ties, as well as contextual factors related to security, citizen participation, and social accountability. As a newer concept, however—particularly in the operational context—social sustainability does not currently enjoy a strong shared consensus over its ultimate value as a goal or ‘end’ of development, and there is considerable contestation over which policies and practices can best achieve it. This brings about an element of uncertainty, higher than for economic or environmental sustainability, over what may enhance or erode social sustainability. Moreover, the impacts of policies and programs intended to bolster social sustainability should be expected to vary considerably, given the long time required to build social cohesion, expand inclusion, strengthen resilience, and establish legitimacy as well as how

quickly these can be undermined by external shocks, social unrest, or the emergence and spread of discriminatory and exclusionary behavior.

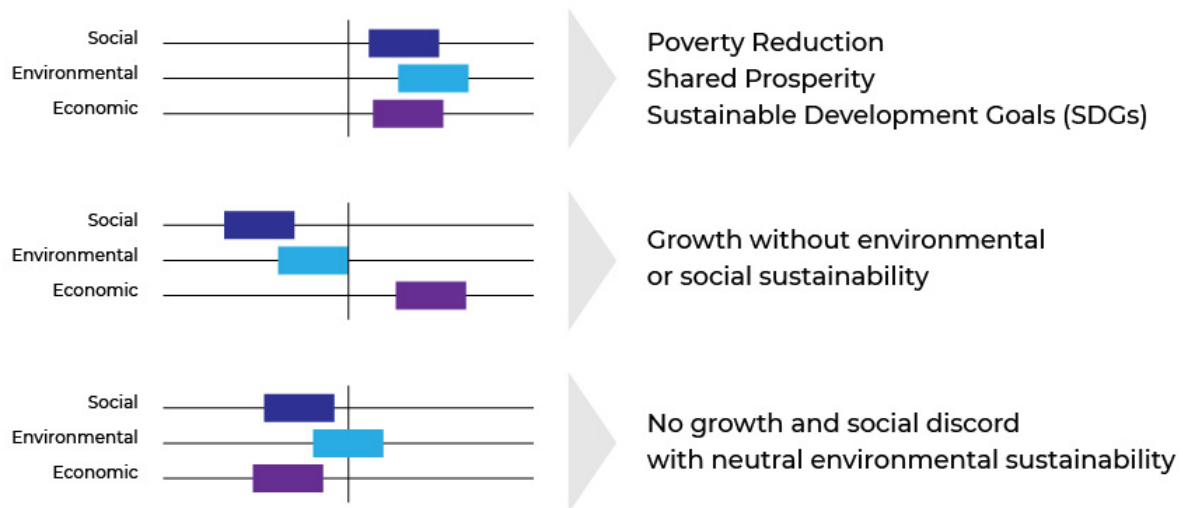
The lack of shared policy consensus and the highly variable and uncertain timeframes for policy impact underscore the most significant differences between social sustainability and its economic and environmental counterparts. Consensus over how to bring about social sustainability will likely always be more difficult to build, especially in terms of designing universal prescriptions or a package of interventions to enhance or accelerate it. This is partly due to the fact that social sustainability is inevitably contextual—that is, highly dependent on historical and current circumstances in a given community or society. Building consensus is also challenging for efforts to assess social sustainability, in terms of identifying the critical outcomes and their desired levels or magnitudes. By contrast, there is broad agreement over how to assess economic and environmental sustainability: poverty, for example, is widely measured with respect to various income and consumption thresholds and there is broad agreement that eradicating poverty is the ultimate objective.^{iv} As a result, there is a wider range of outcome metrics associated with social sustainability—including the satisfaction of basic needs, reduction of polarization, dignity, inclusion, social cohesion, resilience to shocks (or safety, more generally), and the above-mentioned role of legitimacy in public decision-making.

This comparison of sustainabilities underscores two important messages. One is that by nature, social sustainability is a more elusive and complex concept than environmental or economic sustainability. When rainforests are burned down and replaced with monocrop agriculture, it is clear what has been lost; likewise, when hyperinflation wipes out entire generations of wealth, the costs of economic mismanagement are obvious and calculable. But it is less clear what sustainability looks like when people and their communities are at stake: when

severe inequality leads to social unrest; when marginalized groups are excluded from development planning; or when the communities of rural Indigenous Peoples are destroyed by infrastructure projects, forcing them to move to cities. The second message is that while distinctive, the three sustainabilities are highly complementary and mutually reinforcing. Without cohesion, for example, societies may find it difficult to agree on policies to promote economic or environmental sustainability; and such policies will be less effective if parts of the population are excluded or vulnerable. Often, the complementarities can move both ways: failure to address climate change, for instance, can undermine resilience and worsen exclusion, but policies to address climate change (e.g., increased taxes, subsidy removals, coal exits) can often trigger social unrest.

This complementarity underscores the instrumental value of social sustainability. As the next two sections detail, social sustainability and its key components are linked with a broad range of key development outcomes. Notably, the ‘club’ dynamics described above indicate that a society with more social sustainability is more likely to manage public goods in ways that support the broad interests of the club—suggesting that socially sustainable societies are more likely to invest in and manage environmental sustainability. Likewise, a strong club is more likely to ensure that private goods are distributed among its members in ways considered fair to all—suggesting that socially sustainable societies are more likely to achieve economic sustainability. Compared to economic sustainability (which is ultimately driven by incentives for personal gain) and environmental sustainability (which focuses on incentives for group and individual stewardship), social sustainability is determined by the legitimacy of the decision-making process. The overall sustainability of a given community or society can fall into any number of potential scenarios (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Sustainability triad – potential scenarios



III. Definition and framework

Despite growing recognition of social sustainability's importance, there is considerably less clarity over what it is and how it can best be pursued. The following definition and conceptual framework for social sustainability are grounded in the existing academic literatures—both the recent literature on social sustainability and the comparatively wider literatures on its constituent elements—but are also aligned with the key objectives, strategic priorities, and operational frameworks common in international development. The definition is:

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

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

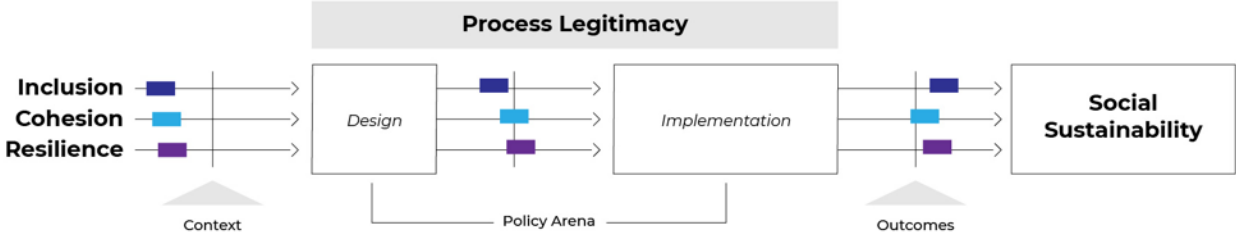
This definition emphasizes social sustainability's aspirational nature: it is not a binary concept but exists on a spectrum, meant to inspire continued efforts and progress toward ever greater levels of social sustainability. Indeed, the current state of the world highlights that no community or society has ever achieved social sustainability absolutely and permanently. The definition, its constituent elements, and the conceptual framework below are also parsimonious and intuitive by design, intended to clearly demonstrate the core components and relationships that support social sustainability.

