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Local Perspectives of Sustainable Development

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Local Perspectives of Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The mainstream school of thought and literature surrounding sustainable development contains numerous terms, assumptions, and perspectives which creates a myriad of meanings. As the academic literature attempts to understand this wide field of study, the perspectives have only grown instead of solidifying into a consensus. This paper first presents a literature review which explores current views and perspectives of how the terms 'sustainable' and 'development' independent of each other are used and how, by combining these terms, create even more perspectives and concepts with sometimes conflicting meanings. This paper then discusses the difficulties of using the term sustainable development as a practitioner of sustainable development 'in the field' and proposes practitioners should have a meta-knowledge of the wide uses of the term(s) for the purpose of creating a locally contextual meaning of sustainable development through the use of local knowledge. The author uses an ethnomethodological approach to interview International Non-Governmental Organization's host country national staff to create mean-making of the term, its use, and its impact within the country of Sierra Leone. The result of this meaning-making shows that while parts of the local perspective of sustainability connect to the current literature, their views are uniquely divergent in some aspects. The locally created view of sustainable development is uniquely different. This divergence should compel practitioners to not only have a thorough understanding of the various literature on Sustainable development, but also develop what I think of as 'contextual empathy' of the local perspectives and usage of the term Sustainable Development.

Introduction

During my experience at The SIT Graduate Institute I grappled with the various theories and perspectives of the term sustainable development. The literary field of sustainable development that I explored at the SIT graduate institute contained broad and sometimes conflicted definitions, views, and perspectives of the term. I spent much of my time on campus reflecting on the why, how, and what sustainable development is to me. I was also very concerned about how the academic theory would 'translate' into the practicum portion of my degree and even into my career. For my practicum work, I was hired by the Peace Corps Sierra Leone to work with the international non-governmental organization CARE International as a Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) specialist. CARE placed me in a semi-urban community in the northern region of Sierra Leone in a town called Binkolo. Now that I am currently 'in the field' for my practicum work, I am faced with a locally unique working environment which has and uses its own terms and meaning for the work considered as 'sustainable development'. As a practitioner and a foreigner working on grass roots projects, the necessity to not only communicate my ideas but also ensure that all stakeholders are able to convey their own without any misunderstandings has lead me to explore and adopt the local perspective of sustainable development and have adopted these usages into my own vocabulary. This has reduced not only confusion but allows for easier and more open dialogue between myself, my organization, the village, and the various stakeholders and beneficiaries of the programs and projects. The approach of adjusting my vocabulary and word meanings to be more contextually appropriate has both benefited my work and expanded my understanding of what sustainable development 'translates' into the real world.

The mainstream school of thought surrounding sustainable development contains numerous terms, assumptions, and perspectives which creates a field of myriad meanings. As the academic literature attempts to understand this wide field, the perspectives have only grown instead of solidifying into a consensus. This paper will first present a literature review which explores current views and perspectives of how the terms 'sustainable' and 'development' independently are used and how combined into 'sustainable development, create even more perspectives and concepts with sometimes conflicting meanings. This paper will show the difficulties of using the term sustainable development as a practitioner of sustainable development 'in the field' and proposes practitioners should have a meta-knowledge of the wide uses of the term(s). Once a clear understanding of the current literature is established, practitioners need to create, what I see as, a locally specific 'contextual empathy' of how sustainable development is perceived and used. This paper will address the process and challenge of creating a local perspective of the term Sustainable Development.

Literature Review

While many of the scholars point to a cornacopia of aspects, definitions, and critiques of Sustainable Development, a definition that is often used by various authors as a starting point is the 1987 United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, also refered to by some authors as the Brundtland Report) *Our Common Future*: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (p. 43). This definition is often used as a reference point for many authors before they critique, explore, and expand upon 'Sustainable Development' (Marcuse 1998, Rist 2007, Scoones 2007, Brady et. al. 2015, Brunsson 2015; Perey 2015). For example, Marcuse

builds on WCED's definition to say that: "Sustainable development is development that meets the specific needs of the present, and can be maintained into the future, without detracting from the satisfaction of other needs in the present or the future" (1998 p. 111). While many authors approach the term 'Sustainable Development' as one whole concept, others have delinked the two terms and addressed 'sustainability' and 'development' separately. This literature review will first address the two terms separately then as the combined term of sustainable development. It is the responsibility of the practitioner to recognize and understand of the various mainstream perspectives of sustainable development. In doing so a practitioner will be able to compare and contrast local perspectives and uses of the term sustainable development for the purpose of working within that specific context.

