

# THE SOCIAL NETWORK SITES AND THE GOVERNANCE OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

The social network sites are becoming more and more complex communities of social dialogue, involving themselves in the governance processes. The stakeholders in different fields are getting engaged to rebuild the institutional capacity and the consensus process. The present paper tries to analyse few mechanisms that enforce online social network sites to play a role in the sustainable development governance. Is there a possibility for these virtual communities to become useful instruments of sustainable development? Do have the social networks the capacity to command and control the economic activity?

**Keywords:** *sustainable development, social network sites, good governance, globalisation, ICT trends.*

**J.E.L. Classification:** *O33, Q56.*

## Introduction

The transformation process towards a sustainable economy requires significant progress in knowledge, human creativity and universal participation. It is clear now that new institutions are necessary to be designed and enforced, in order to respond to sustainable needs. A complex process of capacity building will emerge and all other economic activities must decouple from a *business as usual* approach and involve more and more in sustainable vision, action and management.

Nevertheless the human system must evolve towards a totally harmonized coexistence with ecosystems, in which the economic flows are floating on the ecosystem processes. This means that economic activities should follow the environmental changes, should not put a pressure on the ecosystem to provide the required resources, when the natural resources are hard to get. The ecosystem processes are uncontrollable, the same as the seasons. The climate change implies a transformational process of the economy as well, due to the fact that many of the common economic activities have to adapt to the new ecosystem processes. The human system is operating for the moment on an automatic pilot, showing the lead to required resources, trying to reach the maximum productivity and value added, without considering the dynamics of the environment and the planet. The pressure generated by the exploitation of the natural resources, the extensive agriculture and land use, could provoke, in the conditions of climate change, uncertain effects on the ecosystem. For instance, if none would expect changes in the precipitation amounts in an area that didn't suffer any water shortages during the recorded statistics, the continuous exploitation of hydropower or other extensive use of waters, could lead to an increasing water risk for that area.

A sustainable development process should be governed in a perfect correlation between the human economic activities and the ecosystem processes. Otherwise, the nature's

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resilience could be badly affected or even worse the negative phenomena, like flooding, landslide, earth quakes or bushfires could intensify, which irremediably would affect the human system. For a sustainable governance to happen, the sustainable development requires an extended democracy. The sustainable economy governance is characterized by several key principles, which are different of those described by the actual governance system.

This paper tries to reveal the importance of the social network sites (SNS) in the light of the recent developments. It is not an empirical study on the impact of the social web on the sustainable transformational process, as there is little scientific evidence on that sense. Instead, the paper tries to identify new mechanisms of how such a process can be conducted through social networks and how a consensus may be attained.

This article might have a contribution in redefining the social choice mechanisms (SCM) of human systems in relation to ecosystems and bringing a new dimension, of the online social networks, as the most cohesive delocalized society. This opens up a large theoretical discussion whether the online based community can generate the preconditions to apply the Coase theorem, with implicit efficiency (R. Coase, 1971).

There are of course a number of questions and barriers for these mechanisms to be enforced, but rather this is a question in itself whether it is feasible and desirable that social networks gained such extends, are they a threat or an opportunity of institutional enforcement for liberal democracies?

What are the social networks and how are they used by people?

How it is accepted and promoted in social networks the sustainable development concept?

Are online social networks changing the institutional approach whereby societies make their decisions on sustainable development?

### **1. Governance principles of a sustainable economy**

In a way of speaking, as a basic condition, the sustainable development to happen it needs to be sustained. The public support of the idea of sustainability, as we are aware of (Brundtland Commission, 1987), has risen due to many economic and social developments worldwide and due to negative and unwilling experiences with the environment. More recently, the market failures and the inefficient use of public finance have led to exacerbating imbalances in social and economic indicators, worsening of public finance in many of the democratic states, which eventually induced the economic crisis. The response to the economic crisis, which is totally accompanied by the financial crisis, has to be found only in sustainable solutions. More and more, people are becoming aware of the fact that financial bailouts eventually reflect in their own pocket, that no one can solve global crisis, by inducing temporary anaesthesia, instead of attacking the very causes of the economic fluctuations, which are derived from the unsustainable way of doing business and consumption.

