**IPRPD**
**International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences**
ISSN 2693-2547 (Print), 2693-2555 (Online)
Volume 06; Issue no 12: December 2025
DOI: 10.56734/ijahss.v6n12a3

# THE SOCIOLOGICAL DEBATE ON SUSTAINABILITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON URBAN (SMART) POLICIES

**Eduardo Vítor Rodrigues**[1]

[1]*Professor in the Department of Sociology, Principal Researcher in the Institute of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Humanities (FLUP), University of Porto – Portugal, email: eduardor@letras.up.pt*

## Abstract

This article discusses the theoretical evolution of the debate on economic growth, development, and sustainability in the social sciences, particularly in sociology. This discussion covers multiple approaches, from those inspired by classical economics since the 18th century, to the debate over the alternatives proposed by dependency theory in the 20th century. It is in this debate and in various social and theoretical movements that the concept of sustainability has emerged more recently, highlighting its social and sociological aspects at the expense of its original basic link to the strict domains of the environment and environmentalism, with fundamental consequences for urban sociology and urban policies. It is the path to strengthening and affirming the sociology of sustainability as a specific field of sociology, treating the social issues as a "total social phenomenon", and focusing on articulating its interdisciplinary dimensions.

The consequences of these debates have nowadays, more than ever, a decisive impact on the construction of city models and (new) urban policies, new organizational strategies, new models of governance, and new theoretical approaches. Also, it has significant impacts on citizens' participation and ways of life. Examples of these consequences include the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which we treat as a decisive contribution to the organization of cities, ways of life, institutional structures, and social, cultural, and economic relations.

Also, the recent UNESCO model, the MIL City model, which poses new challenges for Sociology in general and for the Sociology of Sustainability in particular, must be explored in a subsequent discussion. As this is not the setting for a more extended, more intensive theoretical debate, we propose an analytical synthesis capable of generating fundamental new insights, more robust, and with an impact on sociological analysis, reinforcing the sociology of sustainability and its contributions to social intervention.

## Keywords

Sustainability, Socio-environmental Systems, Urban Sociology, Theoretical Roots, Urban Policies

## Introduction

Sustainability, the ability to sustain social, economic, and environmental systems in the long run, has emerged as one of the major concerns of the 21st century. Nevertheless, the origins of the debate go much deeper, back to the historical and theoretical roots of sociology and social sciences in general. Since the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, when the notion of progress was equated with economic development, sociological analysis of development has been directly linked to economic growth in the context of the Industrial Revolution. It was a debate on growth, merely in quantitative terms, not on its (re)distribution. This essay discusses the history of the sociological discussion on development, identifies the key theories of development since the eighteenth century, traces the theoretical development of these arguments, and situates sustainability within this theoretical heritage. It assumes the emergence of sustainability as a sociological field and the primary theoretical paradigms that guide the sociology of sustainability today. Also, it discusses the decisive influence of these (recent) theories on urban debates, urban policies, urban organization, urban crises, the quality of life in urban and metropolitan areas, and new ideas for cities of the present and the future, launching some prospective analyses of the theme. Finally, it critically examines the importance of the SDGs (*Sustainable Development Goals*) as an instrument of social change in local, national, and international contexts.

## 1. The Development Debate in Sociology

The history of development in sociology dates back to the Enlightenment-era considerations of progress in quantitative terms, without any serious concern for its "quality" or ways of distribution, as well as to the social theory of the nineteenth century, where some authors (mainly from sociology and economy) sought to describe the dramatic social changes generated by industrialization, urbanization, and state building. The classical economists (Adam Smith, D. Ricardo, and J. Stuart Mill) saw development as primarily an economic process: markets, specialization, and the accumulation of capital would automatically enhance wealth and human welfare.

In fact, since the eighteenth century, theories of development have multiplied and diversified as world politics and economic systems underwent transformations and reflected intellectual trends (Sen, 2010). Even if this is not the place to go into a deeper analysis, we can't forget that the key schools of thought are classical economic theories, modernization theory, dependency and world-systems theories, and post-development criticisms. The classical economic and sociological approaches, developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, focused on the phases of economic development and institutional maturity (Amin, 2006). The beliefs of Adam Smith in market-based prosperity and the evolutionary outlines of early economists held a vision of development as a progression (in the sense of prosperity for all) toward increased specialization, higher levels of technological sophistication, and a more complex social organization (also believed as social evolution). The critical theorists have, however, refuted these claims and pointed out the unequal gains, the complex contradictions, and the structural oppression that accompany capitalist growth.

These economic perspectives were reinterpreted by early sociological schools of thought, based on the works of Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx, into generalizations about social change. The positivist program of Comte viewed social development as a series of phases to a scientific rationality; Durkheim saw a change of mechanical to organic solidarity as a result of complexity of societies and division of labor, Weber introduced the focus on the centrality of the division of labor and complexification of social organization, and Marx predicted a transition of the modes of production to the dominance of a class conflict. These important classical works formed lasting themes for understanding development as a historical and disputed process, rather than its culmination; the central role of social institutions and culture in determining the paths of growth; and the inseparability of economic change from power, inequality, and ecological impact. These questions underlay more overt theories and popular debates about how societies ought to develop and to whose advantage development is directed in the twentieth century.

Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of modern sociology, focused his work on the importance of social solidarity as a factor of cohesion and balance, fundamental elements for social sustainability. The distinction between mechanical solidarity, typical of traditional societies, and organic solidarity, predominant in complex modern societies, highlights the functional interdependence among specialized individuals and the importance of institutionalized collaboration in maintaining social order.

Durkheim emphasized that social institutions and their normative values play a crucial role in sustaining social balance and promoting development by integrating and regulating social relations. This approach points out that the sustainable functioning of societies depends not only on material conditions, but above all on institutions' ability to promote effective social regulation that takes into account ecological and environmental imperatives in harmony with their social systems. Durkheim's understanding of norms and values thus emerges as an essential component for thinking about sustainability in its interdisciplinary relationship between society, resources, and nature.

Max Weber contributed to the sociology of sustainability by emphasizing the plurality of forms of rationality and the role of ethical and religious values in the development of social practices, including environmental ones. His analysis of instrumental rationality in environmental management highlights the importance of efficiency and rationality in formulating sustainable policies and practices.

In addition, Weber's emphasis on methodological pluralism and cultural diversity makes a valuable contribution to understanding the multiplicity of social contexts that influence sustainability practices, favoring analyses that recognize cultural and historical variations and emphasize the need for strategies adapted to local specificities. Thus, Weber offers an analytical framework capable of integrating ethical, cultural, and instrumental dimensions in the analysis of sociopolitical processes related to sustainability.

Karl Marx's approach takes a structural critique of the capitalist growth model, which he believes is based on a logic of structural domination of the working classes by the wealthy classes, thereby extracting profits that maintain inequalities and accentuate them over time. This exploitation of man by man created the conditions for economic and political domination, also expressed in the domination of natural resources and raw materials, in a relationship of identical dependence of poor countries (usually rich in natural resources) on countries following the capitalist model. According to Marx, this created a structural logic of domination that underpinned the historical model of colonization, but went far beyond it.