The definition also highlights social sustainability's four critical components: social cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and process legitimacy – which focuses on *how* policies and programs are designed and implemented. A cohesive society has a shared purpose and high levels of trust, allowing communities and groups to work together toward a common good, respond to challenges, and drive real solutions and sustainable compromises. An inclusive society is one where all people have access to markets and services as well as political, social, and cultural spaces, which allows all members of society to thrive. A resilient society has the ability, capacity, and flexibility to avoid conflicts (including inter-personal violence) and to withstand, bounce back from, or absorb the impacts of exogenous shocks over time. Finally, the definition emphasizes the importance of the processes by which policies or programs are designed and implemented—highlighting the need for *process legitimacy* within the context of existing norms and values, such that the decisions made and carried out are considered fair,

credible, and acceptable by all members and groups of a given community or society. Our choice of components closely aligns with the World Bank’s initial social development strategy (World Bank 2005a) as well as the Bank’s twin goals (World Bank 2013) and recent work on inclusion (Das and Espinoza 2019). It acknowledges the social sustainability literature’s emphasis on empowerment (Dempsey et al. 2011), participation (Griessler and Littig 2005), and equity and safety (Ballet, Bazin and Mahieu 2020).

A conceptual framework for these four components and their interlinking dynamics is presented in figure 3. The left-hand side of the figure illustrates that a given community or society’s baseline levels of inclusion, cohesion, and resilience are affected by *how* programs and policies are designed and implemented and how, over time, efforts to strengthen these components can enhance social sustainability.

Figure 3: Conceptual framework



Source: Authors’ illustration.

Despite 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 2017a). 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 paper is that where process legitimacy exists, the policies and programs designed and implemented in the policy arena will promote greater inclusion, cohesion, and resilience.

The components operate across all levels of society, from the individual and household levels to the national and regional or transnational levels. Social sustainability and its components are important objectives in and of themselves—they are each, on their own, constituent elements of the ends of development—while also being important means or drivers. They underscore that development is not only about economic growth, although growth is very important; it is also about the social elements of life, which matter very much to people. The four components are described below, with definitions for each in the context of this conceptual framework.

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.^v

Social cohesion cultivates communities that allow people to trust each other and cooperate on behalf of a common purpose, establishing the basic social foundations for peace and prosperity (Larsen 2013). This relationship is true for every society—rich or poor, peaceful or conflict-affected, regardless of norms, politics, or system of government. Notably, different

forms of cohesion matter at different levels and according to which groups are working together. *Bonding* cohesion occurs between individuals in a community—which is necessary to set shared priorities, undertake collective action, and manage local disputes.^{vi} *Bridging* cohesion occurs across different groups, whether between villages and regions or between broader identity collectives, such as political or religious groups, and is a key aspect of conflict management. Bonding and bridging are both “horizontal” forms of cohesion, but “vertical” relations between citizens and institutions in power – referred to as *linking* cohesion – are also critical for peaceful development to flourish (Loewe, Zing, and Houdret 2021). Linking cohesion is an important input for establishing and protecting a strong social contract, as it influences the citizen-state bargaining process, the resulting political settlement, and the ultimate social outcomes (Coutier et al. 2021).

While the concept of social cohesion has garnered increased attention in recent years, its roots date back to 19th century French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who defined it as interdependence between individuals characterized by strong social bonds and the absence of latent social conflict (Durkheim 1897). Since then, a vast literature has conceived of it in various ways: as an intragroup characteristic dependent on size, intimacy, social organization, rewards, and the roles of reciprocity and trust (Lewin 1946; Lott and Lott 1966); as an ongoing process, offering mechanisms to resolve conflict (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Maxwell 1996); and as a society’s capacity to ensure the well-being of its members, avoid marginalization, and minimize disparities (OECD 2011). Recent theoretical developments have considered society-wide issues related to cohesion, while others have focused on local or even hyperlocal dynamics. The literature stresses different facets of cohesion: trust, shared identities, norms, pressures to conform, and other mechanisms through which norms are enforced. Nonetheless, a consensus is

emerging that cohesion produces communities with greater capacity for effective collective action—with high levels of trust, openness toward “outgroups,” and a shared perception that public institutions are legitimate.

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.

Historically, the term “social inclusion” was motivated by the broad observation that some groups in society face constraints to socioeconomic participation that go beyond poverty or even inequality. Over the past decade, the concept has increasingly been adapted to the context of development. During the early 2010s, the MDGs drew to a close amid recognition that development investments had not addressed some of the deepest pockets of poverty and had produced unequal benefits across and within countries. In 2013 the World Bank report *Inclusion Matters* defined inclusion as “the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people, disadvantaged on the basis of their identity, to take part in society” (World Bank 2013b). The 2015 SDGs encapsulated the core motivation of inclusion in their rallying cry to “leave no one behind.” Since 2020, inclusion has gained traction as part of a call for “inclusive recovery” from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The exclusion of groups or individuals from society can take many forms and be driven by many factors, such as gender, age, location, occupation, race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship

status, disability, and sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). Exclusion is sustained through a range of formal and informal norms, behaviors, and institutions. For instance, laws can stipulate a lower status for some groups or afford fewer rights to certain members of society, such as laws that restrict women's participation in labor markets or land rights that constrain ownership by women or people of certain ethnic groups. Likewise, informal norms and behaviors can relegate some groups to inferior status, such as stereotypes of persons with a disability or a different sexual orientation, which can limit their access to and benefits from education, health care, or other services.

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.

In the social sphere, resilience reflects the capacities of an individual, household, community, or entire society to prepare for and cope with shocks (Bowen et al. 2020; Folke 2016). Shocks can be idiosyncratic (specific to individuals or households, such as a job loss or health crisis) or systemic (affecting large groups of people, such as food shortages, natural disasters, or violent conflict) (World Bank 2013a). Likewise, they can be external (trade shocks) or internal (disease) as well as rapid (natural disasters), gradually worsening (soil degradation), or continuous (poverty, child labor, gender-based violence). When shocks or crises occur, more resilient individuals and groups are better able to recover faster. Resilience is particularly critical for poor and marginalized groups—who are exposed to hazards more often, lose more as a share

of their wealth when hit, and have fewer support systems (Hallegatte et al. 2017). Resilience at one level of a community or society does not necessarily improve resilience at another, however (Cannon 2008; Glavovic, Scheyvens, and Overton 2003) – for instance, women, youth, and the elderly might be more exposed to various risks (Ajibade, McBean, and Bezner-Kern 2013; Barrett et al. 2021; Jordan 2015, 2019).

People rely on different types of formal and informal strategies to manage risks. *Risk reduction and mitigation* aim to reduce the probability that shocks will occur and/or mitigate their negative impacts – e.g., grassroots public health campaigns and large-scale vaccination efforts (Obrist 2010; World Bank 2001, 2013). *Coping* measures, by contrast, aim to relieve the impact of shocks after they occur – e.g., relying on friends and family, community insurance schemes, or national unemployment insurance (Garschagen, Renaud, and Birkmann 2011; Tawodzera 2012; World Bank 2001, 2013). When such efforts are inadequate, people may adopt unsustainable coping measures (e.g., reducing consumption, resorting to illegal activities) that can have long-term costs and consequences. Finally, *transformative* strategies – the most difficult and rare type (Moshy, Bryceson, and Mwaipopo 2015; Mozumder et al. 2018; Solorzano 2016) – reflect efforts by society to create and/or strengthen institutions that improve citizens' welfare and ability to weather future crises (Béné et al. 2012; Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013; Lorenz 2013; Smith and Frankenberger 2018; Voss 2008), as has been attempted amid COVID-19 and the climate crisis.