It is clear now that the economic processes in a globalized world cannot afford to continue on an unsustainable basis, despite the up-valued wellbeing created by now. The reverse is reflected by several unacceptable trade-offs, like: natural resources depletion, poverty and social inequalities, climate change, large scale unemployment, natural disasters and financial defaults. All these aspects are definitely trespassing “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs.”

The transformational process towards a sustainable economy has emerged merely due to technological progress and social cohesion rather than a political decision to move things forward, nor as a market consequence. From that starting point, many governments and the market have sensed the pulse and tried to take leadership in the process. The European Union

engaged itself in establishing targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and creating a coherent agenda for a transformational process towards a low-carbon economy. Huge developments have taken place all over the world, as the sustainable development is foreseen as the most important topic of the XX-th century. In that sense, many governments and leaders envisaged that positioning themselves on the market in a favourable course would bring them the winner award in this global contest. Instead of seeing the process as a global contest, it should be argued that the sustainable process requires a different governance approach as the ones we were accommodated with.

The main challenge of the sustainable development governance is to coordinate sector policies at different levels, in order to balance economic, social and environmental goals, which are in conflict (Nita, 2012). This type of governance requires important interventions, coordinated policies and cooperation between stakeholders, at global, national or local level. The leadership needs to be accepted globally or at least in the democratic world as rising from the bottom line of the population and not as a push forward from any type of government or corporation board. And this is due to the fact that sustainability consists of a behavioral change at the individual level, related to any aspect of the lifestyle, health, education and prosperity. (Furtado, 2000)

The basic principles on which a sustainable economy must rely on are the following (Brian Milani, 2005):

- **Self-organizing and self-regulation:** the role of the state evolves from supervision and often leadership to coordination, which means decentralization of management and institutions. New institutions are needed in order to undertake command and control of economic processes. Self-organizing, self-design and self-regulation are based on smart networks, which coordinates themselves. These are bottom-up hierarchies and in comparison with actual hierarchies, the bottom levels are the most relevant.
- **Decentralization:** individuals are more and more getting involved in decision making processes, the public opinions are accepted and the local forces are enabled. The crowd is not a crowd anymore, it becomes a comprehensive executive board;
- **Diversity:** the health and stability of every human system seem to depend on diversity of products, species and regions. This applies to all levels of organization, from human body to social system and ecosystem;
- **The economic flows are designed and controlled in a perfect coordination with ecosystem flows,** the economy follows the sun, the energy regeneration, the hydrologic cycle, the vegetation and the local by-products. Adaptation to climate change should not be a day to day challenge of the government and people, the governance has to take the natural flows as the way to live with;
- **The participative democracy:** in order to generate flexicurity and resilience, the sustainable economy requires a high level of participation. The direct involvement of communities in decision making, in institution building, command and control requires a high degree of transparency of information and a perfect reliability of communication technologies.
- **Human creativity:** in order to substitute natural resources with services, technology and knowledge, the innovative capacity of human beings must be valued and capitalized. The quality of creativity stands in altruistic attitudes for giving something real and valuable to society. Thus, the social values, esthetical and spiritual features become essential for the economic efficiency by itself.
- **Strategic spatial design and building:** land design and landscapes lead to important gains in effectiveness. New integrated designs are required, to conceive an elegant

combination of natural ambient and a sustainable use of space. The conservation of energy and space efficiency have a major impact over the economy.

## 2. What are the social network sites?

In the past 20 years, there were three developments in communication technology that gave reasons to design an information society. These three ICT developments underlie the explosion of the *social web*: (Willard, 2009).

- Mobile Communications – extending Internet access through a new generation of mobile phones and handheld computers;
- Social Media – enabling individuals to easily upload their own content (text, photos, video) and to find (and discuss) the content generated by others;
- Online Social Networking – enabling people to maintain and to extend their personal and professional networks, as well as to facilitate the flow of information, comments and opinions through these networks.

From the recent developments, which were produced even faster than the other three already mentioned, the OER (open education resources) and the rise of big data configure the spectrum of a new image of the world.

- Open Education Resources – a global classroom, where people learn and share knowledge, keep the pace with current trends and improve skills.
- Big Data tools – using great volumes of information to understand how the world looks like, having the global picture of things, values and preferences without needing to look back of the reasons why.