Marx's perspective indeed abandoned determinism at the moment of breaking with the capitalist model, that is, its overcoming. However, structural domination was enduring and called into question human dignity, as

well as the balance with nature, natural resources, and raw materials, thereby disrupting the balance of the entire ecosystem.

The liberal perspective was developed by authors influenced by classical thought since the 18th century.

In this context, Modernization theory was dominant in the middle of the twentieth-century discourse on development, especially in the postwar period, when decolonization and the Cold War made rapid economic growth a top policy priority. There were advocates like Walt W. Rostow, who developed linear stage theories in which traditional societies could be modernized through industrial modes of production, bureaucratic systems, and mass-consumption strategies (Hicks, 2024). Structural-functional emphases on integration and stability were manifested in sociological modernization theory. They were criticized for arguing that it was ethnocentric, legitimized colonialization, ignored power relations on the global stage, and tended to attribute inadequate internal cultures as the root cause of endemic poverty.

Its idea of stages of development was also an ethnocentric problem, with methodological and epistemological consequences: it assumes that historical progress is universal and similar to that in Western countries, independent of historical and sociocultural contexts (Amin, 2006).

The idea of take-off for development often legitimized colonization, namely by framing colonial domination as, above all, a means of inducing structural changes in poor countries to kick-start (the "*take-off process*" explained by W. W. Rostow) their development in the image of the West. This perspective camouflaged the predatory logic of the resources of the poorest countries, promoting not a real boost to their development, but a historical exploitation of their wealth and resources, controlling the national elites and perpetuating this movement of exploitation far beyond colonialism, in a renewed form of control and exploitation, neocolonialism (Rostow, 1991). This neocolonial domination persisted, in fact, well beyond the end of colonial political domination.

The Dependency theory is a strong rebuttal of modernization, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Latin American and other influential thinkers, such as Raúl Prebisch and Andre Gunder Frank, held the view that underdevelopment was a structural relationship between the rich metropolitan centers and their peripheral exporters of raw material (Cardoso, 1979).

Dependency theory attempts a critical approach to capitalist models of domination, based on more or less disguised strategies of maintaining the dependency. These models of domination create bonds of structural dependency and resource exploitation that promote the "dependent development" as referred by Fernando Henrique Cardoso. In this vein, the forms and models of capitalist domination tend to remain in place and reinforce themselves, creating the structural conditions for their perpetuation and the conditions for underdevelopment in poor countries (Amin, 1980; Giddens, 2017).

It is not, therefore, a historical stage or a model of take-off to development, but rather a lasting and predatory logic of resources and social, natural, and institutional balances in dependent countries.

Fernando Henrique Cardoso, sociologist and former president of Brazil, argued that poor countries could only achieve development by alternative structural changes, first of all cutting with the Western domination, as well as creating a new institutional order based on a strong market and cooperation between countries in the same conditions, as the BRICS shows nowadays.

The authors of the dependency theory, strongly influenced by Marxist positions, sought to show the reproductive conditions of dependency of poor countries within the context of capitalism, rather than the "sweet" approach based on the "aid" or cooperation of rich countries towards underdeveloped countries.

Immanuel Wallerstein further expounded these insights in his world-systems theory, which conceptualized the capitalist world economy as stratified into core, semi- periphery, and periphery areas, where development and underdevelopment were understood as relational outcomes (Brinkmann, 2016). Such strategies shifted the field of research to colonial pasts, unequal exchange, and the historical production of global inequalities.

Since the late twentieth century, the post-development theorists have criticized the whole development project as a culturally hegemonic discourse. Arturo Escobar and Wolfgang Sachs, among others, suggested that development serves to universalize Western understandings of well-being and to justify interventions that replace local knowledges and practices. This also raises the possibility of legitimizing colonial and post-colonial contexts.

The Frankfurt Critical School assumed the structural and enduring nature of the prevailing model of society, composed of factors of legitimacy based on the economic structure, but also on a complex ideological framework of legitimacy. The alternative approach involves critically exposing its contradictions and the decisive role of social movements, particularly youth social movements (Soares, 2016). This approach materialized at a promising time in history, with Marcuse and J. Habermas observing with great hope the dynamics of youth movements in Europe and the United States, whether environmentalist, student, or feminist movements, all of which were seen as part of a broader social critique of the capitalist model and its contradictions.

This was also the historical period of decolonization, which seemed to point to true independence and self-determination for formerly colonized peoples. Its historical realization did not fail to reveal deep contradictions and marked tendencies toward the reinforcement of new historical movements of domination, namely, neocolonialism, which maintained many of the processes of exploitation and domination of the traditional colonial model.

The Frankfurt Critical School pointed to instruments for overcoming the contradictions of Western

societies, grounded in a productivist logic and the valorization of exact and natural sciences, to the detriment of the critical and interventionist possibilities of the social and human sciences. This prevailing technocracy, interpreted as the scientific dimension of the ongoing process, reinforced the legitimacy of the model of society and its structural contradictions (Habermas, 2017; Habermas, 2013).

For Habermas, the social movements underway had the capacity to highlight these contradictions and point to critical ways of overcoming them, towards a more humanistic and structurally balanced society, even in environmental terms.

In a line of critical questioning, with diverse influences based on criticism of the current capitalist model, Samir Amin emphasizes the domineering and unequal nature of the current capitalist model, while also acknowledging its capacity for ideological legitimization, which is another reason why it is difficult to overcome. The freedom of individuals and groups is the main tool for understanding the system's contradictions, as well as the main characteristic capable of mobilizing citizens and their social representations in a critical sense and for overcoming the model.

Samir Amin recognizes domination on a global scale, even after the process of decolonization which, according to the author, only changed the face of domination and economic, social, and resource exploitation of underdeveloped countries, hindering or preventing the pursuit of their total self-determination (Amin, 2006).

His contribution also focused critically on the Millennium Goals, which he considered to be an ideological instrument for legitimizing the current liberal system, assuming that the true form of emancipation involved breaking away from the capitalist model and building alternative economic, political, and institutional instruments (building a strong internal market extended to the markets of countries in similar developmental situations, creating a supranational institutional structure, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), breaking with unequal exchange platforms, among others).

On the other hand, post-developmental thinking provided space for plural, context-specific concepts of flourishing and practices that favor ecological balance, regional autonomy, and cultural particularity, in fact, sustainable development.

Thus, the discussion of development changed over time, as the accounts of inelastic succession shifted to more multifaceted, disputed, and multi-scalar accounts. The schemas of evolution used at the beginning of the nineteenth century were replaced in the twentieth century by programmatic theories of modernization related to state- building and economic policy. The subsequent critiques, dependency, world-systems, and post-development, redirected the academic community to structural inequalities, historical legacies, balances with nature, and cultural politics. By the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, a new set of frameworks emerged, focusing on the roles of reflexivity and risk, with researchers coming to understand that the productive forces of modernity also produce hazards within the system.

