



CALL FOR PAPERS

Special Issue: The Social Sustainability of Food Systems: Addressing the Inequality-Unsustainability Nexus

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It has become somewhat of a trope to say that inequality and unsustainability are twin challenges of our times. But there is evidence that they are not just parallel but rather intertwined issues, forming what can be called a 'nexus'. Understanding the inequality-unsustainability nexus is crucial for any transformative project toward environmental sustainability. This special issue will build our understanding of the inequality-unsustainability nexus and will help to reconceptualise 'social sustainability' in the food sector.

The concept of 'social sustainability' was first introduced as a 'pillar' of sustainability within the sustainable development paradigm (Borowy 2021, Vallance 2011). This version of the concept has been criticised as a vague add-on, associated with a plethora of well-meaning concepts related to theories of social capital and social trust, without much theoretical depth or political purchase (Boström 2012).

In this special issue, we aim to develop an alternative concept of social sustainability to address these criticisms. We reframe social sustainability as both a lens and approach: a lens, as we seek to analyse how the production of social inequality underpins and entrenches the production of environmental unsustainability, curtailing sustainability transitions; and an approach and potentially an intervention, aimed at placing equality at the centre of struggles to maintain the habitability of our planet. The papers in the special issue will examine whether and how the current food system relies on, fosters, and entrenches, socio-economic, racial, gender, and other inequalities *which further undermine sustainability*. Literatures on food and agri-food justice, on food regimes, as well as agrarian political economy, and political ecology, have done much to place this relationship within broader and historically informed analyses of colonial and capitalist oppression. Nevertheless, even there, there is a lack of analysis of the nexus itself: whilst such perspectives denounce the risk of reproduction of existing inequalities in food transitions and transformations, they do not necessarily explore how such inequalities also risk undermining the alleged environmental/climate benefits of these initiatives. Our call is thus meant for contributions to develop such a critical and historically aware analysis and approach to develop what we call a social sustainability lens. A reconceptualization of social sustainability along these lines can increase the possibility of developing sustainable interventions that place the struggle against inequality at their core.

We take social sustainability to refer to three interrelated dimensions, which correspond to three broad fields and approaches:

- First, social sustainability can address the *political-economic dynamics and mechanisms* underpinning the food-system's inequality-unsustainability nexus. We welcome contributions about the intertwined political and economic conditions and mechanisms that perpetuate racial, gendered, and class-based inequalities, and which themselves bring about further environmental unsustainability. As suggested above, though there is a wealth of literature pointing to the twin issues of environmental degradation and social inequality, the theorisation of their relation through the fossil- powered agri-food system, as well as through many 'green' initiatives to reform it, is still missing. Contributions could also analyse political and economic conditions for intervening in such dynamics (e.g. drawing on the work of critical geographers such as Rice et. al. 2019). For instance, papers could address the regulation of land and real estate markets, regulation of employment conditions and wages in the food chain, and decommodification initiatives – even though these are also necessarily part of a broader political endeavour, beyond the food and agri-food domains.
- Second, social sustainability can attend to the collective organisation of food practices and their links with other practices (Strengers and Maller 2014). Here we welcome contributions that feature and analyse initiatives to embed transition and transformation practices that address the pervasiveness of class, gender, and racial inequality in everyday life. For example, initiatives towards sustainable workplace eating may pay attention to practices of procurement and supply, preparation, commensality and waste, but such practices are also crucially conditioned by work rhythms, workplace regulations and management strategies (Giacoman 2019). Furthermore, such interlinked practices concern different social groups in very different ways, particularly according to gender (Lhuissier, Caillavet and Cheng 2020), and interventions supporting sustainability transitions need to take these into account.
- Finally, social sustainability refers to the need to develop modes of collective and public support, regulations, and social protection that ensure the *durability* of sustainability transitions and transformations of food systems and practices over the medium and long-term. This question is related to the first dimension, but also to the question of changing social protection in a changing climate. There is an increasing number of proposals for a renewed approach to systems of support, from policies of 'egalitarian sufficiency' (Gough 2022), and 'social-ecological policy' (Laurent 2021) to an 'inequality check' matrix for environmental policies, put forward by Chancel et al in the Climate Inequality report (2023). These are interesting proposals, which can be pursued in the special issue. However, such proposals are rooted in a distributive rather than more structural conception of inequality, i.e. attending to the production of inequality in the first place. We also welcome articles on the contribution of support measures and structural policies for greater social sustainability of food systems. As argued in this journal's special issue on Agri-food justice, 'food systems [need to be located] back into social systems, in interaction with a planetary ecosystem subject to global changes' (Hochedez 2022: 306).

We welcome both theoretical and empirical contributions at various levels, encompassing the broader food and agri-food system, subsystems, or specific transition/transformation interventions. While contributions addressing any or all the above-mentioned dimensions are encouraged, we particularly invite submissions that engage with and discuss the inequality-unsustainability nexus, emphasizing the use of social sustainability as a lens and method, i.e. placing equality at the centre to address this critical intersection.

Practical information

- Article length: 60.000-70.000 characters // max 10.000 words
- **Deadline for submission: end of June 2024 (full papers)**
- **Expected publication: December 2025** (papers accepted will be available online on the journal website before the publication of the whole SI)

All papers will be subject to a double-blind evaluation.

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