These five technologies are extending the possibilities to linking people, ideas and institutions together in new ways. They have enabled society to begin turning its knowledge into something good—for themselves and for their communities (Shirky, 2008). Individuals who weren't involved in the public debates until now are gaining access to platforms enabling them to challenge the status quo (Godin, 2009) and to imagine what non-hierarchical participative government might act like (Us Now). Sharing proficient knowledge to anyone, of which only a selective cohort could have benefited up until now, is leading to an unprecedented openness of mind and clearness. Higher education can no longer be a contextual self-accomplishment of an individual taking a prominent route of cumulative factors, but a possibility of each person to comprehend, to improve and to share knowledge. Considering the big data revolution, statistical analyses will move to a higher level, researchers and policy makers will no longer look for the causes of the events, they will understand what is simply going on only by having put together massive quantities of information that the Internet is offering. Whilst statistics operate with the past, relevant information is bringing us to the present. Only by sharing preferences and options, each node of social community is defining how the world looks like, having the almost complete image of societal DNA.

The social networks are a new form of “social contagion” (Christakis, 2008), which determines powerful mechanisms for rapidly transforming and shifting social norms. *A social network is a social structure made of nodes, individuals or organizations that are tied by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as values, visions, ideas, financial exchange, friendship, kinship, dislike, conflict or trade* (Willard, 2009). In the past 20 years, through the spectacular development of the communication technology, the social networks have grown on a web-based platform. The social network sites (SNSs) are “*web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system*” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

E-skills UK (2009) have determined the rise of social computing among few other globally emerging trends in ICT that will particularly influence the global governance. The social computing, mainly represented by online social networks, now has a branch of business oriented platform, which is entitled Web 2.0. , which shifts customer-company relationships on the web to peer-to-peer social networks. Unlike web storefronts, these channels are not controlled by companies; but by communities of interest. This is already an important step the social networks took towards a governance platform. The involvement of stakeholders in different businesses, specialists in various domains and industries could generate the level of participation and decision making processes necessary to define a governance process.

The social network sites are now seen as a part of Web 2.0 that aimed to enhance creativity, communications, information sharing and functionality of the Web. (Wikipedia, Web 2.0)

The first social network site was SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997. The users could send messages and post bulletin board items to people in their first, second and third degrees, and see their connection to any other user on the site. Online social networking began to develop as a component of business Internet strategy around March 2005 when Yahoo launched Yahoo! 360°. (Willard, 2009)

Now, the most accessed SNS reunite millions of users worldwide and the organization shift from communities of interests to people you might know. Facebook has countered more than 1 billion users worldwide. Facebook, Twitter, MySpace or Cyworld are the most common and used social networks. Many of the users access the sites daily. Facebook surpassed Google and Yahoo with users spending 12.7% of their time at the website. Smartphone users spent 87% of the time on mobile apps for SNS and only 13% of the time on the web. (Nielsen Media Research, 2013)

Which are the main characteristics of social networks that can enforce a social choice mechanism?

- 1) The unlimited number of participants – a social network has the capacity and the conditions to become universal. It is user friendly, it is free and it is fun. For the moment, it is being limited by the penetration rate of the Internet, but on short to medium time this will not be an impediment anymore;
- 2) Self-organized and self-controlled: except the international norms of security and communication, there is no other form of management that imposes rules over participants. The main source of financing is advertising. But advertising doesn't involve a huge logistic capacity and it doesn't replace the purpose the SNS was created, for people to freely interact. There are some social network sites that require subscription fees form premium services, but this is not a large practice. The expected revenues in 2012 in advertising in social networking worldwide reached \$8.8 billion, an increase of 46% YOY. (socialnetworkingwatch.com, 2012)
- 3) The bottom-up hierarchy: there is not command and control as in the classic meaning. Command and control comes from bargaining and the leadership comes from the bottom level of individuals;
- 4) Participative democracy is guaranteed by the number of participants having equal rights and equal options to communicate, to promote ideas, to deny or to argue. The leadership is self-generated through bargaining and dissemination of information;
- 5) Information transparency: in democratic states, the web platforms make impossible the prohibition of information. More than this, the dissemination of information widely and unrestricted is one of the basic principles of networking;
- 6) The cost of participation is null. There is no fee for registration, site access, information or users account, except occasional fees for some premium services (as is the case for LinkedIn).