The idea of the risk society by Ulrich Beck is one example of this change: modernization produces not merely wealth but also systemic dangers, such as environmental pollution, poverty, climate change, and nuclear dangers, which are global and have global effects and must be mitigated by reflexive institutional responses. The structuration by Anthony Giddens anticipates the interrelation between agency and structure, indicating that developmental options are constrained by both the institutional factors and human action and organization. These views led to the development of sustainability as a sociological issue: a sphere of sociological interference of ecological boundaries, social fairness, cultural significance, and political authority.

At this point, it is relevant to reinforce the theoretical debates brought up by contemporary thinkers such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Beck introduced the idea of the “risk society” into sociological discourse, in which global threats, many of them linked to environmental degradation, take center stage in social organization. Giddens adds elements of reflexive modernization theory to the debate, suggesting that modern societies must continually reevaluate their practices in light of their cumulative environmental impacts. Although such concepts are not explicitly normative, they indicate analytical directions for rethinking sustainability policies from a critical perspective that views social relations as inseparable from ecological conditions.

Recent data reinforce this logic by showing the pressure population growth exerts on finite natural resources (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). An increasingly urbanized society faces challenges such as ensuring a sustainable food supply and mitigating emissions from the agricultural sector (Schmidt et al., 2016). This accentuates sociology's role in examining not only the macroeconomic effects of these transformations but also localized practices that promote regenerative economies oriented toward community well-being.

It is worth noting that contemporary authors such as Ulrich Beck have reframed these initial debates by proposing concepts such as the global risk society, an idea according to which environmental risks are partly produced by modern structures of production and consumption themselves. In this view, problems such as air pollution or water depletion do not arise in isolation; they reveal deep links between global economic systems and local vulnerabilities (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Anthony Giddens complements this interpretation by suggesting that societies need to develop reflexive mechanisms to continuously evaluate their practices in light of the cumulative environmental consequences.

## 2. Sustainability and Its Origins in Sociological Debate

Sustainability as a policy formulation term became most apparent worldwide in 1987 with the Brundtland Commission's report on sustainable development (UN), which defined sustainable development as development that fulfilled current needs without jeopardizing the opportunities of future generations to achieve their own.

However, sociological antecedents go deeper. Ecological insights into the metabolic rift predicted by Marx were prefigurments of the environmental disruption of the various processes in capitalist production. One can interpret Durkheim as focusing on moral integration in subsequent arguments about social norms and collective action to maintain the environment (Habermas, 2007). The disenchantment and subjugation of nature, which might be side effects of modernization, were warned against by Weber through his criticism of instrumental rationality. In fact, environmental disruption is not an "externality" of the capitalist process but an intrinsic dimension of the capitalist model.

The sociologists reorganized environmental issues into social phenomena: it was social relations, social institutions, and social organization that created pollution, depleted resources, and made people vulnerable, rather than natural processes. The initial ecological sociology documented how industrial societies shifted ecological burdens and how ecological damage is not randomly distributed among and between societies. Subsequently, environmental degradation was linked to growth and extraction-oriented development paradigms, which anticipate future challenges of ecological inequalities and unfair distribution of burdens among marginalized groups (Caradonna, 2022). In this way, the concept of sustainability entered the sociological discussion not only as a critique of contemporary development paradigms, but also as a program for reconstructing the final and the means of social life.

This means it paves the way for scientific and operational work in the social sciences, in general and in sociology in particular, towards building a less contradictory, unfair, and unequal society, based on analysis and social intervention aimed at social change. This is also sociology's role in integrating knowledge and designing paths for intervention towards a better society (De Vries, 2023). In fact, this is not only a professional debate (fundamental in the fields of the social sciences in a historical moment of overvaluation of the exact sciences), but also an ethical debate about our social systems and the balances with the environment.

Several theoretical perspectives dominate the sociological approaches to sustainability, each offering different prescriptions and priorities for analysis. The key currents are ecological modernization theory, risk society and reflexive modernization, political ecology, environmental justice scholarship, and the concept of degrowth/post- growth. The ecological modernization theory (EMT) holds that technology can reconcile environmental protection and economic development by establishing regulatory frameworks and market incentives, and by recognizing the role of public policies and the State as a decisive social, political, and economic actor. EMT suggests that advanced industrial societies can green their infrastructure and institutions by internalizing environmental costs and redesigning their production processes.

The sociological approach must also resist against attempts to create illusions and legitimize the current social and economic model, avoiding confusing real, structural systemic change with models that have merely illusory effects based on greenwashing, which serves more to legitimize the structural forms of the current model, now disguised as attempts at social change (Caradonna, 2022). This is again the challenge of a critical approach in rupture with the forms of legitimation of the capitalist model.

Opponents argue that EMT does not take stress sufficiently seriously, nor does it consider distributional implications of market solutions, and that it is prone to failing to devise technology fixes without structural reform. Risk society and reflexive modernization theories (Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck) focus on how modernity creates wealth while simultaneously generating systemic risks that must be addressed. These strategies entail precautionary policymaking, institutional learning, the role of public policies, and democratized governance as societies face the challenge of climate change, biodiversity loss, and technological uncertainty. They also emphasize cultural frames and changes in social consciousness as prerequisites for sustainable change. Political ecology situates environmental problems within the framework of relations of power, history, and class. It explores how political- economic structures and marginalized groups mediate land use, resource access, and environmental hazards in various ways in relation to ecological change (Piketty, 2014). The environmental justice scholarship builds on this point by focusing on distributive and procedural equity: who bears the brunt of ecological harms, who is involved in decision- making, and how recognition and reparation are provided.

In fact, the ecological questions are not an externality of the social, economic, and human processes. All of them are interdependent, living in a balance; humans are part of the ecological system, humans are organized in societies, and societies are part of this structural model of ecosystem interdependence (PBS, 2025).

Recent post-growth and degrowth theories dispute the use of GDP as the primary indicator of development and argue that affluent societies should systematically reduce resource throughput. Advocates stress sufficiency, redistribution, localized economies, and the democratization of resources, which sustainability demands reorganizing desires, institutions, and technologies, but not merely decarbonizing already extant growth regimes. Recent degrowth theories attempt to propose a model that is difficult to accept in the context of societies that may

not be prepared (not only in terms of economic structure, but above all in terms of social structure and social representations), a model that seems to want to mitigate the effects of its contradictions and injustices rather than to promote a structural change on them. These proposals encounter greater difficulties in public opinion, which is focused on growth and abundance. They require very rapid changes in very specific and slow-moving areas (social perceptions, social representations, etc.).

The sociology of sustainability is emerging as a scientific field dedicated to understanding how social dynamics interact in the face of challenges posed by new economic, environmental, social organization, and public and private responses PBS, 2025; Caradonna, 2022).

Precisely because sociology has historically been dedicated to the analysis of complex social phenomena, the intensification of the environmental crisis and the centrality of the debate on sustainable development point to the need for a systemic and systematic look at the forms of social organization in this context and society's responses to these issues, also integrating the environmental framework into the analysis of social, political, and economic structures.