Sustainability

Sustainability has had a historically strong connection to the environment and environmentalism as the earliest reference to the term was in 1712 when Carl Von Carlowitz coined the term to advise how forests should be managed on a long-term basis (Scoones 2007 p.588). The connection between the environment and sustainability has never truly separated but now has been attached to numerous words such as the neo-classical economists view 'sustainable capital', business management's new 'triple-bottom line', and climate change's 'green policies' (Scoones 2007 p.593). With many different uses of the term, literature on sustainability has split these perspectives and approaches into two main types of sustainability, weak and strong: weak sustainability assumes natural capital (such as a swamp) can be substituted with man-made capital (a water treatment plant). Strong sustainability rejects the substitution of natural to man-

made capital and advocates for 'steady-state' economic growth, i.e. ecological survivalism (Daly 1992 cited from Perey 2015). The perspective of 'ecological survivalism' within a sustainable development framework aims not to simply mitigate environmental degradation, but to protect current environmental capital such as non-renewable resources and can even go as far as countering the affects economic growth on over-consumption and social justice. Montiel highlights two approaches to sustainability such as ecological sustainability which places a higher value on the environment over economic and social values and second a 'corporate sustainability' through responsible management of social, economic and natural capital (2008). Both of these are examples of approaches to sustainability that can be placed into the categories of strong and weak sustainability respectively.

In the alchemically overlapping literature of Sustainable Livelihoods, sustainability is defined as "a function of how assets and capabilities are utilized, maintained and enhanced so as to preserve livelihoods. Environmental sustainability concerns the **external** impact of livelihoods on other livelihoods; social sustainability concerns their **internal** capacity to withstand outside pressures" (emphasis Chambers and Conway's 1991 p. 9). The delineation of environmental and social sustainability helps practitioners to expand their perspective of sustainability and the 'stock taking' necessary for a creating a more sustainable program or project.

In addition to identifying issues and suggesting solutions to practitioners involved in organizational sustainability efforts, Perey also highlights the challenges and approaches of researching such a complex, multi-meaning term. This challenge is no clearer than Perey's attempt in researching organizational sustainability. Perey needed to

provide research participants terms and concepts they may be familiar with as many of the participants did not use the term sustainability on a day to day basis and asked for a clarification on its meaning. Instead of defining 'sustainability' for research participants, Perey instead decided to describe it, giving the participants a reference point:

> Sustainability is about changing our behaviors, actions and systems, at home and at work, to ensure that our environmental and social impacts are not harmful to us, and future generations. Sustainability covers a wide area that includes terms and ideas that you may be familiar with such as climate change, peak oil, fair trade, carbon credits, end poverty, social justice, slave labor, extinction, work-life balance, employer of choice, etc. In a business sense sustainability is often referred to as corporate social and environmental responsibility. (2015, p.155)

Describing sustainability instead of defining it not only allows practitioners communicate its meaning into 'layman's terms' but also creates a safe space for a discussion and the meaning-making process within a local context. Perecy's approach is convincing because crafting a description of sustainable development helps the research participants have a starting point without constraining them to use a ridged definition.

The vague, buzzword status of sustainability has some authors turning in the other direction, simply using dictionary definitions of sustainability such as "capable of being upheld or defended" (Oxford English Dictionary cited by Marcuse 1998), and Perey observes that "inherent in the meaning of the word sustain is the idea of maintenance of an existing order, implying to hold onto something that we must retain, or stand firm against real or perceived threats. The understanding of sustainability is, therefore, of systems enduring over long-time spans, if not indefinitely" (2015 p. 149). The idea of

long-term sustenance further opens up critiques surrounding whose existence (sustainability) is valued over others as Brunsson concludes: "sustainability relates to ethics, and that individuals and organizations are expected to follow different ethical standards. When, in a society of organizations, individuals adopt an organizational kind of ethics, global sustainability is at risk" (2015 p.5). In some cases, sustainability has been used unsuitably as Marcuse argues, in the context of housing and urban development, that 1) 'sustainability' should not be a goal 2) sustainability may encourage an unjust status quo and 3) a lack of common interests between stakeholders (landlords, developers, tenants, etc) masks the conflict of interest (1998 p.107). Claiming a moral right to sustain an individual, group, space, culture, organization, institution, or business reinforces the vague, buzzword status that sustainability has become.

Development

In the same vain as the term 'sustainability', so too has development become "vague, tending to refer to a set of beliefs and assumptions about the nature of social progress rather than to anything more precise" (Rist 2007 p.485). The term development, in the context of the Global South is commonly connected to economic growth through the use of domestic or foreign activities for the purpose of reducing income-poverty (Chambers 1995). This interpretation can be traced back to the origin of the term from the two roots of development theory 19th century evolutionism and 19th century social technology approaches which "tried to reconcile order and progress in the face of problems caused by industrial capitalism" (Ziai p. 125 2013). The majority of the development theory literature branches into modernization and dependency theories of

development, both of which contain four core assumptions of development as highlighted by Ziai below (2013).