The institutional function of command and control can be gradually decentralized to a more cohesive and participative community of dialogue. The prospect of participative democracy which implies a direct and unrestrictive access of individuals to a decision making process can be easily identified with a social network.

The importance of the bottom level of participants and the originally bottom-up design of online networks create the premises of a wide institutional building that might lead a transformational process towards sustainable development. As it was stated above, the basic principles that define a sustainable economy are more synergetic and navel related to communities rather than other centralized forms of governance.

The most intrinsic value of a social network is the individual himself, having the status quo, the culture and the creativity to determine what is socially best for his own.

There are more and more examples of social networks that have the capacity to change social norms, regulations and even governments. The social networking can generate the fastest mechanism of self-organizing the world has ever met.

The recent unrests in the Arab World (2010), the *Arabian spring*, the *occupy movement* in the US, the riots in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey (2010 – 2013) have shown up the incommensurable power the social networks have gained during the past seven years. Since the US Presidential election, when the actual President Obama obviously gained support using the social network sites and platforms to spread his message, we actually face an increasing social movement on all around the world through all media support, but mainly through social networks on the Internet.

The increased civil unrest in Egypt and Tunisia was due to complaints and manifests of anger against regimes on social networks. In a *New York Times* (2011) article by Kareem Fahim and Mona El-Naggar, titled “*Broad Protests across Egypt Focus Fury on Mubarak*”, the authors demonstrate the importance Facebook played in the organization of the protests. Fahim and El-Naggar argue, “*More than 90,000 people signed up on a Facebook page for the Tuesday, January 25, 2011 protests; framed by the organizers as a stand against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment.*” In many of these countries, the government has completely or partially cut off Internet access during protests, especially since protesters have been using sites such as Twitter and Facebook to organize and gather support. When the Internet access was released, the phenomenon was impossible to be controlled.

Another effect of the social networking is the transparency of information. More often lately, the information provided through other channels, like television or newspapers is suspected by the public opinion as being manipulated, distorted in its content or substance by different stakeholders that exert control over the sources of information. The self-organizing function of SNS determines a diffusion of information from each node to every user and the information is filtered from different perspectives, reducing the possibility of distortion on a certain direction.

The recent *Wikileaks* phenomenon, despite its risk and security dimension, can be assumed as a transfer of power from the security and intelligence institutions around the world to communities, in the sense that the information is a containment of power and who controls information gains power. Through big data tools, although limited for the moment by hardware processing capacity, each node can become the holder of the intrinsic value of information. Although the implications and risks are multiple, the social networking created the platform for information transparency.

### **3. Social networking and the sustainable development**

What is of particular interest in the case of online social networking is the fact that the participant voluntarily agrees to engage in certain behaviour, he becomes a citizen in a virtual community, no matter of his truly commitment or social responsibility in his living

community. The argument of this allegation is that the antisocial behaviour is cut off in this manner. One cannot become violent or aggressively impose his own opinion as he is imminently excluded from the virtual community. The participation and commitment are also a free choice. Instead, one gets support if his arguments are reasonable, as long as the basic principles of networking are observed. We can assume that the social networking is the most democratic community of dialogue.

The reasons of this fact are indeed the large participation of individuals, having equal powers and chances. They have the right to join the community and to leave whenever they want. They can easily interact to each other and bargain with insignificant cost of transactions. As already mentioned, these are important conditions for sustainable development governance. There is scientific evidence about the chain reactions among people on particular trends to follow. Same as the applauses, the social contagion on the Internet increases either if a lot of people in the wider world is describing a trend or if some closer friends are doing so (BBC World, 2013).

There are already specific SNS that promote or support sustainable development.

- stand-alone mechanisms, as cheaper and easiest platforms to promote sustainable ideas, niche products and services and to generate sustainable communities.

The most well-known social networks treat the sustainable development as stand-alone. These networks don't explicitly discuss sustainable development, but the issues around the members organize stand at the core of sustainability.