## 3. Sociology of Sustainability as a Discipline

The sociology of sustainability has coalesced into an interdisciplinary sub- discipline that incorporates environmental sociology, development studies, urban sociology, science and technology studies, critical theory, and many others. Its central issues are the social-ecological system, governance of socio-technical transitions, and the interactions between inequality and ecological change (Longo et al., 2021). The discipline adopts a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative modelling of resource and emissions flows, qualitative ethnographies of communities, movements, and policymaking, historical-comparative studies, and participatory action research that involves stakeholders in the co-production of knowledge about sustainable futures. In the institutional sphere, the sociology of sustainability is reflected in university courses, interdisciplinary research centers, and journals focused on environmental sociology, sustainability science, and political ecology. The sociology of sustainability is also reflected in concrete projects and programs that apply the discipline's theoretical and analytical contributions, implemented through strategies for social intervention and social change. This is, for example, the case of the SDG, to which we will be back.

Themes of interest are *transition studies*- how cities and sectors change their infrastructures to low-carbon; *fair transition*- how to ensure equity in changing extractive industries; and *adaptation and resilience*- how communities adapt and change in response to climatic and ecological stress. The field is also concerned with normative and epistemic issues, how sustainability is understood, who frames the definitions, and the privileged knowledges (Caradonna, 2022; De Vries, 2023). Scholars are increasingly integrating Indigenous, decolonial, and feminist approaches, challenging Eurocentric universalism and prefiguring relational ontologies and intergenerational responsibilities.

Another dimension is the role of social movements and transnational networks in shaping sustainability agendas. From the early conservation movements at the local level to the global movement of climate strikes and the efforts of non-governmental organizations, collective action has played a central role in making scientific warnings politically relevant. Social movement scholars examine how frames, repertoires of contention, and organizational forms of struggle create the possibility of leading ordinary people to challenge prevailing development paradigms and to press for institutional change. The other key strand is the cultural politics of consumption and everyday practices: how routines, habits, and lifestyles are produced and opportuned, and how institutions, schools, corporations, etc., create possibilities for sustainable living. Urban metabolism, mobility regimes, and food systems studies also show that the shift towards sustainability is often path-dependent, driven by historical investments and infrastructural lock-in. Lastly, there is methodological pluralism in the field, as defined, and by combining normative reflection and empirical rigor, the sociology of sustainability is not just an attempt to explain but also (or consequently) to inform democratic deliberation and policymaking.

In fact, the sociological discussion of development has shifted from eighteenth-century perspectives on progress to sophisticated contemporary discussions of global inequality, cultural diversity, and environmental constraints. Classical, modernization, dependency, world-systems, and post-development theories offered analytical instruments for understanding how societies evolve and why development varies across locations and cultures. Sustainability is the landscape in which bio-emerges as the critique of unbridled growth and the re-establishment of social finalities and institutional forces, with a view to a re-positioning of the ecological facts, cultural dispositions, and moral liabilities. The sociology of sustainability is a relatively new academic discipline that draws on sociological theory, empirical research, and normative inquiry and addresses one of the most pressing topics of the modern world and its public policies. It argues that sustainability is not a technical matter but a deeply social one that entails power, meaning, and intergenerational justice (Cruz, 2024). They should do the work of sociologists that illuminates the means by which more just and more sustainable futures can be achieved, the trade-offs and balances between social goals, and how these can reach the public and policymakers in ways that facilitate democratic deliberation. In the academic world, in civil life, and in democratic government, it is still a fundamental science and

an open theoretical issue.

## 4. Cities, Sustainability, and Public Policy in the SDG Era

The concentration of people, capital, infrastructure, and power in the city makes it a decisive factor in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In fact, Urbanization emerged as both a cause and a consequence of demographic change. The proportion of people living in urban areas grew dramatically, fundamentally altering family structures, economic relationships, and social organization. By the mid- 20th century, urban inhabitants generally enjoyed better health outcomes than their rural counterparts, though benefits were unequally distributed between the rich and the poor, eventually magnifying social differences.

But urban agglomeration processes and the interconnectedness of production and consumption make cities the places where the strains of sustainability are most evident: social inequalities, environmental pressures, and lapses in nation-state jurisdiction are likely to be magnified by agglomeration effects. Sociology aims to contribute to a study of sustainability that also focuses on city societies, their institutions, explains how the SDGs are being localized through new city policies, and weighs trade-offs and co-benefits across climate, health, nature, and inclusion agendas (Caradonna, 2022; Cruz, 2024). Our analysis argues that the new era of sustainable development is, in fact, a new politics of urban transformation and sociological participation: one based on multi-level governance, evidence-based planning, participatory inclusion, and a precise reckoning with distributional impacts and path dependencies. The argument has five stages: conceptualizing sociology of sustainability in cities; reviewing how SDGs get translated into local policy tools; inclusion and equity as organizing principles instead of an afterthought; sectoral strategies, particularly climate mitigation/adaptation, health- promoting urban design, and nature-based solutions; measurement, accountability, and learning through voluntary local reviews and comparative analytics. Indeed, it concludes by outlining implications for how new cities could be governed, as well as for renewing public policy in existing metropolitan areas in the context of globalization and multiple crises.

The sociology of sustainability begins with the fact that ecological strains, health, and infrastructural hazards are all patterned: they evoke unequal exposure, ability to adapt, and unequal claims in space and resources. These processes are enhanced by urbanization and metropolitanization. Recent climatic science highlights urban centers as locations of both concentrated hazard and exposure, such as heat, floods, air pollutants, supply-chain breakdown, which are influenced by built forms, the interdependence of infrastructure, and socio-economic stratification (IPCC, 2022). This perspective of the system denies the existence of narrow technologist approaches and predicts, instead, institutions, normative practices, and everyday routines that reproduce unsustainable patterns or open the way for transformative change. Specifically, residential, locational, and access disparities determine the weight of environmental danger and the fruits of sustainability changes.

The territorial location of social groups and classes is not unrelated to the economic and power structure, affecting individuals differently depending on their greater exposure to vulnerabilities arising from climate change, lack of basic infrastructure, absence of public facilities and qualified spaces, among many others.

Hence, equity is not another policy application among others but the grain through which the whole sustainability is crafted and inaccessible (IPCC, 2022). In the event that cities are complicated even socio-ecological systems, city governance and city policies must manage feedback and trade-offs. Climate, health, and urban environment research demonstrates that decarbonization strategies targeting motorized transport or building, in either a social-thin or social-thick form, can worsen displacement, energy poverty, or accessibility disparities. Meanwhile, when developed as more socially cohesive, less technocratic approaches, they can produce a range of co-benefits, including alleviation of chronic disease, improvements in social cohesion, and better quality of life (Lowe et al., 2022; Romanello et al., 2021). This reframing has policy implications: the idea of a sustainable city is not the greenest or the smartest, but the fairest, one in which environmental benefits and social provisions are generalized.

## 5. The SDG and the (new and smart) cities

The Sustainable Development Goals are a set of 17 global goals adopted by all United Nations (UN) member states in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These goals provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future, beginning with urban areas and their characteristics (Sachs, 2022). New cities are planned urban areas built from the ground up or major redevelopments designed to support population growth, encourage economic development, and use sustainable, smart, and innovative technologies to improve quality of life and to improve the balance between people and the ecosystem.