Modernization theory. The modernization perspective shows a view of development almost from an evolutionary theory as it assumes 1) Social change is unidirectional 2) imposed a value judgement on the evolutionary process (with an allusion towards Social Darwinism) and 3) assumes social change is slow (So 1990 p.19). Modernization is thus seen only as a moving forward activity and follow Rostow's 5 major stages of growth starting from the 'traditional' society and ending with high mass-consumption (1964, cited from So 1990 p. 29). Once 'developed' people will not want to 'go back', despite the fact that many people (stakeholders) get hurt in the process of a society's movement towards relatively modernized patterns (So 1990 p.25).

Ziai critiques of development within the post-development school of thought which fundamentally dismisses 'development' and declares it a failed project and ideology (2013 p.126). Through the process of post-development's critique of modernization theory, the consideration of power relations at the global level has been advocated, evolving into the theory of dependency.

Dependency theory. The Dependency perspective attempts to see development from a '3rd world' perspective and argues that the Global North cannot assume that its model of development, i.e. capitalist economic growth, is correct because those nations have not experienced the history of those in Global South, i.e. colonialization forced them into economic backwardness because the "transfer of economic surplus has produced underdevelopment in third world countries" (So 1990 p.97). This underdevelopment is reinforced by a dependence on the Global North through three forms of dependence:

Colonial, Financial-industrial, and Technological-Industrial (So 1990 p.99). To address this power dynamic, dependency theory advocates for self-reliance in 'peripheral' countries by reducing or removing connections with 'core' countries. It is argued that this shift in dynamics the 'peripheral' will have more autonomy and self-direction in their own development. Furthermore, there is a call to redefine 'development' from task to social objectives and target rural peasants, the unemployed, and the needy as stakeholders and participants in development and governance.

Ziai's 4 assumptions stem from various critiques of development theory and observes that Post-development has been critiqued "for homogenizing development and neglecting its positive aspects, for romanticizing local communities and legitimizing oppressive traditions, and for being just as paternalistic as the chastised development experts" (Ziai 2013 p.126).

Dependency theory takes as its starting point, a critique of modernization approaches to development. For the past 50 years or so, scholars and social movement activists have continued to advance alternatives to mainstream development approaches. Ziai's post-modernization critique observes that with all advocates of development, in any form, there are four core assumptions. The first assumption is existential assumption, i.e. development functions as an organizing and conceptual framework. Next is the normative assumption that development is a good thing and as Ziai notes development is "a consequence, stagnation is seen as bad, as good society can be achieved only through change and progress" (2013 p.127). Thirdly, there is the practical assumption, meaning that not only should development happen, but that it is possible for development to occur. Ziai combines the normative and practical assumptions calling the term it creates

'Development Business'. Lastly, there is the methodological assumption, meaning that states or nations can be universally scaled and measured. When taking all four assumptions together, they "determine that there are developed and less developed countries, but not which ones. They determine that 'development' should be achieved but not what it looks like and how" (Ziai 2015 p.127). Other assumptions by development theorist such as the developed are to be used as a model for the undeveloped, that interventions are based on expert knowledge thus creating legitimacy, and the global south needs modernization through a transfer of global north's capital, technology, and knowledge simply reinforce the core assumptions and are examples of how the assumptions are acted upon within the realm of 'development'. What development looks like and how it is conducted 'in the field' is left up to those who plan and implement development projects, which are based on their views on the subject of development.

Combining the two terms: various perspectives of sustainable development

As shown above, the terms sustainability and development are both widely used and interpreted by various authors and practitioners. When combined, the combinations of the two terms can create interpretations and usages which are often at odds with each other. For example, you can have the need for development (growth and progress) on one side and stability (safety and Environment) on the other (Brady et. al. 2015 p.27). Some authors even challenging the very use of the term 'Sustainable Development' as Rist (2007) argues that the WCED created a buzzword which "tried to reconcile the contradictory requirements to be met in order to protect the environment…and at the same time to ensure the pursuit of economic growth that was still considered a condition for general happiness… coining the catchy phrase 'sustainable development'" (p.487).