Examples of such networks are: <http://www.takingitglobal.org> , <http://www.change.org>

- specific issues and develop targeted strategies, like:
  - Corporate Social Responsibility, <http://www.justmeans.com/>, in which individuals and companies discuss the environmental responsibility,
  - Sustainable consumption:  
<http://www.sustainlane.com>, <http://www.people4earth.net/>
  - Climate change:  
<http://makemesustainable.com/>, <http://www.edenbee.com/>
- „think globally act locally”

Many sustainable development online communities have embraced the notion of „think globally act locally”. These communities have embraced sustainability concepts and ideas and try to develop understandings of the challenges facing a region, a resource and to give solutions.

The support of information the social networks share is enormous, but it is almost impossible to measure the impact, because of the decentralized nature of social networks and their rapid growth.

The SNS appear to be one of the trends in ICT that have huge impact in governance and society. The benefits of this fact are that this trend is pushing forward democracy and a more transparent and connected governance.

The mechanisms of governance that social networks can use in order to influence global governance are:

- The use of online social networks to influence political view, to enhance civic education, to support political campaigns that are oriented towards sustainability;
- To use the SNS as an instrument to increase transparency of information, as it is the case of Wikileaks, but not necessarily and the big data tools. The transparency of governance is more important for individuals to take sustainable behaviour even without any subsidies or incentives;
- To support groups and organizations that promote sustainable regulations and incentives;

- To promote and legitimate individuals that have the leadership ability and have the capacity to assume leadership on sustainable development issues;
- To deliver and to induce action among people. Whether they are proper example or not, the recent developments of protests and unrests showed the SNS have the capacity to engage people. People act only when they engage in relationships and gain trust in each other. SNS are the emerging trusting platforms, because people rely on the values they voluntarily agreed to join, when developing profiles on SNS;
- Through SNS, the business environment can be attracted to share knowledge that can be used by communities to be part of sustainable development and to act in that sense.

The actions people might take to get involved in social networks would raise the potential of social networks in the governance process. This would include professionals that work for the interest of the online community, employees, especially in the public sector, to establish and enhance policies and regulations for the sustainable agenda, organisations, associations and networks to create their own out of the box network.

All the activists must ensure they get more effective and sense-making action. People have to be more aware of the impact of open source and social networking around the world and have to increase commitment to make good decisions for their lives. The sustainable institutions must be supported so that the networking power to increase.

### **Conclusions**

In the past 20 years, there were several developments in communication technology that gave reasons to design an information society: mobile communications, social media, online social networks, open education resources and big data tools.

One of the most significant trends in ICT that will have a great influence on the global governance is the online social networking. The way the SNS are engaging people, disseminating information and creating attitudes demonstrated the power and the growth of this social contagion phenomenon over the past seven years.

This paper tried to identify new mechanisms of social choice that can be conducted through social networks and how a consensus can be attained related to issues of sustainable development.

Giving the particularities of sustainable development governance, the social network sites can be a valuable instrument that ensures participative democracy, transparency of information and governance, political pressure to enforce new regulations, support to leadership and a large channel to transform behaviour from ideas into actions.

The most intrinsic value of a social network is the individual himself, bringing his culture and his creativity to determine what is socially best for his own. Despite the commitment in his real community, with which very often the individual is not on the same frequency or despite the values the social and economic context determine to the individual, with the SNS profile, the unbiased individual can embrace the values he really identifies with. From this to the next step of critical mass, the distance becomes less relevant for any entity to have the possibility to stop.

There are more and more examples of social networks that have the capacity to change social norms, regulations and even governments. The social networking can generate the fastest mechanism of self-organizing the world has ever met.

The knowledge of professionals and organizations in matters of sustainable development can be shared to community and the community may use the knowledge in order to fulfil a sustainable agenda.



Sustainable development SNS already exist and the most of them are organized based on the principle of *think globally act locally*. There is a prominence of *out of the box* reason which addresses the niche products, regions or topics.

Although there is a real impact of the social networking over sustainable awareness among people, it is impossible to measure any financial or social impact, giving the rate of growth and the decentralized feature of the phenomenon.

There is instead a lot to do in order to use the whole social networking capacity to disseminate civic education and to try to avoid the information dispersion through small networks, as there is a risk for out-of-dating the sustainable development agenda. The process has already begun, having open education resources and big data tools as the main leading factors to ensure good governance.

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