Process legitimacy

While cohesion, inclusion, and resilience are the core elements of social sustainability, the extent to which they produce social sustainability entails a transformative process that is more than the sum of its parts. Process legitimacy is thus about the ‘how’ of policy making, program design, and implementation and the extent to which these are consistent with a given context.^{vii} Whether policies and programs are deemed legitimate, illegitimate, or somewhere in between gets decided by communities and societies at large, based on a given community or society’s own sense of and standards for fairness and credibility:

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 occurs when decisions are perceived as fair and credible by all; it is not a binary variable, but rather exists on a scale. Process legitimacy is strongest when decision-making is transparent and participatory, such that people believe that decisions are taken by credible and recognized authority figures in ways that align with their values and reflect agreed rules/processes for decision making. When there is disagreement, process legitimacy ensures that extensive good faith efforts are made to engage with and ultimately accommodate the tensions between groups. This is especially important for those who stand to bear the greatest costs as a result of decisions made, goals selected, or procedures enacted.

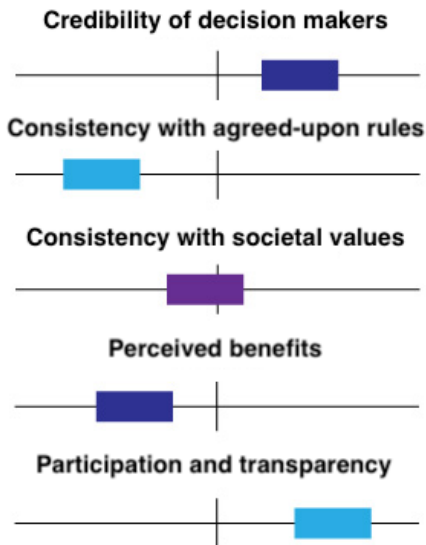
The sources of process legitimacy are multiple, diverse, and often overlapping. However, five common drivers can be identified that lend process legitimacy to an authority, their goals, and the ways those goals are implemented.

- *Credibility of decision makers*: the power to make decisions, set policies, and implement programs stems from an accepted source (e.g., an election, formal or informal designation, or technical expertise).
- *Consistency with agreed-upon rules*: the rules followed to make and implement decisions reflect established methods or approaches that a community or society agrees to be acceptable and credible (e.g., legal precedents, professional standards, procedural guidelines, and informal traditions or customs).
- *Consistency with societal values*: decisions made and implemented align with beliefs or moral convictions about what and how things should be done (e.g., religious, philosophical, and ideological convictions or widely respected but non-binding rules, such as international laws around war crimes or human rights).
- *Perceived benefits for impacted population*: though regarded by some as dubious or morally fraught, authorities can often obtain acceptance and legitimacy for specific policies and programs by convincing stakeholders that they are (or will be) better off (e.g., income and/or security benefits) – through which the ends come to justify (i.e., legitimize) the means.

- *Participation and transparency*: decisions are made and implemented via dialogue, engagement, feedback, partnership, and transparency between authority figures and members of a given community or society, especially when disagreements or tensions arise.

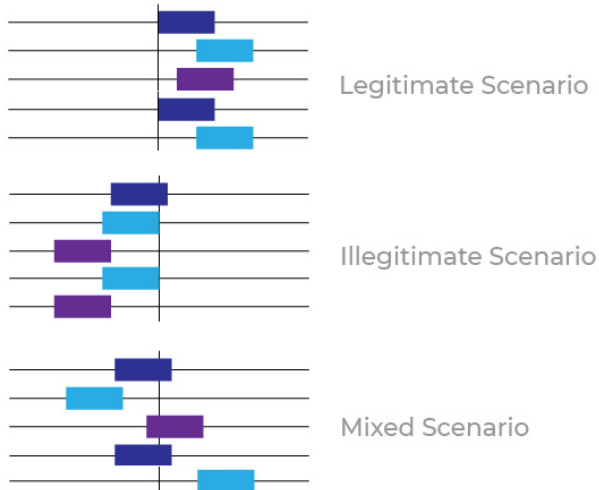
As illustrated in figure 4, the five drivers of process legitimacy are related and can reinforce one another; they also can function independently of one another. Process legitimacy is thus stronger when a credible authority pursues goals in ways that reflect agreed-upon rules and societal values or that offer perceived benefits, with high levels of participation and transparency. Process legitimacy is weaker when an authority derives power through force, when their goals are rejected and do not reflect shared principles, and when policy and program implementation is out of line with prevailing cultural practices and rules. Figure 5 illustrates various possible scenarios, depending on whether particular drivers of process legitimacy are present or absent. By far the most “typical” scenarios are mixed, with varying degrees of difference between members and groups about what counts as a basis for exerting authority, what counts as a reasonable policy or program goal, and what counts as fair implementation procedures for achieving it.

Figure 4: The drivers of process legitimacy



Source: Authors' illustration.

Figure 5: Process legitimacy—Illustrative scenarios



Source: Authors' illustration.

Importantly, these dynamics are fluid and dynamic; they change over time and depend on the level at which decisions are made and implemented (e.g., parliaments, executive offices, the military, the private sector, civil society, and at the local and community levels). As noted above, process legitimacy concerns what happens in the policy arena – the space for collective decision-making, where different groups interact and bargain over issues within the public domain, resulting in agreements that lead to change. The legitimacy of the policy arena is critical and depends on all stakeholders accepting the decision-makers' authority, their chosen policy goals, and the ways in which they pursue those goals.

The consequences of failing to achieve process legitimacy are often obvious: when the conditions of fairness and credibility are not met, outrage may follow. More often, process legitimacy is compromised in less obvious ways: when certain groups lack access to the policy arena due to high levels of inequality; when corruption or clientelism puts decision-making authority up for sale to the highest bidder; or even when well-meaning external actors create short-term incentives for policy reforms that do not reflect a transparent engagement in the policy arena. In all such cases, the social sustainability of the change process can be jeopardized and social tensions may emerge. In recent years, process legitimacy has become more challenging as the policy arena has become more fragmented, driven in part by political and cultural polarization and technologies like social media, which tends to divide groups and often undermines the credibility of information sharing, making consensus-building significantly more difficult.

In the realm of development, the presence or absence of process legitimacy is often decisive, as it shapes how stakeholders experience social change and the extent to which they accept the outcomes it generates – ultimately affecting whether the change process is socially

sustainable. While policies to upgrade slums are common and technically straightforward, for instance, *how* they are implemented matters greatly: a government can forcibly displace residents by invoking eminent domain laws, or it can undertake community consultations and implement a fairly negotiated and transparently communicated resettlement process. From the perspective of social sustainability, the latter approach is more likely to be perceived as legitimate.^{viii} Likewise, social norms and values are often central to the change process in development; process legitimacy ensures that such beliefs are taken into account and accommodated. Of course, the development process often *alters the drivers* of process legitimacy, influencing who has authority, what goals they pursue, and how their policies and programs get implemented. Development also affects established rules, norms, values, and principles and introduces new ones over time. In this sense, if not well managed, development itself can raise concerns, stoke tensions, or even erode social cohesion.^{ix}

Practicing socially sustainable development is about navigating, negotiating, and resolving these complex tradeoffs in the policy arena. Routinely, however, the tradeoffs cannot be anticipated in advance and are highly challenging to address when they materialize. There is also no single blueprint for promoting process legitimacy: the necessary rules, standards, norms, and procedures for managing these tradeoffs are often either absent, inadequate, contradictory, or compromised – thereby becoming part of the development challenge. Nonetheless, a broad body of evidence illustrates the importance of process legitimacy as well as cohesion, inclusion, and resilience for achieving key development goals, and certain practices and principles have been shown to be effective at bolstering these four components. The next section discusses the relevant evidence, after which operational insights are presented.

IV. Evidence

Empirical evidence

As noted, social sustainability and its components have both intrinsic and instrumental value: while they have unique and innate value in much the same way as peace, freedom, or sovereignty, they also have instrumental value in terms of generating development benefits and achieving key outcomes. A growing body of empirical evidence, including rigorous experimental evaluations, highlights why this concept matters and illustrates its broader links to key development outcomes.

