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# Sustainability Communication

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## Chapter 8

# Communication Theory and Sustainability Discourse

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**Abstract** Ecological and sustainability discourses are communicative processes. This chapter focuses on communication theory in order to explore the communicative and social aspects of sustainability discourse, in particular reflexivity, commitment and normalisation. Consequences for sustainability communication are discussed.

**Keywords** Communication theory • Communicative process • Functional differentiation • Characteristics of sustainability discourse • Sustainability communication

The interpretation of 'sustainable development' is as multi-faceted as its strategic realisation. There are few communication theoretical analyses of this term, of its discourse coherence and operationalisation. Research into sustainability and sustainability communication often assign communication a secondary status – as if it were possible to first discuss sustainability, then plan and implement it, and finally communicate it. The opposite is the case. As soon as something has become an issue – and individuals have made a series of specific contributions to that issue – then communication is taking place. Neither sociality nor social structures, neither technology nor ecology are independent of the communication of either given or thinkable situations. It is only through and as communication that an event or an object receives social relevance and meaning. And every event that is well known today has already been through the selection and production machinery of the mass media. The discourse of sustainability is also – as is ecological discourse in general – above all a communicative process event within society. If an awareness of ecological problems and sustainability is not communicated, then it is socially irrelevant, even non-existent.

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Sustainability discourse is less about interpersonal contacts and social relationships and more about global living conditions, as well as social values and structure. The foundation for communication theory outlined below is then based not only on general principles but is also embedded in a theory of society.

## Communication Theory

In contrast to a techno-scientific understanding of communication, which has yielded a number of complex transmission models (essentially of information transmission between sender and receiver through a given channel), the social and human science description of communication begins with face-to-face contact. Communication is defined as the human and technologically based activity of the reciprocal use of signs and the reciprocal interpretation of signs for the purpose of successful understanding, coordinating action and shaping reality (Krallmann and Ziemann 2001: 13).

Communication is thus a social process in which at least two open-minded, spatially bound actors are involved. With the help of signs, language and symbols – whose effect on themselves and on others the participants observe – social orientation, reciprocal control and informative action take place. The necessity of communication can be found in the human condition: each consciousness is isolated, our neuro-physiological, cognitive, emotional processes are mutually unobservable and there is no direct access to the thoughts, attitudes and intentions of the other. It is through communication that ‘the interior is exteriorised’, that we can inform each other, that we become social creatures. Communication is thus the principle of societal organisation itself.

As a completed event – and in comparison to the attitudes, motives and goals of those involved – communication is then something socially separate – in systems theory we would say that it is ‘emergent’. That is why the meaning and effect of communicative events cannot be attributed to one of the participants, nor can they be mentally inferred. Interpersonal sequences of events, relationships, conversations and discourses have an immanent momentum and self-organisation. Out of joint talk and action arises a social event that displays an asymmetric relation between self and other, as a dialectic interrelationship.

Following Luhmann (1995, 1997) we can formulate this more radically. No human subject is the author or transporter of communication and no single consciousness can purposefully order communication. Communication itself constructs information, mutual understanding and its recursive network. Between humans and society, between consciousness and communication there is in fact a fundamental dependency and causal relationship, but at the same time they both operate autonomously and in different (psychic versus social) dimensions of reality.

If we inquire into the conditions of how others can be successfully understood and what the common basis is for taking action and changing reality, then it becomes apparent that, depending on the situation, we resort to common orientation schemes and stocks of knowledge. On the one hand the sign and symbol systems, the rules

of human coexistence and the communicative forms of the cooperation, mutual support and conflict are culturally and historically given. They are taught, learned and then shape our plans, our expectations of others and the possibility of understanding others and expressing ourselves. On the other hand the institutionalised uses of signs, social communication forms, socio-cultural structures and situational rules are not only confirmed and maintained, but also continually changed, extended and optimised. In short, communication changes communication. This means (and this validates its regulative and normative claims) that sustainability communication also changes communication and so society.

