Article

A question of identity

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We are pleased to present this special issue of the *World Journal of Science, Technology and Sustainable Development* entitled, “The multiple identities of sustainable development: towards a convergent definition.” The genesis of this special issue goes back to the London 2013 meetings of the World Association of Sustainable Development, where international delegates from a variety of fields discussed at length the importance of a shared understanding of sustainable development among academics and practitioners alike. The unquestionable underlying theme of the conference was the pressing need to conduct research that unifies diverse approaches and fields.

Understanding how principles of sustainable development permeate organizational life is important, as many organizations are now making strategic decisions grounded in some conceptualization of these principles. At the same time, a desired environment of collaboration among multiple stakeholder groups is still intangible. As governmental policies are developed, corporate strategies are formulated, educational curriculum revised, infrastructure investments made, and so on, a need for global collaboration cannot be overstated. In previous articles, we have argued and advocated for the importance of developing meaning based on a shared understanding of what sustainable development means (Ratiu and Anderson, 2014a,b) and shown how these meanings trickle down to the general public.

Through the special issue, we sought papers that address the issues associated with understandings and how to move towards convergence in defining sustainable development. Some of the submissions were conceptual, while others were empirical. The papers published cover a number of important themes, including human sensitivity towards nature, the social domain of sustainable development, and industry effects.

In her paper entitled “Human sensitivity towards nature: eastern and western perspectives,” Anne Randerson argues that sustainable development is best understood by exploring how humans relate to nature. She shows how eastern and western perspectives towards nature are different and how a reconciliation of these would lead to a stronger shared understanding of the principles guiding sustainable development.

To take the cultural and social argument further, in “Unlocking the social domain in sustainable development” Monica Thiel argues that the key variable to consider in this debate is knowledge fragmentation. She proposes that an underdeveloped social domain leads to knowledge being dispersed and fragmented, which, in turn, reduces the chances for definitional convergence, as different stakeholders fail to participate in the same conversations. Furthermore, she maintains that a poorly developed social domain prevents an in-depth examination that would allow

individuals and organizations to build shared understandings of sustainable development.

The paper entitled “The multiple identities of sustainability” picks up where Thiel’s paper leaves off, by examining precisely the different ways in which various professional social domains define priorities for action around sustainable development. The domains explored are: government, higher education, corporate, and the trades. While general principles are acknowledged among these broad areas, significant differences exist. This paper proposes that, instead of reconciling these diverse perspectives, we might focus on constructing shared understandings around critical values.

A similar effort is proposed by Lijo John and Gopalakrishnan Narayanamurthy in their paper, “Converging sustainability definitions: industry independent dimensions,” where they argue that shared understandings should be built based on commonalities of practice among different industry sectors, rather than within industries. The study proposes a model of generally applicable variables and validates the concept of industry independence through a systematic review of literature that covers industrial contexts as varied as, automobile manufacturing, cement and concrete, electronics, mining, pharmaceuticals, to name a few.

Finally, in the paper “Resource-efficient construction: rethinking construction towards sustainability,” Eleni Sfakianaki focuses on the industrial environment of construction and applies principles of sustainable development to this context, thereby emphasizing the importance of stakeholder commitment to and engagement in sustainability.

These five works offer a diversity of views on sustainable development and make a solid attempt at offering a convergent theory of sustainable development. Whether focusing on the philosophical and cultural perceptions of nature (Randerson), the social domain of knowledge creation and sharing (Thiel), the various domains of human activity (Ratiu and Anderson), or the industrial contexts in which sustainable development principles are to be applied (John and Sfakianaki), the authors’ emphasis is on building shared meaning.

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References

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