Social cohesion

There is compelling evidence for cohesion's positive impacts on development, particularly in contexts affected by fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV). Cohesion may play a significant role in preventing conflict and averting its costs, and in times of crisis, the strength of cohesion matters (Norton and de Haan 2012; see also OECD 2011). Cohesive societies are also less susceptible to the influence of armed or criminal groups (Besley and Reynal-Querol 2014; Cassar, Grosjean, and Whitt 2013; Dell and Querubin 2017; Fearon and Laitin 2012; Rohner 2018; Rohner, Thoenig, and Zilibotti 2013).^x Cohesion offers broad development benefits, facilitating beneficial change processes and enhancing resilience for many types of crises (Aldrich 2012; Gates 2002; Migdal 2001; Staniland 2014; Townshend et al. 2015). During COVID-19, for example, people in regions of Europe that have high levels of trust were more

likely than people in low-trust regions to limit their mobility in response to public pandemic prevention measures (Bargain and Aminjonov 2020). Low levels of cohesion, by contrast, are linked with social discontent, political instability, and social tensions such as strikes, demonstrations, riots, and unrest (Alesina and Perotti 1996; Esteban and Ray 2011). While cohesion is generally positive, it can also lead to the exclusion of certain groups (such as ethnic minorities or those with a different sexual orientation) or be used to build support for violence toward a particular group (Chatterjee, Gassier, and Myint 2022).

Emerging rigorous evidence from randomized controlled trials, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews also shows the potential impacts of efforts to strengthen cohesion. For example, an impact evaluation of a community-driven development (CDD) program in the Kyrgyz Republic found that it increased the community's sense of unity, cooperation, and perceptions of local governance and educational services, with weaker but still positive effects on addressing entrenched perceptions, changing attitudes, and building trust (Esenaliev et al. 2018). Likewise, a systematic review of peace-building interventions aimed at promoting cohesion in low- and middle-income FCV countries (e.g., intergroup dialogues and workshop-based peace education) found positive effects on trust, sense of belonging, willingness to participate and help, and acceptance of diversity – though the effects were small, suggesting the significance of broader challenges and structural or contextual barriers (Sonnenfeld et al. 2021).

Inclusion

A broad body of evidence illustrates the costs of social exclusion – most commonly measured in terms of wages, lifetime earnings, education, and employment 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). Discrimination can also have negative impacts on physical and mental health (Lereya et al. 2015). At the national level, actual or perceived exclusion can lead individuals to opt out of education, health care, or labor markets, with costs to individuals and the economy (Burns 2012; World Bank 2013b, 2018a). Notably, inequality of opportunity is particularly detrimental to growth (Brunori, Ferreira, and Peragine 2013; Ferreira et al. 2013; Marrero and Rodriguez 2013). In the most extreme cases, long-term exclusion can undermine cohesion and lead to conflict and violence (Call 2012). Conversely, promoting inclusion has significant development benefits. For example, the potential global benefit from achieving gender parity in labor markets is an estimated US\$28 trillion over a decade (Madgavkar, Ellingrud, and Krishnan 2016). Inclusion is associated with better outcomes in terms of income, poverty reduction, and human capital endowments (Freire et al. 2020; World Bank 2013b, 2020a). It can boost productivity via more efficient human capital accumulation, entrepreneurship (Rauch 1991), and better access to credit and insurance products (World Bank 2006). The participation and political engagement of excluded groups have also been associated with less conflict (Min et al. 2017; see also Fearon 2010; Fearon and Laitin 2012; United Nations and World Bank 2018).

Rigorous evidence has shown the positive impacts of inclusion, as well. For example, a series of impact evaluations in Indonesia found that a community block grant program targeting excluded geographic regions had large, sustained effects on health and education outcomes (World Bank 2018b). Likewise, a recent review of Bank-financed CDD projects found that many boost health, education, and economic welfare outcomes, but that their most consistent positive impacts are in delivering basic services, reaching previously excluded groups, and increasing

participation and voice in the village development process (Wong 2022; previous studies include Mansuri and Rao 2013; Wong and Guggenheim 2018).

Resilience

A range of development interventions seek to bolster resilience, and a large amount of evidence has shown their positive effects. For example, a meta-analysis of 129 impact evaluations assessing the effects of group-based livelihoods programs – such as community-based microfinance schemes, self-help groups, or savings and producer groups, often based on gender, economic, social, cultural, or ethnic affinity – found that they provided much-needed safety nets and led to reduced vulnerability in contexts of extreme deprivation and adverse events like conflict or climate shocks (Barooah et al. 2020). Moreover, the meta-analysis found that group-based livelihoods programs systematically improved social cohesion in the form of greater access to entitlements and intra- and inter-group relationships.

Other evidence also suggests that resilience has strong links to social cohesion and inclusion and that the three may be mutually reinforcing. Building and maintaining social relations and network structures are critical for resilience, as are the content of those relations—including the roles of trust, reciprocity, and mutual support (Adger 2000; Bodin, Crona, and Ernstson 2006; Peiling and High 2005; Traerup 2012). For example, a study of natural disaster response across four countries found that communities with robust social networks were better able to coordinate recovery and minimize long-term consequences (Aldrich 2012). In contrast, a study of Chicago’s 1995 heat wave found that various forms of social breakdown, including the physical and social isolation of senior citizens, contributed to high fatality rates (Klinenberg

2002). Similar studies have assessed resilience amid climate change and broader development efforts, especially focusing on vulnerable communities (for example, Ashwill, Flora, and Flora 2011; Mearns and Norton 2010; World Bank 2013a). Institutions and power relations, including cultural capital in the form of gender, kinship, or ethnic ties, also influence social resilience (Adger 2000; Obrist 2010).

Process legitimacy

Despite its complexities, several types of interventions offer evidence on the positive effects of process legitimacy. Interventions that seek to strengthen social accountability, for example, have been shown to have several benefits. In Cambodia, an impact evaluation highlighted the benefits of efforts to increase government capacity for social accountability in rural regions, including the development of citizen-state feedback mechanisms. The evaluation found that the program empowered citizens to provide comments to community service providers on the quality of critical public services, ultimately strengthening transparency in access to information, increasing the use of health centers, and improving school facilities (Mubarak et al. 2020). In the Philippines, an economic support program reduced the number of conflict-related incidents and weakened the influence of insurgents (Crost, Felter, and Johnston 2016). In Afghanistan, the participatory and transparent community-driven approach helped to minimize conflict and tensions throughout the program, as community leaders included households that otherwise may not have been included. In Colombia, an economic support program was found to have positive effects on the demobilization of combatants (Pena, Urrego, and Villa 2017; for additional references, see Chatterjee, Gassier, and Myint 2022).

Links to poverty, inequality, and human capital

In addition to evidence from specific interventions, policies, and programs showing the instrumental value of social sustainability and its key components, cross-country analysis also indicates that cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and process legitimacy are associated with macro-level development objectives. There is 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 these four components are all correlated with poverty reduction, human capital, human development, and inequality.^{xi} (See Annex A for illustrations of these correlations and Annex B for a full list of each index's indicators and details on their construction.)

Several of these correlations are strong—namely, inclusion and process legitimacy with poverty reduction and human capital as well as process legitimacy with inequality. Indeed, process legitimacy is among the most strongly correlated indexes, underscoring the importance of factors like the rule of law, fairness, justice, and government effectiveness for the broader development agenda. However, some correlations are weaker. This variation likely reflects data shortcomings and measurement challenges (including the need to refine SSGD indicators) as well as the inherent methodological difficulty of unpacking complex social relationships that are often affected by long-standing structural factors. Long-term country-specific time series data (as well as continued improvements in the core data) would improve analytical tools like the SSGD. Likewise, additional causal analyses – leveraging impact evaluations as well as experimental and quasi-experimental analyses – would help confirm the correlations presented here.