New cities play a significant role in achieving the SDGs, especially those focused on sustainability, innovation, and well-being, thereby contributing, in this way, to sustainable cities and a sustainable planet.

This is the purpose of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities): to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable; improve urban planning, housing, transportation, and waste management; and ensure access to green spaces and reduce environmental impact. In fact, in new (smart) cities, planners use eco-friendly designs, renewable energy, and smart technology to reduce carbon footprints and improve living standards.

The SDGs provide a common set of terms and goals that numerous cities are now using to coordinate strategies across departments and government tiers. But localization is also not automatic and uniform. A comparative analysis with Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), which are the primary tool cities rely on to report on SDG progress, shows that local governments focus on a narrow subset of objectives, usually on action rather than indicator-based analysis. The size of cities, fiscal capacity, data infrastructure, and national enabling environments determine the extent and rigor of the local follow-up and review (Ortiz-Moya et al., 2025). Most notably, the VLR process itself may be generative: it fosters interdepartmental coordination, provokes stakeholder dialogue, and normalizes cross-sectoral thinking, even when measurement falls behind ambition (Ortiz-Moya et al., 2025; Caradonna, 2022). An equivalent body of literature emphasizes that geographic variables are significant in accelerating progress toward the SDGs. The regions and cities govern or manage land use, transportation, waste, housing, and local economic growth; therefore, they are well-positioned to use the SDGs as a planning framework. However, they need intergovernmental arrangements, fiscal instruments, and regulatory adaptability to address cross-jurisdictional consequences, rising living costs, and the challenges of decarbonization in consumption and production-based systems (OECD, 2024). To put it concisely, it is a pragmatic statecraft and localization, a process that brings world interests and local resources into local political formations.

Hundreds of cities promise to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions. Based on an analysis of 318 municipal climate strategies through machine learning, it can be seen that although many cities claim to use the net-zero brand, their action plans are uneven and frequently incomplete, with gaps in their implementation journeys, areas of social equity engagement, and coordination of their systems to support energy, mobility, and land use (Sachs, 2022; Cruz, 2024).

The conclusions are grim and practical: on one side, the theme serves frequently more for discursive and political issues, more than to really change the urban and collective life; on the other side, the standard templates, transparent benchmarks, and equity-based measures ought to be applied to cities to ensure that targets are converted into sequenced actions, which can be monitored over time.

The problem is not only institutional or political. It also lies in how public opinion represents social challenges and possible responses. On the one hand, there is the resigned perspective, which holds that the problem is so complex and global that citizens can do nothing on an individual level. On the other hand, there is the idea that nature has mechanisms of adaptation, which presupposes a relative exaggeration of these approaches. Or, from an equally static perspective, that the situation is now irreversible and the priority is to mitigate its impacts (Sachs, 2022).

One of the best rationales for the integrated sustainability policy is the evidence from public health. In The Lancet Global Health (https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/home), a multi-country study demonstrates links between compact, mixed-use urban form, fine-grained street networks, and the risk of non-communicable disease, as well as promoting climate mitigation and social inclusion in a context of affordable housing and anti-displacement protection (Lowe et al., 2022). They are not environmental or mobility choices; they are social policy choices that have health returns that can be quantified and equity risks (Lowe et al., 2022). The Annual Lancet Countdown reports have documented the health impacts of delaying climate action and the co-benefits of faster mitigation. The 2021 edition underscores that the policy spaces for urban heat, air quality, and energy transitions are intertwined spheres where urgency can improve the lives of more people, increase labor efficiency, and strengthen health systems against shocks.

This reinforces the argument to leaders of cities to adopt cross-cutting programs which provide immediate health benefits but shift long-term emissions patterns - cool roofs and tree-canopy expansion, low-emission zones, housing retrofits.

In this line of argument, it is important to adopt a reflective approach rather than the convenient abdication of responsibility by individuals and groups. Does public opinion, especially in a democratic context, accept the reduction of immediate benefits and advantages in the name of vague issues that are not yet perceived as very pressing? Do they accept these trends in times of crisis or only in times of economic growth, when they can participate in these projects without too much “pain”? How can we recognize the importance of this debate when our families, schools, and economic structures have prepared us more for ownership and less for global concerns and critical perspectives?

The Lancet Countdown series of annual reports has documented the health impacts of inaction and the benefits of the speed of mitigation action. The 2021 edition also states that urban heat, air quality, and energy transitions are interconnected policy spaces where early intervention can save lives, enhance labor productivity, and strengthen health systems' resilience against shocks.

To city leaders, this makes the argument of cross-cutting programs: cool-roofs and tree-canopy expansion, low-emission zones, housing retrofits, which would offer immediate health benefits as well as bend the long-term curves of emissions, compelling. Nature-based solutions (NbS) are being developed to shift to the center of climate change adaptation and mitigation policy. Whereas uniform benefits are sometimes overvalued in early advocacy offerings, more recent literature suggests the net effect of design is uniformly considered alongside context sensitivity, governance capacity, and a focus on distributional outcomes. The new syntheses indicate that NbS can

mitigate urban heat islands and stormwater and can be used to store carbon, as long as they are implemented together with infrastructure planning and community stewardship (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2024). Importantly, the purpose of NbS is to be developed as social infrastructure that promotes health, safety, and belonging, such that social inclusion and ecological performance support each other rather than conflict (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2024).

In fact, environmental policy cannot and will not be sociologically legitimate, viable, and sustainable without inclusion and social cohesion as a condition. There are three dimensions of focus. First, *procedural inclusion*: by whom are the agendas set and co-designed, and is the process of the decision-making being justified publicly? In the absence of substantive attentiveness and the sharing of power, sustainability interests may become entrenched in distrust, especially in locations that have historically suffered the negative impacts of an environmentally hostile atmosphere. Second, *distributional inclusion*: beneficiaries and costs. For example, road space reallocation (such as bicycle corridors or pedestrian ways) and congestion pricing can provide climate and health benefits at the expense of low-income households; the solution should be complemented with affordable, reliable public transport and benefits for low-income households to prevent counterproductive effects. Third, *recognitional inclusion*: is policy indicative of different identities, practices, and geographies, such as informal settlements, peri-urban, and disability justice standpoints.

These points are supported by the evidence of health-oriented urban design research that records how active mobility and the investments in the green space can reduce the gap in health inequalities in conjunction with the affordability of houses, safe streets, and the social programs (Lowe et al., 2022). Scholarships on climate and health have also emphasized that, to prevent exposure to heat and air pollution, vulnerable populations need individual interventions and social safety nets, rather than just technical standards. The IPCC incorporates these lessons within a risk-and-resilience framework that embraces social reduction of vulnerability as a primary form of adaptation, rather than a co-benefit (IPCC, 2022).

This is the context in which UNESCO's proposal for the creation of MIL Cities (Media and Information Literacy Cities) models emerged as a decisive pillar of sustainable urban development, in order to mobilize cities and urban policies to implement guidelines for urban practices regarding social inclusion and culturally responsive urban spaces, prioritizing the real needs of citizens and their participation.

