

Social Sustainability and Education as a means of Bridging Gap of Inequality in Modern World

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ABSTRACT

Social sustainability is essential for creating a stable, progressive and inclusive society, forming a core pillar of sustainable development by ensuring equitable access to resources, opportunities & social participation. Social Sustainability means the capacity of a community to develop processes and structures that not only allow it to fulfill the basic needs of all its members but also for active participation, empowerment and the creation of an inclusive and just society (Dillard, Dujon, & King, 2009). A society can be considered sustainable when all individuals feel included in the development process and believe that they and their succeeding generations will benefit from it (World Bank, 2023). Education plays a critical role in advancing social sustainability because it addresses structural inequalities, strengthens social cohesion, and expands life opportunities. This paper explores how inclusive, high-quality education can reduce disparities, promote social mobility and empower marginalized communities. The Capability Approach of Amartya Sen (1999) also states that education plays a crucial role in expanding human freedom and social opportunities as equitable, accessible, and effective education is closely associated with the dimensions of social sustainability which also help to strengthen it. Achieving meaningful sustainability requires ensuring equal educational opportunities that equip individual with the knowledge and skills required to maintain a decent standard of living, participate actively in democratic processes and contribute to collective progress. Education enables people to understand their rights, engage with diverse perspectives, also develop the capabilities necessary for personal and societal advancement. Therefore, investing in equitable and inclusive education systems is crucial for narrowing social inequalities, achieving sustainable development goals, and building resilient societies that support long term prosperity for existing and future generations.

keywords: Social Sustainability, Education, Inequality, social inclusion, Resilience.

Recived : 25/4/2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21340900>

Aceptance: 5/5/2026

Introduction

Sustainable Development can be defined as a process of development that addresses needs of the present without limiting the capacity of future generations to fulfill their own needs (Brundtland Report: Our Common Future, 1987). It strives to maintain equilibrium among economic advancement, environmental protection, and the welfare of society. To create systems that are effective, equitable, and efficient across generations, sustainable development places more emphasis on

long-term progress than on short-term gains. It is grounded in the principle and the concept of sustainability, which refers to the capacity of organisations, societies, and systems to endure and thrive throughout time. The goal of sustainability is to maintain social cohesiveness, natural ecosystem integrity, and continued economic viability. It takes cooperation from all sectors to address complicated global concerns including poverty, inequality, resource depletion, and climate change; these issues

are not merely environmental in nature. Sustainability is crucial for conserving natural resources, promoting social fairness, and sustaining economic stability for current and future generations. It helps in enhancing quality of life by encouraging responsible consumerism, environmental preservation, and inclusive growth. Societies may tackle global issues, preserve ecosystems, and promote resilience by incorporating sustainable practices. The significance of sustainability is found in its capacity to strike a balance between ecological integrity and human progress, securing the enduring welfare for everyone and a habitable planet.

Sustainability is based on 3 fundamental pillars -

1. **Environmental Sustainability** - focuses on biodiversity preservation, natural resource conservation, and maintaining the health of ecosystems that sustain life.
2. **Economic Sustainability**- means the development of economic systems that provide employment, generate income, and support livelihoods without depleting resources or harming the environment.
3. **Social Sustainability** - emphasis on justice, equity, inclusion, and the welfare of both individuals and communities.

The interconnection of the three pillars of sustainability is becoming increasingly apparent to both scholars and practitioners. In the same way that economic or environmental sustainability can promote and facilitate social sustainability, and vice versa, their absence can exacerbate social conflicts and other social challenges (Purvis, Mao, & Robinson, 2019).

SDGs adopted in 2015, placed social concerns at the core of the global development agenda. Previously, United Nations and other multilateral institutions acknowledged "environmental and social sustainability" but rarely defined or analyzed social sustainability as an explicit concept or objective (United Nations, 2012). The SDGs introduced the guiding principle of "Leave no one behind",

embedding social concerns across most of the 17 goals - SDG1: ending poverty, SDG2: eliminating hunger, SDG3: ensuring health and well-being, SDG4: providing quality education, SDG6: expanding access to clean water and sanitation, SDG7: delivering affordable and clean energy, SDG8: promoting decent work, SDG11: fostering inclusive, safe and resilient cities but three SDGs explicitly focuses on social sustainability: SDG10 aims to reduce inequality promoting inclusive distribution and equal opportunity. SDG5 focuses on gender equality through women's empowerment and equal rights to resources, SDG16 emphasizes sustainable peace, justice and strong institutions through which inclusive societies, access to justice and accountable governance should be ensured.