Beyond data considerations, weak correlations may also underscore that there are multiple ways to make progress on such high-level development goals, some of which are more

socially sustainable than others. For instance, there are several countries that do well in terms of poverty reduction or inequality but do less well on one or several dimensions of social sustainability. This does not suggest that the latter does not matter; as noted, social sustainability also matters intrinsically and not exclusively for its instrumental value. Likewise, it is important to note that development progress can often be short-lived and subject to reversals (including reversals driven by a lack of social sustainability). For example, poverty and inequality in contexts of migration can be reduced with cash transfers to refugees; however, failure to also support host communities (who may be just as poor) or involve them in the decision-making process may undermine the gains achieved and exacerbate social tensions.

Overall, the large number of positive correlations suggests that inclusion, cohesion, resilience, and process legitimacy are mutually reinforcing: in other words, social sustainability will generally be strongest when all of its components are present, offering a virtuous circle that helps to drive poverty reduction and shared prosperity. In reality, of course, the components often work at cross purposes. Some of the least inclusive societies, for example, are also the most resilient, and may appear cohesive only because minority groups are suppressed or marginalized. Likewise, there are often significant tradeoffs: highly resilient communities can be too tolerant of adversity, while efforts to enhance inclusion can generate resentment from groups who fear losing out. Such instances can undermine social sustainability, leading to increased tensions or conflict. In practice, communities and societies must balance these tradeoffs and make difficult choices; if well managed, participatory, and transparent, this decision-making process in and of itself can support social sustainability. The next section explores specific efforts that have been shown to bolster cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and process legitimacy.

V. Bolstering social sustainability

While generally a complex endeavor, progress towards social sustainability can be fostered. Over the past decades, significant experience has been accumulated on how to design and implement successful projects, programs, and policies to support social cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and process legitimacy. This section provides a brief set of examples for each component.

Interventions to strengthen social cohesion often aim to reduce violence (or the potential for it), improve perceptions of and trust in government, or strengthen local institutions. A growing body of evidence documents the success of such interventions, both in fragile and non-fragile contexts (Fiala and Premand 2018; Blair et al. 2021; Acemoglu et al. 2020; Mansoor 2021; Chatterjee, Gassier, and Myint 2022). The most effective interventions fall into three broad categories: the establishment and strengthening of local and community platforms, efforts that integrate economic support with mechanisms for collaboration, and efforts that integrate social accountability mechanisms (Barron 2011). Examples include, among others, local and community platforms to build cohesion between different ethnic or religious groups in Indonesia (Barron, Diprose, and Woolcock (2011); programs in Colombia (D'Exelle, Coleman, and Lopez 2018; Valli, Peterman, and Hidrobo 2019) to increase cooperation and social cohesion among displaced populations; efforts in Malawi (Burchi and Roscioli 2021) to improve cohesion and cooperative behaviors at the community level; and dispute resolution in North Central Nigeria (Chatterjee, Gassier, and Myint 2022).

Policies and programs to deepen inclusion typically seek to expand and improve access to markets (e.g., labor, land, financial) and services (e.g., health, education, social protection), but

also include efforts to foster voice and agency for groups at risk of exclusion. As such, interventions to bolster inclusion are as diverse as the types of exclusion they seek to address, from removing barriers to land markets for indigenous peoples and tackling gender gaps in labor markets to improving education for persons with disabilities and increasing access to quality health care for refugees. Some of the most effective interventions for inclusion encompass legal reforms (Ali, Deininger, and Goldstein 2011; Ali et al. 2015; Hallward-Driemeier and Gajigo 2013), affirmative action (Das and Espinoza 2020; Langer, Stewart, and Schroyens 2016), and targeted efforts to reach particular groups as part of universal access programs (World Bank 2019; Das et al. 2017). Involving groups at risk of exclusion in the design of policies and programs or general efforts to foster their voice and agency in society can also bolster inclusion. Normative change is also often a critical component of efforts to strengthen inclusion, as norms typically play a role in sustaining exclusion over time. Efforts to shift harmful norms have been successful through a number of channels, including legal reforms and media-based interventions (Banerjee, La Ferrara, and Orozco-Olvera 2019; Bicchieri 2016; Bicchieri and Mercier 2014; Gauri, Rahman, and Sen 2019).

Efforts to strengthen resilience aim to ensure that communities can withstand and recover from shocks without resorting to negative and unsustainable coping strategies. This includes strengthening communities' capacities to anticipate and reduce future risks as well as strengthening or creating new institutions to prepare for future shocks. Three categories of resilience efforts have proven to be particularly effective. First, efforts to improve people's livelihoods can directly enhance resilience, including investments in cash transfers, education, and health care (Barrett and Conostas 2014). Second, a variety of efforts can reduce people's exposure to future risks, including reforms to underlying institutions – e.g., police protection,

disease-resistant seeds, insurance programs, or employment guarantee schemes (Barrett and Conostas 2014). Likewise, expanding financial inclusion (e.g., access to finance, digital finance, risk sharing and diversification mechanisms, and financial education) can improve people's capacity to cope with shocks or disasters (Moore et al. 2019; Suri and Jack 2016; Hallegatte et al. 2017). Finally, enhancing agency and self-organizing capacity building at the community level can help identify and strengthen the key capacities that enable resilience (Myers 2021). Such efforts often involve increasing access to information and deepening engagement between communities and the state. For example, in conflict zones in the Philippines, regular meetings between government officials and community leaders in conflict-affected areas led to improved delivery of services to at-risk communities (Haim, Nanes, and Davidson 2021).

Advancing social sustainability also requires leveraging process legitimacy, paying close and continual attention to *how* development is done. How goals are formulated and how policies and programs are designed and implemented can often mean the difference between success and failure. The importance of process legitimacy thus cuts across most development efforts – highlighting the need for approaches that reconcile potential disagreements or tensions, especially among those who stand to bear the greatest cost from a given policy, program, or change process. Critically, this requires inclusivity and a deep engagement with the local context. While many efforts to enhance social sustainability involve shifting social norms, behaviors are an important part of this puzzle. These factors affect what is considered acceptable behavior in a given context, whether individuals and groups will trust each other, and whether they will be willing to engage and cooperate throughout the change process. The consequences of not getting this right can be dire.

The promotion of process legitimacy in practice involves adopting a certain mind-set as much as any operational tactic. At the highest level, engaging with process legitimacy requires all development actors to meaningfully consider their own role in shaping it. Two useful starting points are acknowledging the potential for development efforts to be socially disruptive, no matter how well intentioned, and recognizing that mainstream professional development discourse and practice—grounded in numbers, written documents, and analytical abstractions—is often at odds with the prevailing beliefs and ways of doing things in developing contexts. In such cases, development actors must realize that they *lack* legitimacy and must earn (rather than impose) it for their efforts to be socially sustainable. This means that the concerns or grievances generated by development should be regarded as challenges to proactively address. Indeed, a key aspect of the development process is for societies to incrementally build robust domestic policy arenas—including capable administrative and judicial institutions, citizen engagement mechanisms, local government decision making, and civic spaces that provide voice to civil society—that can “manage” the increasingly large, complex, and contested tasks that development itself brings about (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017).