## 6. New Cities and the Politics of Urban (new) Formation

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly SDG 11 (Making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable), acknowledges cities as key players in achieving sustainability goals. This represents a paradigm shift recognizing urban settlements as both sources of challenges and engines of solutions for global sustainability. The emphasis on local and regional governance reflects growing recognition that while national and international frameworks provide essential guidance, effective implementation requires contextualized approaches that account for diverse urban realities. Cities must navigate complex trade-offs between economic growth, ecological preservation, and social equity while managing the uncertainties of globalization and climate change (or compensating for them). Understanding these dynamics necessitates attention to the social dimensions of sustainability, including how power relations, institutional arrangements, citizens' perceptions, and community mobilization influence outcomes.

The sociology of sustainability offers critical insights into the mechanisms of urban transformation, emphasizing the importance of governance structures that enable meaningful participation, ensure accountability, and foster innovation. Local and regional public policies play a decisive role in translating global sustainability commitments into tangible (local) action with (global) consequences. Yet, their effectiveness depends on the capacity to mobilize diverse stakeholders, address structural inequalities, promote new organizational arrangements, and align interventions across multiple scales. As cities confront mounting pressures from urbanization, demographic change, and environmental degradation, sociological perspectives help illuminate both the barriers to and opportunities for transformative change toward more sustainable and inclusive urban futures.

Recent urban innovations extend beyond compact city models to encompass nature-based solutions, circular economy principles, and smart city technologies, though evidence regarding their effectiveness remains mixed and context-dependent. Nature- based solutions for urban areas demonstrate particular promise for addressing multiple challenges, including climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation, and urban metabolism, as well as social cohesion and improved quality of life. Yet, their successful implementation depends critically on governance structures, stakeholder engagement capacity, and adequate resource allocation (Giddens, 2017). An implementation analysis reveals significant barriers, including technological complexity, limited governance capacity, insufficient mechanisms for stakeholder participation, and challenges in securing adequate financing. The integration of these diverse approaches into coherent urban regeneration strategies requires moving beyond sectoral silos toward systemic frameworks that acknowledge trade-offs between economic development, social equity, and environmental protection while enabling adaptive management under uncertainty.

The new city proposals of the present day, such as technology hubs, climate- resistant townships, cities with soft mobility (bicycles, for example), and infrastructure for people's leisure, and satellite suburbs, carry both

invitations and warnings. On one hand, the greenfield developments can overcome the legacy constraints by integrating compact form, transit-first mobility, circular-economy logistics, and distributed energy systems at the very stage. Alternatively, international studies caution that risks are commonly merely relocated, not abolished: greenfield developments privatize benefits, privatize costs, export trash, defragment metropolitan governments, and replicate claustrophobic spatial practices. The example of waste exports (garbage and hazardous waste) demonstrates the global effects of local problems, further externalizing them and reinforcing the existing trends. It is a demonstration of the model's structural ability to defend the economic and social structure, assuming the concern to evade problems, hide serious issues, and demonstrate the model's apparent capacity for regeneration, in a convenient NIMBY (*Not In My Backyard*) logic.

In sociology-of-sustainability terms, the question is not whether a city is new or old but whether its establishment is managed as a collective project with the social compacts that are enforceable, and in which the land policy is transparent, and where intergovernmental responsibility is accountable with public participation based on the SDG targets (IPCC, 2022; Lowe et al., 2022). This, in practice, would be to promote proposals and incentives based on measurable public outcomes (affordable housing ratios, universal design standards, public space requirements, school and clinic provision, and climate-risk disclosures), basing greenfield projects on regional plans rather than stand-alone enclaves. The use of health-first street grids, blue-green corridors, soft mobility, mixed-use zoning, and others is not just an architectural or "fashion" choice but an institutional decision to socially integrate and reduce long-term risk in modern cities – not the cities *of* the future, but the cities *with* future (Lowe et al., 2022; Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2024).

Achieving truly sustainable urban development requires confronting persistent inequalities and exclusionary processes that sustainability interventions themselves can inadvertently reinforce (as we mentioned above with the example of the Greenwashing processes). Environmental justice research reveals that greening initiatives, while providing ecological benefits, often trigger gentrification that displaces the very populations intended to benefit.

The city's decarbonization flows through its infrastructure and distributed energy systems. As demonstrated in European cities that started working towards reaching climate-neutrality, coherent stationary-energy roadmaps, such as deep-retrofit programs, the use of heat pumps, district energy, and demand-management, as well as well-defined governance structures and financing techniques that might mobilize private capital and safeguard energy-poor households, are significant.

A sociological reading warns of carbon landlordism and retrofitted gentrification; it demands the combination of technical standards and tenant protections, that social housing retrofits be publicly financed, and that workforce policies produce good green jobs. The ideal of trade-off management is transport policy. The Lancet and urban health research paper provides evidence that low-traffic neighborhoods, congestion pricing, and active-travel networks reduce emissions and disease burden. Yet, the allocation of benefits relies on access baselines, fair policies, and street safety enforcement (Lowe et al., 2022). The more enduring coalitions were achieved by cities that followed the sequencing of interventions: the first required that cities ensure service and affordability, after which they should price it and reallocate the space.

Getting mobility is an SDG frame integrator in this case: SDG 3 (health), SDG 10 (inequality), SDG 11 (sustainable cities), and SDG 13 (climate) are developed simultaneously in the case of mobility as a social right being a part of a decarbonization pathway (Lowe et al., 2022). Sustainability plans do not work when they do not incorporate land markets and housing systems. Compact, transit-oriented development, by reducing land values without efficiency through the displacement of low-income residents, may achieve anti-equity outcomes. Thus, inclusionary zoning, social and cooperative housing, value-capture tools, and anti-speculation measures are not necessarily at the edges; they are climate policy by other names, as they determine who can live near employment, services, and low-carbon facilities.

This is a sociological-institutional issue: how to align land and housing governance with the distributional aspirations of the SDGs rather than treating them as an externality of the privately operated market – which it isn't (IPCC, 2022). An example of an ecological investment is NbS, as we saw before, which is structured as a single good. However, the benefits of such, such as cooling, flood reduction, mental health, and biodiversity, depend on access and maintenance. Research highlights the need to go beyond single parks to linked blue-green networks, which are also planned and part of water, (soft) transport, and housing networks (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2024).

Climate risk becomes more urban and social risk. More and hardest. The IPCC analysis of cities, settlements, and infrastructure outlines compound and cascading risks, such as heat and drought combined with energy disruptions; oceanic floods and groundwater shrinkage; stormwater blanketing drainage systems; and climate effects that trickle into health, logistics, and finances (IPCC, 2022). An agenda of resilience aligned with the SDGs should thus promote cooling equity, harden critical infrastructure, build resilient water systems, and strengthen social protection. It is also vital to note that there are limits to adaptation: some coastal and riverine areas will have to be managed back or transformed to new land use practices. Sociological adaptation implies institutional adaptation, such as budgeting for risk, reinsuring and remortgaging, integrating climate disclosure into land-use authorizations, and developing legal frameworks for the relocation and reuse of land that protect rights and

livelihoods (IPCC, 2022).

