

Embedded value systems in sustainability evaluation tools and their implication, by Gasparatos, Alexandros

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ABSTRACT

Embedded value systems in sustainability evaluation tools and their implication

This paper explores certain implications that arise with the selection of a sustainability evaluation tool. Tools such as monetary analysis, biophysical models, composite indicators and multi-criteria analysis have been employed in the past to evaluate the sustainability of projects and policies.

Nevertheless such tools embrace a number of assumptions that essentially articulate what is considered relevant data, how data is to be handled as well as who and in which capacity (i.e. role), should be considered during the decision making process. These assumptions are in effect embedded value systems (Gasparatos et al., in press). From this starting point this paper conceptualises the different sustainability evaluation tools mentioned earlier as value articulating institutions. Inevitably, when these tools attempt to evaluate the sustainability of projects/policies they do it from radically different perspectives.

In most cases, however, the choice of an evaluation tool is made by the expert(s) without taking into consideration the needs, wants and values of the affected stakeholders. By choosing the analytical tool the analyst “enforces” a particular worldview as the legitimate yardstick to evaluate the sustainability of a particular project/policy. However this worldview might not be compatible with the worldview of the affected stakeholders and as a result it can have significant ethical and practical implications. At the same time the expert(s) adopts to an extent the role of a stakeholder considering that he/she willingly or unwillingly enforces the perspective upon which a project/policy will be evaluated.

Consequently, the choice of the appropriate sustainability evaluation tool is a far from straightforward task as it seems that the choice of the evaluation tool must not only be scientifically rigorous but also, as it is theorised in this paper, must be guided by the values of the affected stakeholders.

In this respect, the aim of this paper is three-fold:

- a) to elucidate the different sustainability evaluation tools' assumptions and the viewpoint they adopt when they evaluate the sustainability of projects/policies;

b) to discuss the ethical and practical implications of a tool's selection and how the expert(s)

"becomes" a stakeholder;

c) to provide insights that could facilitate the choice of the most appropriate tool according to the context of the analysis.

From these starting points it is argued that the selection of a sustainability evaluation tool should be consistent with the needs, expectations and values of the stakeholders. It is discussed how certain stakeholder value orientations are more compatible with the vision of specific evaluation tools and consequently a tool selection procedure is suggested. It is expected that such a conscious choice might prevent distorted evaluations and can in theory provide better quality information for the decision making process.

Keywords: sustainability evaluation, stakeholder values, value articulating institutions