Social Sustainability

Social sustainability is crucial for maintaining long-term societal health and stability. It refers to the ability of a society to provide conditions that support human well-being, cohesion, and participation. This includes promoting social inclusion, equitable access to resources and opportunities, respect for human rights, cultural diversity, and participatory governance. Social sustainability ensures that no group is marginalized and that development benefits are shared equitably. It also fosters trust, cooperation, and resilience in communities. According to Dillard, Dujon, and King (2009) - Social sustainability is "the ability of a community to develop processes and structures which not only meet the basic needs of all its members but also allow for active participation, empowerment, and the creation of an inclusive and just society." Dempsy et al. (2011) has defined "social sustainability as equitable access and the sustainability of the community itself." In other words, it focuses on the creation of communities that are equitable, diverse, connected, and democratic, with the ability to provide all members with access to opportunities and the resources necessary to achieve their potential (Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2003).

Cuesta et.al (2022) in their study titled "Social Sustainability, Poverty, and Income: An Empirical

Exploration discussed about this concept and said that the increasing awareness of social sustainability has not translated into a consensus, operational definition. Reasons for this include the concept's intangibility, multidimensionality, dynamic characteristics, context dependency and the need for conceptual flexibility to address its multidisciplinary nature." Factors such as education, healthcare, gender equality, labor rights, and democratic institutions are vital components of social sustainability. Vallance et al. (2011) have defined its three components as -

1. Development Sustainability
2. Bridging Sustainability
3. Maintenance Sustainability

Ly & Cope (2023) have suggested five dimensions of social sustainability -

1. Safety & Security
2. Equity
3. Adaptability
4. Social Inclusion and Cohesion
5. Quality of life

Barron et al. (2023) defines that for a community to be socially sustainable, it must show the ability to work collectively, overcome challenges, deliver public services effectively and share resources

in a way that all people perceive it as fair and acceptable so that everyone got the opportunity to thrive and improve their quality of life overtime. It is built upon 4 core elements: Social Cohesion, Inclusion, Resilience and Process Legitimacy (Sustainable Development Global Database 2.0, 2024).

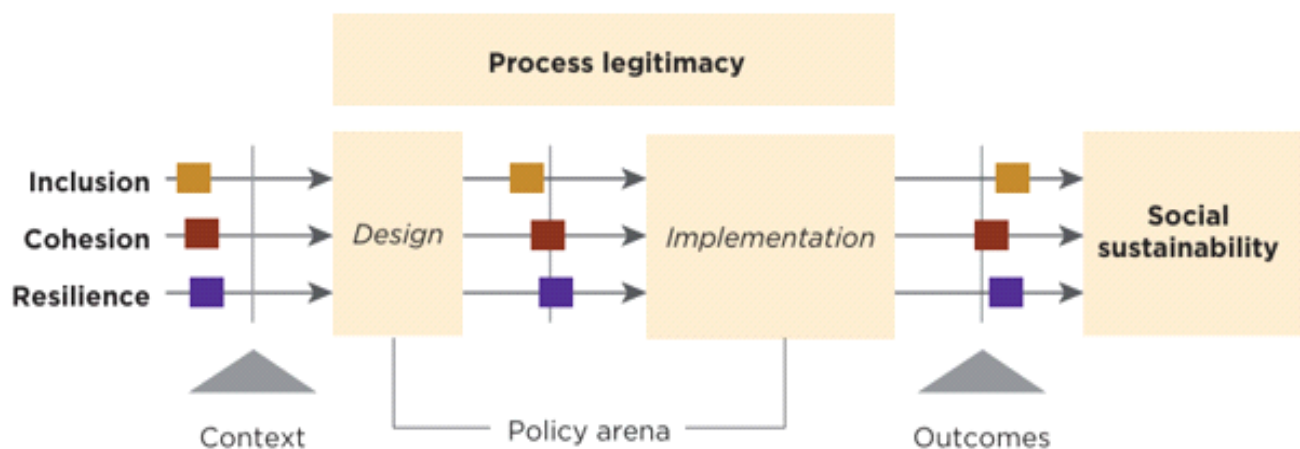
1. Social Cohesion - It represents the feeling of having a common goal and trust among community members. It fosters collaboration among individuals and groups for the attainment of common goals and sustainable outcomes.

2. Inclusion - Inclusive society provides all individuals with access to essential services and markets, social, political and cultural spheres to ensure the active participation in society with agency and living a life with dignity.

3. Resilience - This refers to the capacity of society (including poor and marginalized groups) to preclude conflict, feels safe and able to recover from and respond to external shocks.