In the absence of validated statistics and feedback, SDG localization will be performative. The new state of evidence in VLR indicates advancements and underscores that many cities can now map the strategy to SDG targets. In contrast, fewer can report disaggregated trends in indicators by neighborhood, income, gender, or race/ethnicity (Ortiz-Moya et al., 2025). To address this situation, the way forward is to invest in city data infrastructure and open-data systems, and to collaborate with universities and civil society to co-create indicators relevant to local decision-making. Candidate metrics in peer-reviewed syntheses of health and climate communities have causally strong connections, such as the incidence of chronic diseases related to active-mobility environments; heat-mortality indices associated with covering with canopies and retrofitting buildings; and the achievement of air-quality gains with the electrification of transport, soft mobility corridors, providing a starting point in results-based governance (Lowe et al., 2022).

## 7. Globalization, Multi-Level Governance, and the New Politics of Urban Sustainability

The issue of urban sustainability is formed by globalization in at least three aspects. To begin with, it decentralizes effects: the consumption footprints of cities and risks of supply chains do not respect the limits of the municipalities, but trade policy, corporate practice, and international standards are involved. Second, it disperses policy formulations: whether a 15-minute city or a low-emission zone, the concepts spread quickly across transnational networks, often faster than they receive serious consideration. Third, it disrupts fiscal and governance structures, as mobile capital and platform economies create challenges for local revenues generation and governance. The response to the policy should then be based on a multi-level and coalition policy. The OECD's localization of SDGs work underscores the need for intergovernmental agreements, shared indicators, and place-based industrial policy that integrates decarbonization with inclusion and resilience (OECD, 2024). The health-and-climate scholarship holds that the most credible global-to-local alignment is achieved when neighborhoods feel cooler, streets are safer, air is cleaner, and plausible political timeframes are met (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2024; Lowe et al., 2022).

Sustainable city policy redefines what works from a sociological perspective. Lead with co-benefits that residents can experience. Health-sensitive policies such as safe walking and segregated bicycle corridors, tree cover and shading, and house retrofitting assure legitimacy and allocate the good at an early stage during the transition. The support of evidence also aligns with health and climate outcomes irrespective of setting (Lowe et al., 2022).

Conflict plan blue-green social infrastructure: NbS should be community-based, interconnected on scales, and should use anti-displacement practices. Having been treated in this manner, urban nature would serve as climate infrastructure and civic commons (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2024).

Implement the SDGs as a governmental technology (at the local and national levels). Instead of a checklist, use the SDGs as a framework for interdepartmental coordination, intergovernmental covenants, and lifelong learning by the VLRs, open data, and peer benchmarking (Ortiz-Moya et al., 2025; OECD, 2024).

Effective participatory governance mechanisms emerge as essential (yet insufficient in their own) conditions for inclusive sustainability outcomes. While community engagement has become standard rhetoric in urban planning discourse, implementation often remains superficial, with power asymmetries constraining meaningful participation in decision-making. The challenge extends beyond establishing formal participation structures to ensuring that marginalized voices genuinely influence policy outcomes, rather than merely legitimizing predetermined agendas. Digital transformation initiatives promise enhanced governance but raise concerns about whether innovative city platforms genuinely democratize decision-making or create new exclusions through digital divides and technocratic approaches that privilege technical expertise over lived experience. Strengthening inclusive governance requires building capacity among disadvantaged groups, ensuring representation throughout planning processes, addressing underlying power inequalities, and establishing accountability mechanisms that make decision-makers responsive to diverse constituencies or contradictions. Cities pursuing transformative sustainability must therefore integrate distributional, procedural, and recognitional dimensions of justice, moving beyond a narrow focus on equitable distribution of environmental amenities to address who participates in shaping urban futures and whose knowledge systems inform sustainability transitions.

Regional and national enabling environments prove crucial for local sustainability action. Cities require supportive legal frameworks, adequate financing mechanisms, technical capacity, and policy coherence across governance levels. It also requires a public opinion that is exigent and participative.

Transformative change demands confronting power structures, redistributing resources, and supporting grassroots alternatives that challenge dominant development models while building on communities' own priorities and knowledge systems. Cities must develop capacity for reflexive governance that enables continuous learning, adapts to emergent challenges, and redistributes decision-making authority toward marginalized populations whose experiences and knowledge remain essential for crafting context- appropriate sustainability pathways.

Environmental issues have undergone a significant transformation in their understanding of the human-

nature relationship from the Enlightenment period to contemporary debates on sociology and sustainability. Early sociological thought examined this relationship by situating humans within a natural environment, emphasizing the normative and epistemic drives that shaped human interactions with nature. This tradition established a foundation for conceiving environmental sustainability as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon rather than merely an ecological or economic issue. Contemporary perspectives continue to evolve by critically engaging with historical roots and theoretical concepts, underscoring the interplay among culture, social structures, institutional organization, and environmental change (Sachs, 2025).

Further, the debate on sustainability in sociology's trajectory highlights the importance of considering the evolution of man-nature relations throughout intellectual history, situating environmental sustainability within broader societal debates about modernity, progress, and the human condition (Sachs, 2025). These debates underscore the need for sociology to address environmental issues with a nuanced understanding of social behavior, power relations, and institutional dynamics, as we discussed before.

Furthermore, ecological economics grapples with tensions between science-based approaches that prioritize material conditions and science-skeptical perspectives that emphasize the critique of human domination over nature embedded in scientific rationality. The field attempts to reconcile these positions by advancing pluralistic frameworks that can incorporate democracy, ethics, and sustainability, recognizing that the ecological crisis reflects not only resource limitations but also socio-political, institutional, and epistemological contradictions.

Indeed, Sociology plays a decisive role in shaping sustainable development agendas by ensuring that social equity and community engagement are integral to environmental policymaking. Thus, sociology serves both as an analytical lens and a practical tool in achieving more holistic and equitable sustainability outcomes. The sociological approach calls for integrated, context-sensitive approaches that advocate for transcending simplistic triadic models and focusing on lived experiences, collaborative governance, and place-based analyses (Sachs, 2025; Sachs, 2015; Caradonna, 2022). These approaches prioritize recognizing the inseparability of social and ecological systems, advancing sustainability as a dynamic and socially embedded process rather than a static balance among isolated domains.

By revealing the power dynamics embedded in sustainability communication, sociological approaches uncover how language shapes social realities, legitimates certain practices, and marginalizes dissenting views. This insight is critical for understanding how sustainability initiatives are framed, accepted, or resisted within organizations and societies.

## Conclusions

Effective integration requires acknowledging the variability of social contexts and tailoring governance structures to local conditions and community participation levels. This approach aligns with emergent scholarship advocating for grounded perspectives that combine equity and environmental protection within integrated urban governance models. In fact, conceptual frameworks in social sustainability incorporate elements such as equity, safety, community attachment, and urban form, advocating for urban planning that supports (environmental) cognizance that the spatial and social dimensions of sustainability are inextricably linked in urban contexts.

