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Placing spiritual capital in sustainable development frameworks

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Introduction

The history of humanity unfolds as a narrative of development, spanning from the nomadic era in the pre-agricultural stage to the post-modern digital era (Helle et al., 2014). Various dimensions of development, including spirituality, religion, culture, politics, economics, and science and technology, have all played integral roles in shaping this ongoing process (Zinsstag et al., 2011). Consequently, development emerges as a multidimensional concept that necessitates a multidisciplinary approach for a comprehensive understanding (Harte and Lonergan, 1995).

Numerous developmental theories have evolved throughout history, with sustainable development taking center stage since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Traditional models of development, driven by industrialism and capitalism, have often overlooked the human and ethical dimensions essential for long-term sustainability. While there is unanimous acknowledgment of the imperative for sustainable development, the ongoing debate revolves around the diverse means of achieving it. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are necessary but insufficient without addressing the ethical frameworks that guide individual and societal actions. Surprisingly less discussed, yet immensely influential, is the role of spirituality.

Understanding spiritual capital

Spirituality is associated with universal themes such as love, compassion, altruism, harmony, wisdom, and truth. These values transcend religious affiliation and are evident in practices promoting peace, fairness, and compassion. Spirituality involves recognizing a belief in something greater than oneself—an understanding that being human goes beyond sensory experiences (Spencer, 2012). This greater whole is often perceived as cosmic or divine in nature. Spirituality involves seeing oneself beyond biological existence, moving away from selfishness and aggression. It adds meaning and purpose to our existence as part of the universe.

Spiritual capital refers to the accumulated and enduring collection of beliefs, knowledge, values, and dispositions that drive societal, organizational, and interpersonal behavior (Noghiu, 2020). It encompasses the values, beliefs, and ethical principles that motivate individuals and communities to pursue socially responsible and ecologically conscious actions (Dahl, 2022; Garg, 2017; Malloch, 2003, 2010; Mas-Machuca and Marimon, 2019; Tjahjadi et al., 2023). Spiritual capital provides the moral foundation that motivates individuals, organizations, and governments to act based on empathy, fairness, and stewardship. It fosters a collective commitment to shared wellbeing.

Spiritual capital for promoting pro-sustainable behavior

Individuals possessing moral values, among other qualities, are essential for sustainable development (Ploum et al., 2018). It is argued that enlightened individuals achieve higher levels of intellectual development than ordinary people. Spirituality is rooted in individual practices aimed at bringing peace and purpose to life through the pursuit of enlightenment. Spiritual capital embodies the values, ethical standpoints, and visions for change held by individuals, groups, and institutions (Baker and Skinner, 2014). It represents a capacity to advance common goods (Rima, 2013).

Sustainable attitudes and spirituality are determinants of individual sustainable behavior (Koch et al., 2020). Achieving sustainable development requires going beyond conventional methods. Interventions have proven effective in instilling sustainable behavior, which, in turn, drives sustainable development by promoting lasting pro-environmental actions (Elf et al., 2021).

To grasp behaviors that promote sustainability, Verdugo (2012) identifies a tri-dimensional model: self-care, caring for others, and caring for the planet. This aligns with the commonly accepted three-pillar model of sustainable development, which simultaneously considers the economy, society, and the environment.

The triple-bottom-line theory emphasizes that business success metrics should include people (social wellbeing), the planet (environment), and prosperity (just economy) (Jennifer, 2008). However, this framework cannot ensure an individual's, institution's, or community's commitment to sustainable development. Accumulating spiritual capital, on the other hand, can ensure this commitment. This is because accumulating spiritual capital involves nurturing spirituality through the development of universal values and belief systems. These open the eyes to a holistic view—one that offers a deep-rooted, long-sighted, and all-encompassing understanding of existence.

Conclusion

The integration of spiritual capital into the sustainability discourse represents a significant shift toward a more inclusive and ethically grounded model of development. In a world facing mounting ecological crises and social inequalities, spiritual capital offers an innovative solution to global sustainability

challenges. Assessing spiritual capital can help individuals and organizations prioritize the accumulation of humane values alongside wealth accumulation.

As we look to the future, the need for spiritual capital becomes increasingly important in shaping policies, technologies, and educational systems that prioritize the wellbeing of both people and the planet. By embracing this new frontier, we can build a more sustainable and just world—one that aligns not only with economic and environmental goals but also with the deepest values of human dignity and collective responsibility.

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