4. Process Legitimacy - This largely focuses on how programs and policies are designed and how they are implemented to ensure that these are considered credible, justifiable and acceptable by all community members.

Conceptual Framework of Social Sustainability



Source: World Bank. & Barron et al. (2023)

Therefore, it is the societal ability to ensure that its members have access to basic needs, opportunities for education and economic advancement, and the capacity to influence decision-making processes (Munasinghe, 1993).

A study was done by Cuesta (2022) et.al on "social sustainability, poverty and income: An

empirical exploration", a database comprising 71 indicators developed for 193 countries and 37 territories between year 2016 & 2020. The indicators are categorized under 4 dimensions: social cohesion, inclusion, resilience & process legitimacy. Based on that data they also represent best and worst performing countries regarding social sustainability as follows:

Top and worst five performers of social sustainability

Social inclusion	Resilience	Social cohesion	Process legitimacy
Top performers			
Mongolia	Kyrgyzstan	Ghana	Mauritius
Georgia	Indonesia	Jordan	Dominica
Thailand	Ghana	Thailand	St. Vincent & the Grenadines
Serbia	Kazakhstan	Tajikistan	St. Lucia
Costa Rica	Vietnam	Indonesia	Costa Rica
Worst performers			
Chad	Haiti	Haiti	Venezuela, RB
Mali	India	Yemen, Rep.	Cambodia
Niger	Dominican Rep.	Mexico	Congo, Dem. Rep.
Congo, Dem. Rep.	Belarus	Colombia	Afghanistan
Burkina Faso	West Bank and Gaza	Tunisia	Cameroon

Source: Social Sustainability Global Database 2022

Cuesta et. al (2022). *Social sustainability, poverty, and income: An empirical exploration*

Among these, India comes under worst performing countries in resilience dimension of social sustainability.

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According to Global Gender Gap Report, 2025 India's Rank is 131st out of 148 countries in Global Gender Gap which indicates persistent gender inequality while 144th in Economic Participation and opportunity, 110th in Educational Attainment, 143rd in Health and Survival and 69th in political Empowerment showing moderate performance. These disparities restrict women's workforce inclusion and hinder equitable, socially sustainable development (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Role of Education in Bridging Inequality

Education is one of the most effective means of achieving and maintaining these SDGs. Being a transformative force that transforms people's opportunities, beliefs, and roles in society, education is both a fundamental human right and a major force

behind sustainable development. Education increases people's ability to fully engage in civic life and economic development by fostering knowledge, critical thinking, values, and skills. In the context of social sustainability, education fosters inclusivity by reducing disparities among social groups and enabling marginalized populations, such as women, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities to access opportunities and social capital. As a transformative tool, it not only empowers individuals with knowledge and skills but also provides them with opportunities for social mobility and economic participation but also addresses structural disparities by enhancing access, representation, and equity in societal institutions. Income and opportunity disparities are lessened by education. Numerous studies have demonstrated a strong inverse relationship between educational attainment and income inequality. According to UNESCO (2020), a person's income may be raised by up to 10% with

each additional year of schooling, thereby reducing income disparities over time. Higher educational attainment improves employment prospects, particularly among disadvantaged and marginalized groups, enabling greater participation in economic and social systems (OECD, 2018). According to the World Inequality Report 2026, inequality in India is widespread across income, gender, caste, region and religion, posing challenges to social sustainability. Around 58% of the total national income is earned by the top 10% while the bottom half obtains only 15%, highlighting stark income disparities. Top 1% owns around 40% of the total wealth that shows unequal wealth distribution. Gender inequality persists in low female labour force participation and limited access to economic opportunities. Caste and religious minorities continue to face structural disadvantages in education, employment and assets ownership. Regional inequality is evident in rural-urban divide, where rural population have significantly lower income share and access to service. These overlapping inequalities restrict economic participation and social mobility, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and limiting India's progress toward inclusive and socially sustainable development (World Inequality Lab, 2026).

Social inclusion is promoted via equitable access to high-quality education. When educational systems are inclusive, addressing the needs of all learners regardless of gender, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, or disability, they provide a platform for empowerment and equal opportunity. Education is instrumental in the formation of attitudes, values, and behaviors that uphold human rights and social justice. Education must be liberating, enabling students to critically analyse and confront the societal injustices that sustain poverty and injustice, as Freire (1970) contended in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Curriculum reforms that include human rights education, civic education, and multicultural perspectives help build empathy, reduce prejudice, and foster inclusive communities (Banks, 2016). According to World Bank data from 2021, nations that engage in equitable

education systems typically see improvements in a number of human development metrics, such as political involvement, gender equality, and health. For instance, girls' education has been linked to delayed marriage, lower maternal and infant mortality, and increased civic engagement (UNICEF, 2019).