It is not merely an era of targets, but the SDG era is an era of urban politics that is structured around the co-production of environmental integrity, social inclusion, and institutional capacity. All of them are examined using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A sociological perspective sees sustainable cities as those in which public policies integrate climate, health, housing, mobility, and nature into a coherent social contract that produces visible benefits today and provides resilience against downside shocks in the future. The research reviewed here identifies practical levers. Cities that make net-zero roadmaps conform to measures of equity; that landscape streets and neighborhoods to be healthy; that construct a blue-green network as a civic common good; that gauge and publish what and how it counts, and that bargain intergovernmental compacts to localize the SDGs with resources and power, such cities are better placed to translate world objectives into daily changes in life opportunities and life quality. For new (smart) cities, the challenge is to avoid reproducing old exclusions behind new façades: to treat urban formation as a public institution with enforceable social outcomes. For established metropolitan regions, the imperative is to retrofit not only buildings and streets, but also governance: to align budgets, standards, and land-value dynamics with inclusionary sustainability. In both cases, the sociology of sustainability insists that the fair city is the sustainable city. And that the politics of how we share space, risk, and opportunity will decide whether the SDGs become lived realities or remain distant aspirations. But also, in respect of the principles of Agenda 21, which emerged from the Rio Conference in 1992, the sustainable world begins with sustainable practices in local, urban, and metropolitan contexts. We should think globally, but if we don't act locally or regionally, we will never act as we intended.

The sociological debates on sustainability are rich and multifaceted, encompassing theoretical insights, empirical challenges, and critical reflections on institutional, cultural, and discursive dimensions. These debates illuminate the complexity of achieving sustainability in contemporary societies and highlight sociology's indispensable role in fostering equitable and transformative pathways toward sustainable (near) futures.

**References**


Aghion, Philippe; Antonin, Céline; Bunel, Simon (2021). O Poder da Destruição Criadora. Lisboa: Temas e Debates.

Alonso, Angela; Costa, Valeriano (2002). Por uma Sociologia dos conflitos ambientais no Brasil. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales.

Amin, Samir (1980). A Crise do Imperialismo. Lisboa: Sá da Costa Ed. Amin, Samir (2006). O Vírus Liberal. Lisboa: Campo das Letras.

Brinkmann, Robert (2016). Introduction to Sustainability. Wiley Blackwell.

Caetano, Joaquim, et al. (2025). A Caminho da Sustentabilidade. Lisboa: Clássica Editora.

Caradonna, Jeremy (2022). Sustainability, a History (2ª ed.). Oxford University Press.

Cardoso, Fernando Henrique (1979). Dependency and Development in Latin America. California: University of California Press.

Cruz, Bernardo Ivo & Brás, Diana Marques (2024). Sustentabilidade, um desafio coletivo. Lisboa: Tinta da China.

De Vries, Bert (2023). Sustainability Science (2ª ed.). Cambridge University Press. Delicado, Ana, et al. (eds.) (2018). Changing societies: legacies and challenges (vol. III). Lisboa: ICS.

Drouin, Jean-Claude (2014). Os Grandes Economistas. Lisboa: Texto e Grafia. Giddens, Anthony (2017). Capitalismo e Moderna Teoria Social. Lisboa: Ed. Presença. Habermas, Jurgen (2003). Era das Transições. SP: Tempo Brasileiro.

Habermas, Jurgen (2007). Técnica e Ciência como Ideologia. Lisboa: Ed. 70.

Hardi, Peter; Semple, Penelope (2000). The Dashboard of Sustainability. Canada: IISD, Paper presented at the Fifth International Conference on Social Science Methodology, Cologne, Germany, October 3 - 6, 2000

Herndl, Carl G. (2014). Sustainability, a reader for writers. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hicks, Tom (2024). Understanding the Wealth of Nations, Ed. Kindle. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2022). *Chapter 6: Cities, settlements and key infrastructure.*

IPCC, 2022: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA.

Latouche, Serge (2011). Pequeno Tratado do Decrescimento Sereno. Lisboa: Ed. 70.

Lin, Jan, & Mele, Christopher (2012). The Urban Sociology Reader. London: Routledge.

Longo, S. B., Isgren, E., Clark, B., Jorgenson, A. K., Jerneck, A., Olsson, L., Kelly, O. M., Harnesk, D., & York, R. (2021). Sociology for sustainability science. *Discover Sustainability*.

Lowe, M., Arundel, J., Hooper, P., Rozek, J., Higgs, C., Roberts, R., ... & Giles-Corti, B. (2022). City planning policies to support health and sustainability: An international comparison of policy indicators in 25 cities. *The Lancet Global Health, 10*(9), e1286–e1296.

Nieuwenhuijsen, M. J., Sillero-Rejon, C., Mueller, N., & Rojas-Rueda, D. (2024). Climate crisis, cities, and health. *The Lancet*, 403(10425), 1843–1845.

OECD (2024), OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2024 Issue 2, No. 116, OECD Publishing, Paris,

Ortiz-Moya, F., Koch, F., & D'Alessandro, C. (2025). Cities' review of the Sustainable

Development Goals and the Voluntary Local Reviews. *npj Urban Sustainability, 5*, Article 8.

Piketty, Thomas (2014). O Capital no século XXI. Lisboa: Círculo de Leitores.

Planetary Boundaries Science (PBScience). 2025. Planetary Health Check 2025. Potsdam: Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK).

Portney, Kent (2015). Sustainability. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Racimo, Fernando (2025). Science in Resistance. California: University of California Press.

RDH (1996). Relatório do Desenvolvimento Humano: Crecimiento económico para propriar el desarrollo humano? PNUD/ONU.

RDH (2014). Relatório do Desenvolvimento Humano: Sostener o progresso humano: Reducir las vulnerabilidades y construir resiliencia. PNUD/ONU.

Robertson, Margaret (2021). Sustainability, Principles and Practice. London: Routledge. Rockstrom, Johan, et al. (2021). Breaking Boundaries: the science behind our planet. Ed. DK.

Rostow, W. W. (1991). The Stages of Economic Growth (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roubini, Nouriel (2022). Mega-Ameaças. Lisboa: Planeta dos Livros.

Sachs, Jeffrey (2015). The Age of Sustainable Development. NY: Oxford University Press.

Sachs, Jeffrey (ed.) (2022). Ethics in Action for Sustainable Development. NY: Columbia University Press.

Sachs, Jeffrey, et al. (2025). Sustainable Development Report 2025: Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century. Dublin: Dublin University Press.

Schmidt, L., Truninger, M. Guerra, J. e Prista, P. (2016). Primeiro Grande Inquérito sobre Sustentabilidade: Relatório Final. Lisboa: Observa.

Sen, Amartya (2010). Desenvolvimento como Liberdade. Lisboa: Companhia de Bolso. Soares, Jorge C. (2016). Escola de Frankfurt. RJ: Ed. UCRJ.
Thiele, Leslie Paul (2024). Sustainability (3ª ed.). London: Polity. UN; Brundtland, Gro H. (1987). Our Common Future. Ed. UN.