That catchy phrase has also become a boundary term as "scientific concerns, drawing from ecology, economics, and politics, merged with specific political and bureaucratic agendas in a process of mutual construction of both science and policy" (Scoones, 2007, p.592). The need to address sustainable development in a holistic way is well advocated by Brady et. al. in that sustainable development encompasses 4 perspectives 1) economic 2) ecological 3) social and 4) institutional, all of which are highly interrelated and complementary, which "builds a logical nexus between business profits and social good whereby entrepreneurs doing business in developing countries not only can enhance their own productivity, effectiveness, and efficiency to improve their financial positions but also contribute to the wellbeing of their (host) countries (2015 p.22). Even with the inclusion of all four elements, there is still a wide field of views on sustainable development which influences the how and what of such activities. Hopwood (2005) explores these views by placing the status quo, reformers, and transformationalist onto a spectrum (see figure 1).
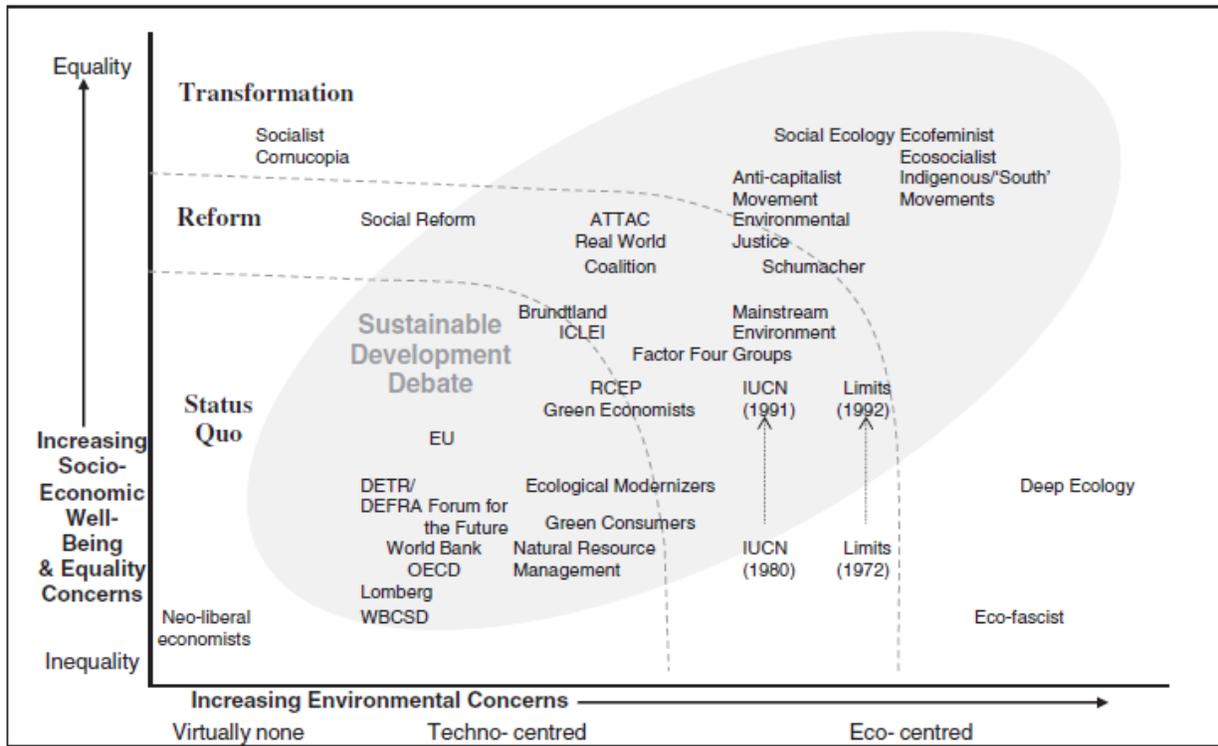
Figure 1. Mapping of views on sustainable development

Hopwood et. al., 2005 p. 41

The 'Status Quo' perspective within sustainable development recognize a need for change but do not see the problem(s) as unsurmountable and supports the idea of more (economic) growth and sees change through a managerial point of view (Hopwood et. al. 2005 p.42). Institutions such as the World Bank, International Monitary Fund and Bretton Wood, which all focuse soley on economic policies and growth without conciderations to social or enviormental concerns, would all fall under this perspective (Jolly 2005).

The 'Reform' perspective accepts that problems are mounting and challenges current policies but "do not consider that a collapse in ecological or social systems are likely or that fundamental change is necessary" (Hopwood et. al. 2005 p.43). Reformers highlight technology to protect the environment (weak sustainability). The reform

approach can be seen though Brady et. al.'s (2015) definition as well as the often quoted WCED's 1987 definition of sustainable development.

Transformationalist advocate and use terms such as social ecology, or dialectical naturalism often viewing 'sustainable development' at odds with 'justice', which is reflected by Marcous (1998). Furthermore, the Transformationalist perspective places a larger priority on ecological protection and the rights of minorities and marginalized, including indigenous peoples, more than the reformers or proponents of the status quo. Not only is there advocacy for grassroots movements, but their inclusion in various 'sustainable development' processes for the purpose of equity and governance (Hopwood et. al. 2005). A good definition of sustainable development from a transformationalist, who still assumes the term should still be used, comes from Chambers: "sustainable development means enhanced individual and community well-being and autonomy, with an integrated, equitable and just society" (p.174 1995). The inclusion of stakeholders has led to the area of study called 'local knowledge' and how 'host country nationals', 'stakeholders', 'beneficiaries', and 'indigenous peoples' view sustainable development and its programs, projects and activities.