Effective efforts at promoting process legitimacy typically reflect three key underlying principles. First, they make a sincere effort to understand the policy arena of a given context. While the insight that politics and the political economy of countries matter to the success of reforms is not new (see, for example, Fritz, Kaiser, and Levy 2009; Woolcock 2014; World Bank 2017a), it has not been translated consistently into action. Second, interventions that achieve process legitimacy must foster space for all stakeholders to be meaningfully and regularly involved in the policy arena, especially those at risk of exclusion or who stand to lose from a given policy or program. This often involves strengthening systems for social accountability

(open government, public sector user feedback mechanisms, participatory or civil society monitoring); supporting groups traditionally excluded from the policy arena or lacking the means, confidence, vocabulary, or information to participate fully; and bringing groups with differing views together to explore solutions for common challenges. It is particularly important that such engagement meaningfully informs the design and implementation of projects (Masud, Kumagai, and Grandvoinet 2019; World Bank 2018a). Finally, achieving process legitimacy via socially sustainable development typically means engaging for the long haul in a given context, even when challenges arise, since social change happens slowly but opportunities for rapid progress often emerge suddenly. Staying engaged, building trust, making connections, and generating coalitions and partnerships can help development actors detect and be prepared to act as windows of opportunity emerge (Green 2016, especially ch. 1). This protracted time frame – and other time-consuming efforts that promote process legitimacy, like conducting rigorous stakeholder engagement and participation upfront – can pose challenges for many development actors, who often operate on project timelines that are too short to achieve measurable results in terms of social change.

Efforts to bolster social sustainability would of course be most effective if states, communities and societies pursued all four components simultaneously, while also pursuing both economic and environmental sustainability. In practice, however, stakeholders and policy makers often choose or are forced to prioritize particular components or certain dimensions over others. This process – of balancing tradeoffs and making difficult choices – unfolds within the policy arena amid the reality of competing priorities, budget constraints, and limited timeframes. As such, process legitimacy is thus doubly useful – by increasing the effectiveness of how development is practiced while also ensuring that broader tensions between stakeholders are

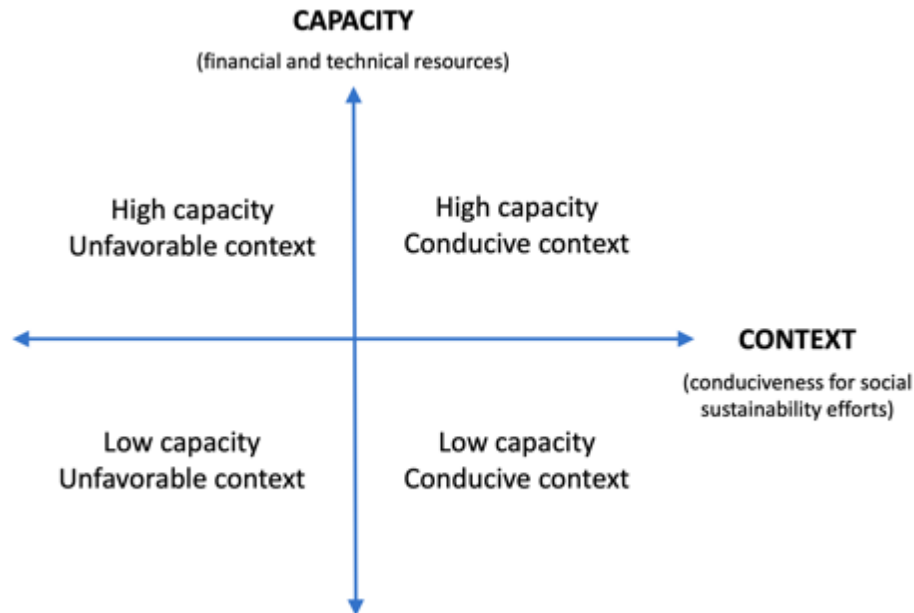
meaningfully accommodated as communities and societies set collective priorities, especially among groups who stand to lose from a given decision or tradeoff.

Typology for social sustainability

When social sustainability is challenged in one area, there may be openings in another. For instance, if a given country has political sensitivities around promoting the inclusion of a specific group, there may still be openings around strengthening resilience for all vulnerable groups; similarly, where the policy arena around the energy sector is very narrow, the education sector might be highly transparent, open, and inclusive. In such cases, development actors may achieve more results by investing in resilience or education efforts rather than targeted work on inclusion or energy, respectively.

A typology can help development actors to navigate these trade-offs and make judgment calls regarding what to prioritize in the face of time and budget constraints. Figure 6 illustrates a simplified typology for mapping the potential social sustainability of development efforts along two key dimensions: *context* and *capacity*. Context, as discussed throughout this paper, is the full set of social factors that characterize a given community or society and its policy arena (including norms, behaviors, and beliefs), which can be conducive or not conducive to change. Capacity, by contrast, refers to the capability of development actors, including governments and other authorities, to get things done (establishing and maintaining peace, setting compliance mechanisms for revenue collection, enforcing rights). Such capacity can be technical (level of staff expertise, administrative resources) or financial (resources to undertake large-scale citizen engagement efforts).

Figure 6: Typology for social sustainability



Source: Authors' illustration.

The potential success of any policy or program (in terms of its social sustainability) depends on a combination of context and capacity. In figure 6, the far corner of the top-right quadrant represents the most promising potential for socially sustainable development, the far corner of the lower-left quadrant represents the least promising, and the areas closer to the axes represent moderate viability. Considering this typology, it is not surprising that high-income economies are often more inclusive, cohesive, and resilient and have higher levels of process legitimacy than fragile or conflict-affected countries. Even so, some high-income countries still have less favorable contexts (for example, those with persistent levels of social exclusion, lack of gender equality, or political or social dynamics that deprioritize efforts like climate change adaptation or mitigation). As with the examples above, within a given country one sector may also have more or less capacity or a more or less conducive context than other sectors.

Of course, as this paper has emphasized, *how* development is done also matters greatly. A given policy or program is unlikely to succeed if the affected community or society does not support it, does not accept the authority who designed it, or does not see its implementation as legitimate—or if there is no process for reconciling the potential concerns, disagreements, and tensions that may arise. In other words, process legitimacy determines what is seen as acceptable or desirable within a given country, both in terms of what to support and how to support it. This will differ widely across countries—and within countries, it may differ widely across sectors, demographics, or even individual policies and programs.

Although assessing process legitimacy cannot be reduced to a simple rubric, some classic examples of challenging cases are described below.

- *Fragmented legitimacy* can occur where different sections of a population have deeply divided views on what is acceptable or desirable—which will always be the case to some extent but is more pronounced and difficult to resolve in certain contexts (for example, countries with ethnonational conflict or significant differences on development pathways between groups, such as farmers and pastoralists). In these cases, development actors can help by creating space for contentious discussions and participatory processes to occur, particularly at the local level, where the tensions or conflicts often play out. Community and local development instruments, for example, can be effective.

- *Challenged legitimacy* can occur when existing rules, norms, or values are threatened by an emerging challenge, crisis, or the development process itself. A classic example is gender equity in places where some groups oppose efforts to promote girls' education, female participation in the workforce, or access to contraception—thus challenging the legitimacy of traditional views about gender. To overcome such challenges, development actors can

incentivize particular reforms or projects, such as offering technical assistance and supplemental concessional financing (for example, to strengthen transparency in governments struggling with corruption or to support communities hosting refugees if they develop sustainable integration strategies). Supporting different perspectives to play out in the policy arena can also be helpful here.

- *Displaced legitimacy* can occur where governments are not supported by most of society (for example, after some coups or where democratic institutions do not function). In these cases, there is often still some degree of consensus among the population about what to do and how to do it, and development actors can support such efforts through nonstate bodies rather than the government, often also working at the community level.