Through the joint stocks of signs, language(s), values and norms that are produced and reproduced in communication and transmitted through it, social order is built up. The more successful the communicative understanding the more stable the social order – and vice versa. Nevertheless, successful understanding is not the same as consensus and consensus is not the primary goal or the condition of and for communication. Dissensus is also particularly important for the continuation of communication. Ultimately each communicative act doubles the world and reality towards a yes/no form. “Every communication invites protest. As soon as something specific is offered for acceptance, one can also negate it. The system is not structurally bound to acceptance, not even to a preference for acceptance. Linguistically, the negation of every act of communication is possible and can be understood. It can be anticipated and circumvented by avoiding corresponding communication (...)” (Luhmann 1995: 173).

For sustainability communication both this autonomy from psychic systems and from human intentions as well as the social momentum of orientation and value schemes, consensus/ dissensus and recursive communication sequences is revealing. Sustainability discourse is relatively independent from its many actors who are saying or proposing something. In fact these are interchangeable. It is more decisive *what* and *how* communication takes place. Each act of communication refers to prior acts of communication (accepting or rejecting them) and prestructures at the same time future acts of communication. No longer can everything be said. Expectations arise. This factual-temporal bonding is created by the distinction between theme and contribution (Luhmann 1995).

The social (as well as the non-social) environment enters into communication through themes, which reduce the complexity of the environment to something more specified. In the factual dimension an example would be how the marketing of organic food is concerned with this one particular theme, and nothing else. Communication relationships are ordered by themes, which are, or can be, referred to by various contributions by individuals to communication; and contributions in turn confirm or change themes. In a social perspective themes regulate who can make a contribution, and who is allowed to. And finally the temporal dimension forces a one-by-one *sequentialization* of the contributions to themes. This temporal order allows for continual stream of new references to be made, as well as for a remembrance of past acts of communication and their corresponding system histories. Themes thus take on a memory function. In the 1980s ‘sustainable development’ began its career as a political semantic and ecological term, and has since served as a reference point for countless discussions, studies and structural changes.

“Thus themes serve as factual/ temporal/ social structures within the communication process, and they function as generalizations insofar as they do not restrict which contributions can be made at what time, in which sequence, and by whom” (Luhmann 1995: 157).

Contributions are themselves re-specifications of themes. As concrete acts of communication they show how themes are interpreted, which information triggers their introduction and who they are relevant for. The political demand that ecological and social aspects be taken into consideration in every situation is just as much a re-specification of the sustainability theme as for example communicating that plane travel should be avoided or publishing an academic text on modern environmental ethics.

A general definition is thus that sustainability communication is a global social process (and one that is accompanied by the mass media) that consists of the recursive order of contributions and arguments to the theme of a better ecological, economic and social life. There are however a number of goals of sustainability communication that are similarly general. Ideally they should be pursued simultaneously (Lass and Reusswig 2001):

- Popularisation goals: the concepts and plans of sustainable development should (not least through mass media support and diffusion) be made known to the general public and offer concrete orientation for action.
- Innovation and alliance goals: Decisive social and technological innovations should be initiated. This would involve a variety of social actors working together and building strategic networks, for example among political parties, business enterprises and NGOs.
- Information and educational goals: Fundamental contents and aspects regarding sustainability should be firmly implemented in the educational system. This would allow children to learn and develop reflexive competence early in life.
- Research goals: Sustainability should become a central research topic in an interdisciplinary scientific discourse with its own perspectives and applications, especially for economic and political actors.

## The Nature of Sustainability Discourse

Very few natural hazards and environmental risks are directly experienced by an individual in everyday life. Instead they must first be disseminated by (mass medial) communication. The mass media make the unknown known to the unknown. In the introduction it was pointed out that it is not until sustainability communication reports on human need, wasted resources, potential ecological-economic crises or the lack of rules governing intra- and intergenerational need that these become socially relevant, a social resonance is created and (ideally) remedial action is taken.