Local Knowledge

As critical of using the term 'development' as Ziai is, the author presents three pragmatic alternatives to the use of the term (1) being more precise in language used such as 'social change' or 'global social policies', (2) measuring the qualities of different ways of living and compare them such as suicide, time spent fetching water, and cases of rape and (3) to use indigenous concepts of 'development' such as Buen Vivir, Sumak Kawsay, Ubuntu, and Haq (2013 p. 133 and 134). This final suggestion allows for a better

connection to the value of 'local knowledge' and connecting to those directly involved (often the beneficiaries) to the actions of 'sustainable development.' Cornwall connects with this sentiment when addressing the conflict between the global north's and south's concept ('ideology' in Cornwall's words) of 'good governance', how that conflict fails those efforts, and reclaiming meaning through reconfiguration will reclaim its meaning (2007, p.478).

To understand how local knowledge and how beneficiaries of 'sustainable development' can be effectively integrated into a program, we look to a case study by Friedner and Osborne which followed an NGO that audits and advocates for the public spaces in India, such as the railway and bus stations, to be universally accessible. The NGO incorporates their program's beneficiaries by using people with disabilities in the audits themselves. The authors argue that embodied participation, or 'using one's physical body' to make claims and exert their presence is an effective tool for the advocacy of universal access. The beneficiaries became 'experts' based upon their own experiences and "declaring that there is no access has the authority of objectivity more usually associated with scientific rather than activist claims" (Friedner and Osborne 2013 p.45). Such an incorporation of beneficiaries to participate and to have agency in the programs which in turn benefits them addresses many of the 'idyllic' notions of stakeholder theory.

Conclusions from Literature Review

The academic and practial field surrounding the term 'sustainable development' is full of various individuals, groups, and organizations each with their own idea of the term. Its vagueness allows for a mainstream agreement on the merits of it, while

empowering the staus quo to the transformationalists to argue their moral right to conduct activities in the name of it. For the field of Sustainable Development to move forward, is the solution to create a singular definition that everyone agrees upon or is it the responsibility of the practitioner to develop a 'meta-knowledge' of the term for the purpose of working within various conexts and stakeholders?

One singular definition would create more problems than the current vagueness that is currently seen. First, the process of creating one definition would in itself be a process of power dynamics as observed in dependency theory and as Cornwall argues "all things are subject to interpretation; whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth" (2007 p. 471). In addition to the currently assumed power dynamics within the field, a definition of 'sustainable development' would contain words and phrases used by the various persectives of the organizations found in figure 1, which does not nessisarily translate into other languages or cultures for "language does matter for development. Development's buzzwords are not only passwords to funding and influence; and they are more than the mere specialist jargon that is characteristic of any profession" (Cornwall 2007 p.471). Cornwall even points out that she decided to write her article in English and not in French because the term 'buzzword' is Anglophone and would have had to translate the term into 'la langue de bois' or 'language of the woods' meaning language that is vague or abstract (2007 p.473). As an non-fluent French speaker, I would have found it difficult to read a whole paper on the wood's language of sustainable development.

No, the solution for practitioners is not the definition of homoginization but one of "contextual empathy". It is the responsibility of practitoners to inquire, understand, and

use the various terms and meaning that are given by those involved in 'sustainable development'. This conclusion connects with Ziai's (2013) advocation for the understanding and use of indigenous concepts of 'development' such as Buen Vivir, Sumak Kawsay, Ubuntu, and Haq (p. 133 and 134), which allows for a closer connection to both the stakeholders involded and the practice of local knowledge within sustainable development activities. The use of local knowledge to construct a meaning of 'sustainable development' for the purpose of further understanding a program, activity, or project's beneficiaries' needs, values, and point of view(s) towards sustainable development has just begun to be explored. It is in this area that my inquiry will begin.

Research Methodology

For such a vague, well used term that 'sustianable development' knowledge construction is possible as show by Perey's work who argues that a "richer understanding of an organization's engagement with sustainability may be achieved with the deeper analysis of interview narratives from selected individuals" (2015 p.160). Though an ethnomethodology framework I have inquired about the local use, terms, and view surrounding 'sustainable development' within a specific local context. Ethnomethodology's use of meaning-making and reflexivity at a micro-level interaction allows participants to create their own local knowledge. As a result, I used a semi-structured interview, in-depth patterns from 'thick descriptions' of social life to help me produce knowledge that is "contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic" (Hesse-Biber 2011 p. 93). The semi-structured, 'active interview' encouraged the respondents to shift positions during the interview so they could explore alternative perspectives and stocks of knowledge, thus creating a holistic view of the term as best said by Wieck "how can I

know what I think until I see what I say?" (1995 p. 61, quoted from Perey 2015 p. 156).