This paper does not aim to provide detailed and customized guidance on all the potential interventions and engagements across different types of communities and societies. Rather, it emphasizes the importance of being aware of how context and capacity interact with social sustainability to drive outcomes. Any typology or assessment of social sustainability (including this one) is time-sensitive and fleeting, and, as noted previously, development itself can alter both the context and the capacity for social sustainability.

VI. Conclusion

Despite notable progress on key development goals in recent decades, an increasing array of new and overlapping challenges are putting future achievements at risk. Climate change, COVID-19, rising levels of conflict, widening inequality, a global slowdown, and persistent

social exclusion are aggravating social tensions at a time when the social fabric is already fraying. Polarization, declining trust, unrest, and related forces are dividing communities and societies, undermining cooperation and shared effort just as these capacities are becoming most vital. While *sustainability* is broadly seen as the prevailing ‘solution’ to these and most other global challenges – and while the SDGs and other key development institutions increasingly understand the concept of sustainability to have economic and environmental as well as *social* dimensions – the theoretical and operational foundations of social sustainability are comparatively under-developed, resulting in a relatively weak and incoherent policy agenda for how it might be advanced.

This paper helps begin to close these gaps by putting forth a new definition and conceptual framework for social sustainability, outlining what makes it distinctive from the economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability, and underscoring the concept’s key constituent elements: social cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and process legitimacy – which emphasizes *how* development policies and programs are designed and implemented. A wealth of empirical evidence illustrates that each of these components has important development benefits and is associated with higher-level goals like inclusive growth and shared prosperity. Beyond its instrumental value, however, social sustainability also matters intrinsically – yet achieving it in practice involves navigating, negotiating, and resolving a complex array of tradeoffs and challenges. A key message of the paper is that social sustainability can be defined and measured, though future work is needed to address data, measurement, and methodological issues.

Amid new, persistent, and growing challenges, integrating social sustainability alongside economic and environmental sustainability should be elevated as a key priority for the global development community. In practice, this means incorporating social sustainability into

development discourse, theory, and implementation and giving it equal consideration as economic and environmental sustainability in analyses, strategies, and operations. Beyond these academic and operational applications, however, achieving social sustainability's full potential requires that it be incorporated as a local, national, corporate, and global priority – and that the concomitant time, resources, and collective energy be mobilized to pursue it.

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Annex

Annex A. Correlations between the four components of social sustainability

Figure A1. Correlations with poverty reduction

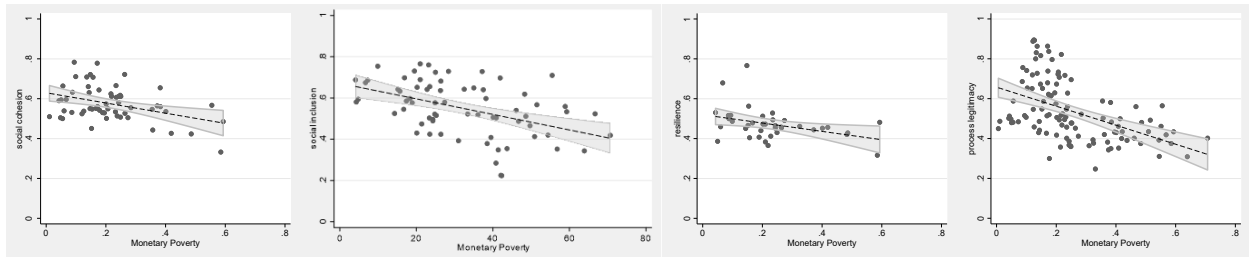


Figure A2. Correlations with human capital

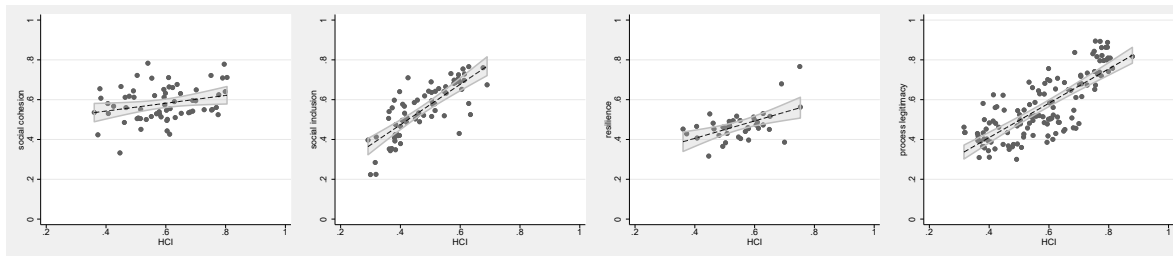


Figure A3. Correlations with human development

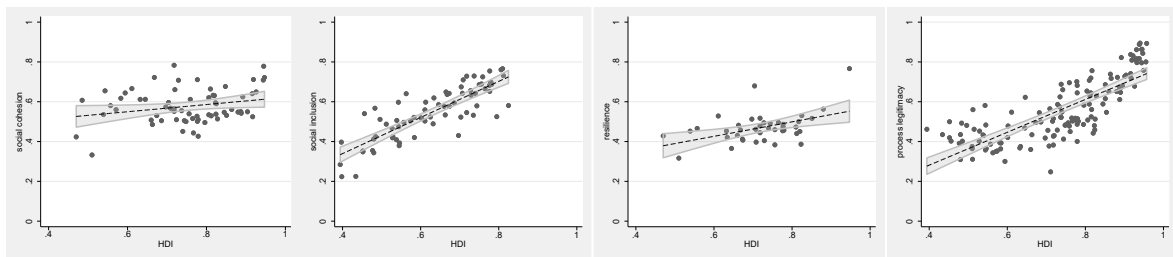
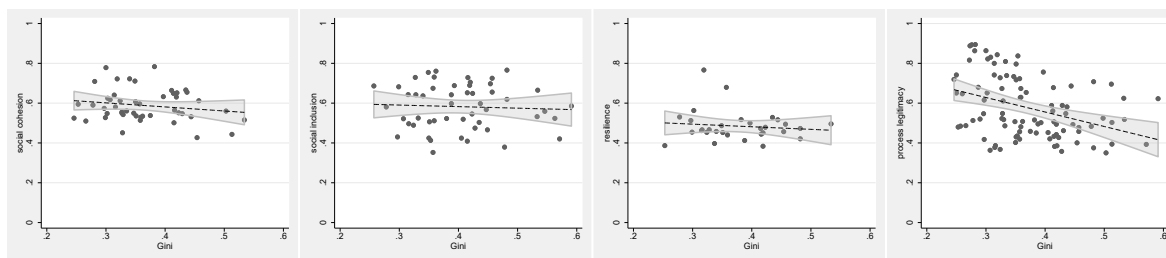


Figure A4. Correlations with inequality



Source: World Bank 2022d.

Note: The figure shows the following: all components of social sustainability are correlated with poverty reduction (panel A1); all components are correlated with human capital (panel A2); all components are correlated with human development, but some more so than others (panel A3); and most components are slightly correlated with inequality, except process legitimacy (panel A4).