Luhmann, in all sociological seriousness, states “that the oil reserves are declining, the rivers are becoming too warm, the forests are dying, the heavens are darkening and the oceans are being polluted. This may be the case, or it may not be the

case, but as a physical, chemical or biological fact it will not create any social resonance until it is communicated. Fish may die or human beings; swimming in lakes and rivers may cause illnesses; no more oil may come from the pumps; and average temperatures may rise or fall, but as long as this is not communicated it does not have any effect on society” (1986: 62f.).

Communication and media technology are thus the necessary conditions of sustainability discourse and its social resonance, but this is not to say anything about its typical form and inner structure. In the following some of the characteristics found in sustainability discourse will be discussed and at the same time an analytic framework for its study will be created.

## Reflexivity

News about environmental problems or unjust living conditions and research about the destruction of nature and attendant risks to humans have led to public and scientific reaction and reflection, which in turn observes these observations, makes these phenomena and their interrelationships themselves a theme and searches for ways to understand, explain and cope with them. The traditional self-understanding of mankind’s currently successful domination of nature and of the evolution of technology is critically examined – and is introduced from society back into society. With this self-referentiality, environmental analysis and sustainability issues become an analysis of society as well as a critique of modern social order (Brand et al. 1997: 37). A further effect of reflexivity is communication about sustainability communication. Sustainability discourse does not just discuss the environment and a better life, but also, and repeatedly, it discusses itself.

## Sustainability as an Intrinsic Social Value

Each value is and means a *certain* preference with *universal* validity. Something ought to be, something else ought not; this ranking is fundamentally positive and has a desirable connotation. It stands to reason that we have a preference for freedom, justice, peace, health, conservation etc. and it seems obvious that we have attitudes or make assumptions in favour of them. At the same time values have universal or general validity because they remain, whatever their actual ineffectiveness or non-inclusion, something positive and are (or can be) something that we expect or demand. Their function consists of an action or situation orientation that is neither questioned nor calls for reasons to be provided – this is rarely explicit, much more likely *per implicationem*. “Values remain, in other words, relevant through their allusive nature and that is the source of their infallibility. (...) Values are thus persuasive then because in communication there is a lack of objections; not because one could give reasons for them. (...) Values are the medium for the commonly held assumptions that limit what can be

said and what can be wanted, without determining what should be done" (Luhmann 1997: 343). Values compete, however, with each other and depend on particular needs, situations and decisions. That is why they must be dynamically balanced and their application must remain open, i.e. at a given point in time environmental protection instead of freedom, at another welfare instead of intergenerational justice.

Sustainability discourse labours to establish sustainability itself as an intrinsic social value and to gain acceptance for other short-term goals, e.g. securing human survival, inter- and intragenerational justice, maintaining social production potential. On the other hand its value dimensions do not enjoy – everywhere, all the time and without limit – priority over social structures, cultural habits, individual intentions and other values.

The communicated alternatives – of a better life, of anticipatory management, of a just distribution of goods and resources, of a more responsible caring for nature and mastery over nature etc. – are counter-productive when they are connected with an implicit assumption that all too quickly limits or discredits other perspectives and communication contributions, namely that alternatives are always better than what is and what has come before. In addition, sustainability discourse is also labouring to create common perceptions of problems and commitment in the first place, while at the same time there are "a variety of actors struggling with each other to have their own specific definition of sustainability, together with the resulting strategic recommendations, accepted. Behind these disputes are assumptions about different images of the world and nature, different concepts of society, different interests and value preferences" (Brand 2000: 2).

### ***Tendency to Normalisation***

The widespread recognition of sustainable development is leading to a normalisation of the concept. The time of ideologically laden struggles is over; objectives are still without doubt being controversially discussed but in general this is being done in a pragmatic fashion. To a great extent this is due to a de-moralisation of environmental issues. This normalisation, de-moralisation and institutionalisation has brought sustainability discourse into a paradoxical situation. The more people talk about and demand sustainability, the less it is able to draw attention to itself or create pressure for change, whether for individual consumers or for key political and economic actors.