Within a semi-structured interview, the participants not only created knowledge through the process of the interview, but practiced 'shared authority' between themselves and me during the interview process. This further allowed the research participants to use their own language, terms, and descriptions. This process also gave further strength to the local knowledge that is being created in 'real time'. After all, languages are nothing more than a huge collection of concepts, names for things, feelings, and ideas (Hoover 2011 p. 12).

For the purpose of triangulation, I conducted open participant observation within meetings and other 'in the field' activities during the research timeframe. These observations allowed me insight into how the participants' language and point of view manifested themselves in real time which advanced subjective perspectives regarding how the term sustainable development was used.

Participants/Sampling

I selected 5 research participants, through a convenence sample, from two Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating in Sierra Leone. I also used a 'snowball' referal process which expanded the participant number to 8. All research participants were employees within an NGO or a local Civil Service Society which is funded by the United Nation's Population Fund. The staff selected directly run or support 'in the field' projects, programs, or activities that they or their organization consider as being sustainable development.

The interview process

I conducted the interviews in a semi-structured interview allowing the participants to explore different thoughts, ideas, and stories relating to sustainable development. As

part of the introduction to the interview I adapted Perey's (2015) approach of describing the term sustainable development instead of defining it. The description was a combined product of my own research into sustainable development with the inclusion of local terms and ideas that I had heard during my work here in Sierra Leone:

> Sustainable Development is about balancing different needs, wants and values to maintain and improve the lives of people, their community, and their culture. Sustainable development is often used to talk about balancing the environmental stability and economic development but some have included social and institutional needs as well. Sustainable development covers a wide area that includes terms and ideas that you may be familiar with such as health promotion, outreach, gender equality, good governance, climate change, fair trade, end poverty, social justice, and social entrepreneurship.

This helped the interviewees by creating a reference point while reducing the risk of prompting the participant to a definition they assume the I would want to hear.

Data analysis

I analyzed the interview transcripts and my participant observation notes and identifed patterns and emerging themes. I then analyzed the individual points of view within Hopwood's sustainable development spectrum (2005). This creates a reference for myself and the reader to understand the lens through which the other findings are seen. Lastly, I used my open participant observations to triangulate and expand the perspectives given by research participants. Further qualification of words, ideas, etc, helped create a holistic picture of how sustainable development is viewed and used within the local context.

Findings and Discussion

The findings attenanded from the interviews in relation to Hopwood's sustainable development spectrum (2005) proves difficult to place them neatly within the Status Quo, Reform, or Transformation perspectives. Many of the interviewees adressed concerns about equality in areas of women, people with diabilities, and the impoverished. This places most interviewees high on the equality axis. However, environmental concerns were not mentioned while there were many examples of techno-centered examples of development such as farming equipment, cell phone towers, roads, schools, hospitals, and hand pumps. These examples however do not cleanly align with 'weak sustainability' because these technologies were not talked about within the context of replacing natural capital with man made capital. In fact, these technologies were given as examples for developing people such as: "The government comes and gives farming machine, but you have the human resource. The internship program. You create yourself. You self-employ". The low consciousness surrounding environmental concerns places the interviewees' views on the environment in the low or virtually none category.

The high equality, low environmental concern findings can place many, if not all the interviewees under the 'reform' view of Hopwood's sustainable development spectrum (2005), placing them in a triangle between Social Reform, ATTAC, and Brundtland. The difficulty in placing them 'neatly' into the reform perspective comes from the various diviations from mainstream 'reform' thought. While this gives a reference point for the rest of the findings, the way in which sustainabile development, together or separate, are percived by local staff loosly connects to the mainstream thinking and various articles reviewed within this paper.

Sustainability

There is a closer connection to the literature when the interviewees used the term sustainablity separately from development. In the same vain as Marcuse (1998) and Perey (1995), many took to simply define sustainability as many interviewees defined the term as "continuity, sustainable is to continue, to maintain…". From this starting point, the local perspective on sustainability was about keeping or maintaining the current level of development that has been attained.

