The returning butterflies

Social entrepreneurs and sustainability in ecotourism

Jensen, Christine Revsbech; Langergaard, Luise Li

Published in:
Forskning og Forandring

DOI:
10.23865/fof.v3.2404

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Jensen, C. R., & Langergaard, L. L. (2020). The returning butterflies: Social entrepreneurs and sustainability in ecotourism . *Forskning og Forandring*, *3*(2), 6-26. https://doi.org/10.23865/fof.v3.2404

Forskning & Forandring

RESEARCH AND CHANGE

Vol. 3, No. 2, 2020, 6–26

ORIGINAL ARTICLE – PEER-REVIEWED

The returning butterflies: Social entrepreneurs and sustainability in ecotourism

Authors: Christine Revsbech Jensen & Luise Li Langergaard

Affiliation: Roskilde University, Denmark (Department of people and technology)

Contact corresponding author: Christine Revsbech Jensen; crevsbech@ruc.dk

Abstract

This article is based on a field study of adventure ecotourism in Nepal, and aims to explore how social entrepreneurs operationalize and practice sustainable development in this field. The qualitative data material was analyzed from a critical hermeneutical approach. The article reviews views of currently discussed, multi-dimensional sustainability models representing the idea that sustainability can be developed with an eye to the dynamics between society, the environment, and economy. These dimensions of sustainability were brought into the analysis of the case organization, offering empirical practice perspectives on: the articulation of fundamental values put into action; efforts towards ecology; and the involvement of the local community. All of these have an emphasis on education as a tool for change. Based on examples and critical insight into current sustainability models, the article concludes: that it is of central importance to the case study organization to find a balance between the dimensions; that they are interconnected; and that one aspect of this implies viewing economy as a means rather than an end in itself.

Keywords

Sustainability, social entrepreneurship, ecotourism, embedded economy, critical hermeneutics

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Introduction

"Sustainability" has come to the fore as a policy issue of interest to activists, governments, NGOs, social enterprises, and private companies (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002). How to support a more sustainable course of development, including more sustainable patterns of production and consumption, is perceived to be one of the great challenges of our time, and something which many different organizations, companies, social enterprises, and actors are involved in (Andersen & Hulgård, 2019). Even though social enterprises are generally defined as being concerned with social value and environmental goals (Dees & Centennial, 1998; Dart, 2004; Utting, 2015), the ways in which concepts of sustainability are interpreted and put into practice by social entrepreneurs merits further investigation. In this article, we observe that actors in ecotourism act in a socially entrepreneurial manner to promote sustainability. We consider social entrepreneurship to be a potential driver of social transformation (Alvord et al., 2004; Barinaga, 2012) and of sustainable development (Rahdari et al., 2016). Some scholars argue that solutions to social problems, such as the sustainable alleviation of the constellation of problems associated with long-term poverty, often demand fundamental transformations in political, economic and social systems. Our focus here is rather on the actions and notions of sustainability on the level of social action (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018), and on more situated efforts and everyday practices, rather than on some large-scale coordinated effort as the only way to achieve social transformation (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Since the Brundtland report, it has been common to operate with a three-pillar concept of sustainability, covering the social, ecological, and economic dimensions of sustainability (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987; Boström, 2012; Griessler & Littig, 2005). These three are often portrayed as partly overlapping yet independent dimensions of sustainability. Potential conflicts, as well as the practical interconnection between these dimensions, have been less systematically explored. In order to address the gap between theory and practice, this article studies how sustainability is practised by an ecotourism organization: the Eco-Adventure School (EAS) in Nepal.[1] We ask the questions: How does the EAS operationalize sustainability? And how can we understand their role as change makers?

We understand ecotourism, in line with The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), as: "Responsible travel to natural areas with the purpose of conserving the environment, sustaining the well-being of the local people and educating tourists" (Wondirad et al., 2020: 1). The EAS can be characterized as a social business, integrating social, financial, and green aims as key principles in their business model, as well as in their practice, with the aim of working sustainably. As part of initiating a new research project in eco-tourism and social entrepreneurs, we carried out a field

1 All informants and companies referred to in the empirical data material have been anonymized.

visit which involved observation and interviews in November 2019. Having become acquainted with EAS, we found it interesting in relation to the field of social entrepreneurship and management how the owners of the EAS acted as social entrepreneurs in order to maintain the sustainability of their business. Our findings introduce a budding area of bottom-up solutions to the environmental and social challenges encountered within ecotourism. The results show that, besides *understanding* sustainability and thoroughly *performing* sustainably in the everyday life of a sustainable business, *passing on* the know-how and involving local communities are key factors in displaying an innovatively sustainable business strategy and approach as a solution to the environmental and social problems which the tourism business poses, and currently generally represents (Sheldon et al., 2017).