### ***Medialisation***

Sustainability discourse attempts to resolve the normalisation paradox by linking it with the mass media. It is after all the function of the mass media to generate receptive attention, to inform society, to provide an integrative construction of reality so that there is a reference to common – or at least those assumed to be common – themes, values and knowledge. Through moralising (good vs. bad), the mass media

also serves to alarm society. In the mirror of the mass media, society encounters, among other things, its structural problems, is confronted with its catastrophes, ecological risks and, in an extraordinary variety, scandals. What this means for sustainable development is that there are – together with the mass media – two possibilities of educating, warning and improving the public. Either ecological (that is, sustainability) communication itself already implies an attention factor (environmental catastrophe, new data, high profile demonstrations etc.), which are predestined for media coverage and trigger alarm, or sustainability discourse must adapt to the logic of the mass media, must accept journalistic support and medialise itself, so that its communication contributions and visions are broadcast, become known and have consequences. Without effective medialisation there is no popularisation.

### **Conclusions**

The political, moral and scientific discussions centring on sustainable development have not gone unnoticed in the economic field and have triggered a number of reactions in business enterprises and associations. In the course of establishing sustainable objectives, the path between protest movements, NGOs and economic actors has changed in a number of ways, from ignorance to resonance, from confrontation to cooperation. Many economic and other organizations have since taken up sustainability issues, discussed them internally and structurally implemented them in a number of different ways. The genuine communication form of organisations is the *decision* (Luhmann 2000). Within the context of their other commitments and themes, organisations have been able and are able to take sustainability into account in its economic, ecological and/or social dimension (or not!). This means that future decisions are bound by this decision and are thus restricted. "Decision-making programmes define the conditions responsible for the accuracy of decisions" (Luhmann 2000: 257).

Sustainability would then make for a superior decision programme that sets criteria for the evaluation of future projects and organisational objectives. To formulate this more precisely, sustainability functions as an output-oriented goal programme. When sustainability is the goal of what is in principle open-ended planning for the future, then the choice of the possible means (e.g. corporate action) is limited. At the same time by setting such goals the company legitimises its decisions and actions – regardless of whether goals are abandoned or there are unintended consequences or other social values it might pursue (see for example Senge 1999).

Organisations are also necessary in a second case, namely if sustainability is to be addressable, specifically attributable and claimable. When organisations have implemented sustainable development programs they publicise this under their own name, while others as an organisational addressee make demands for sustainability and still other organisations set up guidelines and serve as an addressee for queries or requests for support. Without organised communication, themes cannot be kept visible over the long term, nor specifically attributed, nor disseminated from a specific address.

Sustainability communication is and remains a difficult issue of drawing distinctions and creating resonance. On the one hand there are calls for moderation along

with the diagnosis that the environment is unable to fulfil all the demands society evokes and reproduce. And on the other is the highly specialised and functionally differentiated order level of modern society with all of its achievements. At any rate the fact is that no criticism of the risks and consequences of functional differentiation can simply take one side without taking the other into account. "The criticism of functional differentiation remains (...) a moral criticism that cannot account for and cannot determine what otherwise could evolve. That much could be made better is undeniable (...) the apotheosis of one's own morality and the rather unconventional stylistic devices of one's own demeanour might suggest that one should be prepared to revise the assessment. But that will happen anyway and in any case in society and not against it. The secret to those who call themselves alternative is that they do not have any alternatives to offer others. They have to hide this from themselves and others" (Luhmann 1987: 173; see also Rasch 2000).

In the middle of this process of functional differentiation, sustainability communication goes on – precisely because it can handle dissensus. The challenge remains however for communication theory, as well as sociological research, to reflect on ecology in general and sustainability in particular. One of its most important tasks is to continually examine and revise its terminology and theoretical tools and to improve them analytically, so that justice can be done to the complexity of the subject matter – by all means in a fashion that is both critical and enlightening.

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