Two of the interviewees, from two different organizations, made comments that sustainability cannot occur until you already have development or put in a different way: "…with development, people can develop themselves or maybe a community that has already developed themselves. They have a lot of water wells, latrines, schools, markets, health center, mmm, so how can you sustain the development? So you look at the community ------ and after we develop ourselves first, how can we sustain?". This perspective ties sustainability and development together as there is a desire from local staff to keep the tangible development maintained. To highlight another example, within my practicum work, I was working with a group of women about coming together to help each other with digging and constructing latrines for their homes, they asked me if I would be supplying the concreate and other 'imported' materials. I told them that it would be expensive and that using local materials such as wood and a thatched roof, would be much cheaper and sustainable. They replied by saying that locally constructed latrines were not sustainable because the organic materials would have to be rebuilt every 2-3 years. In this example, sustainability is related to the concept of 'long-lasting' or able to keep the development, as long as possible.

While many interviewees, if not all of them, gave examples of infrastructure as a type of development that needs to be sustained, one interviewee described the process of empowering local staff as an example of sustainability:

> In the old days, the partners in the US where controlling everything, ok do this policy, do that policy, but that is not sustainable because they are kind of doing that all abroad, so last year they came and said ok now we are giving more autonomy to the Sierra Leoneans to run the program… because we are on the ground we can see what happen we can just way that this can improve or ok this is not applicable or this is not healthy or sustainable because once the partners leave, you know, once the white ones leave, the program collapses because they bring in their own policies and how to do things, you know, without us having a say and that has to change. We will be much happier and we are able to make the change we need. That will be much better because we are developing leaders. You know I cannot be here forever. I need to start thinking about bringing someone up. You know, one way that your leadership can last is for you to take people and bring them up. So we try for do everything we can with leadership training, to grow more leaders so that the leadership can go on and on. So that someone can say I am ready and can step in quick.

The shift from donor control to localized self autonomy through leadership and staff empowerment not only recognizes the value of local staff and their knowledge but highlights a form of sustainability that is an example of 'corporate sustainability' because the donors wish to create an organization that practices responsible management of social, economic and natural capital (Montiel 2008). The idea of maintaining or continuing development was repeated, in some form or other, by the interviewees.

Development

The local staff interviewees' use of the term development aligns loosely with the modernization theory of the development literature. In connection to the modernization theory, many interviewees saw development as a tangible goal or thing which can be possessed. Development was talked about when infrastructure projects were mentioned. In fact, communication, roads, and healthcare where classified under development by all but one of the interviewees. The local perspective on development contrasted with modernization theory's assumptions in two ways. The first is that development is unidirectional as one interviewee explained that "there are two types of development, progressive development and regressive development. You can start as the president and end as a cleaner, that is backward development…however, I want to believe that your focus here is on progressive development, looking forward (he laughs)". This regressive development perspective also challenges a second assumption of modernization theory in that it assumes that stakeholders involved will not want to 'go back' to the state before development despite the fact that some stakeholders are harmed in the process. An anecdote I was told during one of the interviews sheds light into the conflict of stakeholders being harmed by development and their attempt to 'go back' to life before. The community of Binkolo recently received several solar powered streetlights down the main road of the town. While this improved road safety and encouraged night time activates including shops staying open later and school kids using the lights to study, there was a group who attempted to break or steal the lights or batteries. This group of community members complained that it disrupted their traditional male society activities, as many of the events required secrecy and the lights allowed non-members to view parts of their ceremonies.

Not all development was infrastructure focused. Terms like empowerment, gender equality, and added value were used by a few of the interviewees. The strongest example of this came from the director of a program which works with orphans effected by the civil war and the recent Ebola outbreak by connecting them with extended family members:

added value, yeah, added value to people's lives, we take care of 6 different dimensions... the social needs, the nutritional needs, you know the intellectual, we train the children, we send them to school, we provide school things, everything to have them stay in school this organization does. Then we have to take care of the, we take care of the psychology part of it ... to make sure that they are able to integrate back into the community, we make sure that we council them but also that the community accepts them. We also strengthen the families; we provide some micro-finance. We bring the families in that are vulnerable and we train them on micro-finance and we teach them how to take care of a businesses and how to do savings, so when you take that all, those become sustainable features...we want to make sure that when the organization leaves them, that they are able to take care of themselves in all these ways

Development from a local perspective is seen as both infrastructural and personal development with the acknowledgement that issues may arise causing such development to become 'regressive'. The challenge and acknowledgement of development's mortality creates a uniquely local perspective of the term 'sustainable development' as discussed in the next section.

Sustainable Development

Three of the interviewees proposed their own definitions of sustainable development which can be summed up as "advancement that can be sustained in continuity". An interesting note to highlight was that one interviewee defined sustainable

development by using the WCED's definition nearly verbatim. When asked how he came to such a definition, he told me that he was currently studying for a sustainable development degree with a focus on organizational sustainability. His definition should not be considered an 'outlier' in any sense of the term because while he defined sustainable development in this way early into the interview, his perspective shifted to talk about sustainable development in term of empowerment, communication, and infrastructure similar to other interviewees.