Annex B. Empirical annex

Table B1: Variables used in social sustainability indexes

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Country observations</i>	<i>Source</i>
<i>Social inclusion</i>		
Labor force participation rate (0-1)	113	GMD
Share of population with a bank account (0-1)	105	Regional Barometers, FINDEX
Share of households without access to adequate sanitation (0-1)	137	GMD
Share of households with access to electricity (0-1)	104	GMD
Secondary enrollment rate (0-1)	114	GMD
Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (0-1)	190	World Development Indicators
Social inclusion index (0-1)	73	
<i>Resilience</i>		
Index of average assets in household (normalized 0-1) ^a	101	GMD
Share of population that saves some money (0-1)	85	Regional Barometers and World Values Survey
1 minus the share of population that has gone without enough food to eat in the past year (0-1)	110	Regional Barometers and World Values Survey

Share of households with several sources of income (0-1)	113	GMD
Share of population that considers moving because of climate change reasons (0-1)	113	Gallup
Resilience index (0-1)	40	
<i>Social cohesion</i>		
Share of population that says most people can be trusted (0-1)	86	Regional Barometers and World Values Survey
Share of population that says they have confidence in the government (0-1)	112	Regional Barometers and World Values Survey
Share of population that says they have confidence in the police (0-1)	113	Regional Barometers and World Values Survey
Share of population that voted in the last national election (0-1)	106	Regional Barometers and World Values Survey
Share of population that are active members of organizations (0-1)	78	World Values Survey
Index of fatalities from violence (normalized 0-1) ^b	206	ACLED
Index of homicides (normalized 0-1) ^c	90	World Development Indicators
Social cohesion index (0-1)	68	
<i>Process legitimacy</i>		
Rule of law (normalized 0-1)	209	World Governance Indicators
Control of corruption (normalized 0-1)	209	World Governance Indicators
Government powers are effectively limited by the judiciary (score 0-1)	139	World Justice Project
Equal treatment and absence of discrimination in the legal system (score 0-1)	139	World Justice Project
People can access and afford civil justice (score 0-1)	139	World Justice Project
Government regulations are applied and enforced without improper influence (score 0-1)	139	World Justice Project
The right of life and security to the person is effectively guaranteed (score 0-1)	139	World Justice Project
Process legitimacy index (0-1)	139	

Source: World Bank 2022d.

Note: GMD = Global Monitoring Database. ACLED = Armed Conflict Location and Event Data.

a. Average = set of assets, including computer, cell phone, radio, television, washing machine, sewing machine, car, fridge, and motorcycle, that are owned by a household in the country, normalized between 0 to 1 (1 = having all assets considered).

b. Index = number of fatalities due to violence in a country. The indicator is normalized across all countries in the sample using $\frac{\text{var}-\text{var}_{\min}}{\text{var}_{\max}-\text{var}_{\min}}$.

c. Index = number of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in a country normalized across all countries in the sample using $\text{var} - \text{var}_{\min} / \text{var}_{\max} - \text{var}_{\min}$.

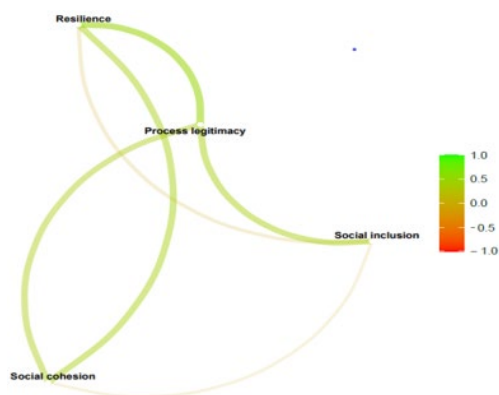
Those indicators are aggregated across each of the four social sustainability components through the following index:

$$SS_j = \sum_i (w s)_i, \quad (2A.1)$$

where, for the j th social sustainability component ($j = 1, 2, 3, 4$)—that is, social inclusion, social resilience, empowerment, and process legitimacy in each region—each i th social sustainability indicator, s , used to define the respective component is weighted by a factor, w . Following the most parsimonious definition, $w = 1/i$ —that is, each index equally weights its indicators. In practice, the index for each component of social sustainability is defined at the national level.

Robustness checks were conducted to see the sensitivity of results to the number of indicators used in each component, alternative choices of indicators across indexes, and nonlinear functional forms for the index (figure B1 and table B2). Key findings regarding the direction and strength of correlations did not change after these changes. See Cuesta, López-Noval, and Niño-Zarazúa (2022) for a detailed discussion of those robustness checks.

Figure B1: Pairwise correlations between social sustainability components



Source: Cuesta, López-Noval, and Niño-Zarazúa 2022.

Table B2: Correlations among the components of social sustainability

	<i>Social</i> <i>inclusion</i>	<i>Resilience</i>	<i>Social</i> <i>cohesion</i>	<i>Process</i> <i>legitimacy</i>
Social inclusion	1.000			
Resilience	-0.088	1.000		
Social cohesion	-0.042	0.391	1.000	
Process legitimacy	0.393	0.493	0.353	1.000

Source: World Bank 2022d.

Affiliations: All authors are affiliated with the World Bank.

ⁱ This paper utilizes the UN’s Brundtland Commission definition of sustainability as fulfilling “the needs of current generations without compromising the needs of future generations” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Likewise, the paper refers to ‘social’ in

its broadest sense: the relationships between individuals and groups and the diverse characteristics that shape those relationships – e.g., norms, values, shared identity, culture, institutions. (For similar prior World Bank efforts to define ‘social’ and ‘social development,’ see Davis 2004; World Bank 2005a, 2005b).

ⁱⁱ These concerns moved in parallel with other developments in the social sphere, such as the emergence of environmentalism, the sustainability movement, the prioritization of human rights, the establishment of grassroots civil society NGOs, and the women’s rights movement.

ⁱⁱⁱ Drawing on the work of the World Bank and others, the summit adopted ten commitments around a people-first approach to development, including: equitable access to health and education; gender equality; the protection of human rights; the eradication of extreme poverty; increased attention to social issues in structural reform programs; more resources and international collaboration around social issues; and recognition of the need for an integrated approach to social development across legal, economic, social, cultural, and political contexts.

^{iv} Interestingly, the metric of inequality enjoys less consensus: while it is widely measured as income or consumption dispersion, not everyone agrees that zero inequality is the ultimate goal—which makes inequality just as relevant for social sustainability as for economic sustainability.

^v This definition and the brief summary of the literature that follows is adapted from Chatterjee, Gassier, and Myint (2022).

^{vi} The terms bonding, bridging, and linking are drawn from Woolcock and Narayan’s work on social capital (Woolcock and Narayan 2000). Whereas social capital can refer to an individual or a community and generally refers to the extent of one’s own communities or social networks,

social cohesion is measured at the intra- or inter-community and society levels and refers to trust. See also Olawole, Lichtenheld, and Sheely (2022).

^{vii} The concept of process legitimacy has deep roots in prior World Bank efforts. In particular, it evolved from the Bank’s work on empowerment and accountability, including the bottom-up Demand for Good Governance approach. See, for example, the 2017 *World Development Report* on governance and the law (World Bank 2017b), which stresses the importance of process legitimacy for navigating political tensions in policy deliberations. (See box 1 in Part 1 of SSI book – Barron et al. 2023.)

^{viii} It should be acknowledged, however, that the very act of opening up such wrenching decisions to broad community input has the potential to raise unrealistic expectations and cause costly debilitating delays – e.g., the case of efforts to rebuild a section of lower Manhattan after Hurricane Sandy, which remain unrealized nearly a decade later; see Kimmelman (2021).

^{ix} As noted in this paper’s opening sentences, development changes how people live, including peoples’ identities, expectations, and established ways of managing resources and relations – a process that is often deeply disruptive (and sometimes overtly destructive) to the local ways of doing things. This dynamic—of pursuing goals through a process of deep change—can be considered a form of “creative destruction,” in the Schumpeterian sense; see Aghion et al. (2020).

^x By contrast, several authors have found that conflict might also be associated with higher political participation, more local collective action, and stronger intragroup trust (see Bauer et al. 2016; Bellows and Miguel 2009; Blattman 2009; Gilligan, Pasquale, and Samii 2014).

^{xi} 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. Annex B includes a full list of each index's indicators and details on their construction. See Cuesta, Madrigal, and Pecorari (2022).