However, systemic obstacles like prejudice, underfunded schools, and unfair resource distribution must be addressed so the education effectively contributes in reducing inequality and creating a sustainable society.

Role of Education in Enhancing Social Sustainability

Educational systems that emphasize inclusivity help break cycles of poverty and marginalization, thereby contributing to greater social cohesion and reduced inequality (OECD, 2012). It enhances social inclusion and equity, two core pillars of social sustainability. Through equitable access to quality education, marginalized groups-such as women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities-gain the tools necessary for active participation in economic, social, and political life (UNESCO, 2020). Education supports intergenerational sustainability by equipping individuals with knowledge and skills that are not only economically productive but also socially responsible. Curricula that integrate concepts such as environmental stewardship, social justice, and civic responsibility prepare learners to engage in sustainable behaviors and community-oriented actions (Sterling, 2011). This, in turn, nurtures a citizenry that is committed to fostering inclusive and sustainable societies. Research conducted by the World Bank (2021) shows that countries with inclusive education policies tend to have more stable governance and lower levels of conflict. Inclusive education policies and practices encourage critical thinking, empathy, and dialogue, which are essential for peaceful coexistence in diverse societies. Multicultural and human rights education enhances students' appreciation of diversity and encourages them to challenge discriminatory attitudes, thereby strengthening democratic values and social stability

(Bank, 2016). Eliminating barriers related to gender, geography, disability, and socioeconomic status, and ensuring that educational content is aligned with sustainability values and real-world challenges can make our society sustainable. The role of stakeholders i.e, students, teachers, parents, and the community is crucial in social sustainability. It relies on shared responsibilities where all stakeholders collaborate to promote equity, inclusion, cooperation and long-term social well-being.

1. Role of Students - Students contribute as learners and future citizens by developing values such as respect for diversity, empathy and responsibility. Participation in collaborative learning, civic activities and community service fosters social cohesion and democratic engagement, essential for sustaining inclusive societies (UNESCO,2017). When students think critically and engage with others, they become agents of social change.

2. Role of Teachers- The role of teachers is central in facilitating social sustainability as they shape students' personality. By adopting inclusive pedagogical approaches, they foster equality, social justice and respect for human rights and act as role models for them. By creating inclusive learning environment, teachers boost their confidence to become active and responsible members of society contributing sustainable development (Tilbury, 2011).

3. Role of Parents- Parental contribution in making society sustainable is foundational as learning initiates in a family environment where they learn to respect each other, tolerate, co-operate, values and overall behaviour. Parents who encourage education and lifelong learning, model positive social behaviour and maintain strong relationship with schools builds a consistent environment that supports inclusive and ethical development (OECD,2018).

4. Role of Community- It is the community which forms a broader social setting where sustainability is nurtured and sustained. Social learning should be encouraged in community institutions, organisations and cultural groups by creating opportunities for participation, cooperation

and service. Communities that ensure inclusiveness, preserve their cultural heritage and involved in an educational setting through school partnership, volunteering and shared decision-making builds trust and strengthen social connection and also contribute to social resilience and cohesion. It also facilitates application of learning in practical life situations, reinforcing social sustainability beyond classrooms (Brundtland Commission, 1987).

Therefore, Social Sustainability can only be achieved through the contribution of each stakeholder which plays a complimentary role in building a society that is inclusive, resilient, and sustainable i.e. capable of meeting the needs of current and future generations.

Conclusion:

The foundations of socially sustainable societies are human growth, social cohesiveness, and active citizenship, all of which are promoted by inclusive and egalitarian education. Through providing marginalized groups with access to high-quality educational opportunities, education helps address structural differences in social status, gender, and income. Furthermore, when curriculum incorporate principles like empathy, justice, and environmental responsibility, education produces people who are not only competent but also socially conscious and focused on the community. Education plays a function that goes beyond empowering people economically; it fosters civic engagement, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding. These elements are crucial for building inclusive communities that respect diversity and reduce interpersonal conflicts. However, realizing this potential requires addressing persistent barriers to educational access, retention and ensuring that pedagogical practices align with the principles of equity and inclusion. Education is not merely a means to personal advancement but a strategic tool for building resilient, fair, and sustainable societies. Its integration into social sustainability frameworks is imperative for attaining long-term peace, justice, and collective well-being. Therefore, strengthening inclusive education systems is essential for fostering a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

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