Beyond defining sustainable development, many interviewees discussed various aspects of sustainable development that can be placed into two strong themes: feedback loops and good governance. When the interviewees were talking about Sustainable Development there was a common thread surrounding the 'next step' of development which would create a feedback loop and create a positive impact on the family, community, or country. Beyond maintaining the current level of development, usually infrastructure projects, there was mentality and hope that those that have been impacted by development would 'pay it forward'. Many interviewees gave examples of school children being able to go to school, who would "at the end of the day, they, after a while, the girls go to college and after graduation they come and do development in their communities. Project writing, and in other ways to do development." Sustainable development from a local perspective is seen as a means that impacts the current generation and the future's development and wellbeing.

The use of sustainable development, and to some extent the use of development was connected to the government's involvement in their citizens' lives. Three interviewees discussed how the involvement, or lack thereof the government's

involvement had negative or indirect consequences for the communities. The first aspect of good governance which connects to sustainable development highlights the issues of infrastructure or tech-focused development by the government that do not include sustainability within their projects: "The federal government or the local government, they come into this community, and they come with their projects and building latrines and water wells, health centers. So, we here have to sustain this development. But again, we have achieved a few of these areas, like the health center and a few pumps and we have to sustain them because if we don't they will stop giving us water. Is that not so? So, looking at the schools we need to sustain them so that the school children can go there the whole year and get an education.".

The second aspect of good governance that connects with sustainable development is the challenge of government projects which do not address the human resource aspect and the issue of the government misplacing projects. The challenge of human resources can include government projects that provide farming, carpentry, metal works and other equipment or facilities without any trainings or 'growth' opportunities and on the other side of human resources, there is the issue of the government simply "putting the right man in the wrong place". Within many of the interviews, the topic of good governance was not connected to advocacy or 'grassroots' movements. However, during my experience working within Binkolo, there was been the creation of a co-operative for people with disabilities, which have included the advocacy of their human and civil rights as part of their mission.

The local context's perspective of sustainable development can be compared and contrasted with the current schools of thought and literature. Many of the participants can

be seen as placing a high value on equity with little to no value on environmental protection. Sustainability to them was not seen as environmental sustainability but a focus on maintaining the current level of development had by an individual, community, or nation. Examples of development were primarily tech or infrastructure projects but there was a consciousness to develop or 'promote' themselves. Both types of development were understood to a goal or tangible possession with the understanding and fear that once it was gained, it could be lost due to its own mortality. Combining sustainability and development, many participants pointed to good governance as necessary for healthy sustainable development and in many cases, participants expected those who benefited from development to 'pay it forward' in a positive feedback loop to their families, community and nation.

Conclustion

The mainstream school of thought surrounding sustainable development contains numerous terms, assumptions, and perspectives which creates a field of myriad meanings. As the academic literature attempts to understand this wide field, the perspectives have only grown instead of solidifying into a consensus. This paper presented a literature review that explored the current views and perspectives of how the terms 'sustainable' and 'development' independently are used and how combined into 'sustainable development, create even more perspectives and concepts with sometimes conflicting meanings. This paper showed the difficulties of using the term sustainable development as a practitioner 'in the field' and argues that practitioners should have a meta-knowledge of the wide uses of the term(s) for the purpose of creating a locally contextual meaning of sustainable development through the use of local knowledge. Through the research, I have shown that it is possible to work with local staff to form a locally specific view

of 'sustainable development'. The findings show that the local views and perspectives do connect to some of the mainstream school of thought on sustainable development such as sustainability seen as maintaining and development as infrastructure or technologically focused. However, because local perspectives may diverge significantly from the conventional literature, it is important for practitioners not to make immediate assumptions about how the term sustainable development is understood.

Within a localized context, words matter and how those words are used and the meanings behind them shape the way work surrounding sustainable development is perceived by local stakeholders and translates 'in the field'. As practitioners of sustainable development, possessing a 'meta-knowledge' of the sustainable development literature and creating a unique 'contextual empathy' for the working environment you find yourself in is important. Differences in perspective and word usage is not necessarily inherently a negative thing. If the literature on the subject has not reached a consensus, why would practitioners expect every context to have the same perspective of sustainable development. The ability for practitioners to create a 'contextual empathy' for their unique work has two strong advantages. The first is the creation of a meta-knowledge allows you to understand the various viewpoints of your organization and others working within it. This meta-knowledge can to be taken a step farther, allowing you to compare and contrast the local context usage and perspective. The second is effectiveness of communicating ideas. If you assume that the terms and its usage are the exact same as other peoples' when there is a divergent or even opposite understanding of those terms, issues in stakeholder buy-in and the long-term acceptance of sustainable development activities can be in jeopardy.

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