The main contribution of this article is to present findings concerning how social entrepreneurs in the field of ecotourism specifically practice an integration of the three sustainability value spheres: the green, the social, and the financial. The showcase of practice, from an entrepreneurial angle, elaborates, nuances, and challenges the currently debated theoretical-ideological models for the benefit of smaller social enterprises, and value-integrated sustainable business approaches for ecotourism in general.

Pillars or development goals – a broad concept of sustainability

The concept of sustainable development represents an attempt to combine growing concerns about a range of environmental issues with socio-economic issues (Hopwood et al., 2005). The Brundtland report from 1987, *Our Common Future*, which has had significant influence on the definition of sustainability (McKenzie, 2004), stresses the combination of ecological, economic, social, and institutional aspects of social development (WCED, 1987; Dupret & Langergaard, 2020; Arler, 2015).

Despite the broadness of the concepts of 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' (Bonnett, 1999; Griessler & Littig, 2005; McKenzie, 2004; Giddings et al., 2002), the majority of definitions share some common elements. The essence of any sustainable development definition, according to Wackernackel et al. (2017), implies a concern for everyone's wellbeing (development), while acknowledging the need to operate within the ecological constraints of the planet. This recognizes the dependency of humans on the environment to meet their needs and enjoy well-being in the broadest sense, and sees ecology and economy as interwoven (Hopwood et al., 2005). The 2030 Agenda from 2015, in which the 17 SDGs are presented, covers these three dimensions by declaring that it is an action plan for "people, planet, and prosperity", and that the SDGs are "integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental" (United Nations [UN], 2015, p. 1). Multi-pillar models are based on the assumption that human needs cannot be sufficiently met just by providing an ecologically stable and healthy environment, but that care must be taken of social and cultural needs as well (Griessler and Littig, 2005).

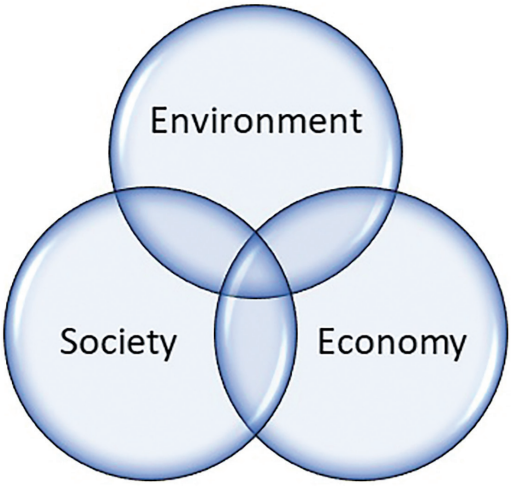
However, it might not be that straightforward to balance practically, or define conceptually, the relation between the dimensions. And there is general agreement that the social dimension is the one which has received least attention and is the theoretically most underdeveloped of the three (Boström, 2012; Dillard et al., 2009; Griessler & Littig, 2005; Magis & Shinn, 2009). In research literature, the social dimension covers a broad range of issues and is defined through such concepts as justice, equity, social cohesion, the sustainability of the community itself (Polèse & Stren, 2000), access to services such as health care and green areas, social interaction and local networks, and the accommodation of social needs. Sometimes, social sustainability is portrayed as the sustainability of society itself, like the sustainability of the community, and sometimes it is portrayed as the social conditions for pursuing green goals, i.e. through collective activism (Langergaard, 2020). The concept is thus ambiguous and very broad. In three-pillar models, it is most often denominated by the broad term 'society'. The economic dimension is not as often defined, but seems to be implied in the three-pillar model as the financial-profit dimension, or the economic market-related growth dimension. Research in Education for Sustainable Development (EDS) (e.g. Bonnett, 1999; Vare & Scott, 2007; Scott & Gough, 2003), and in Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) (e.g. Van Poeck & Östman, 2017; Öhman, 2016), also argues that the ambiguities surrounding the definition of sustainable development lead to very different interpretations of the educational task related to sustainable development.

Three interconnected rings or nested sustainability?

The relation between the dimensions of sustainability is often presented through one of two models: either as three concentric spheres, in which the economic and social spheres are portrayed as dependent on the environmental sphere and nested herein (model 2); or as three interrelated but independent spheres (model 1). In addition to these two models, Kate Raworth's 'doughnut' from her book *Doughnut Economics*, represents a more recent sustainability model (Raworth, 2017), which we will not treat in depth here, as we are interested in the relationship between the sustainability dimensions.

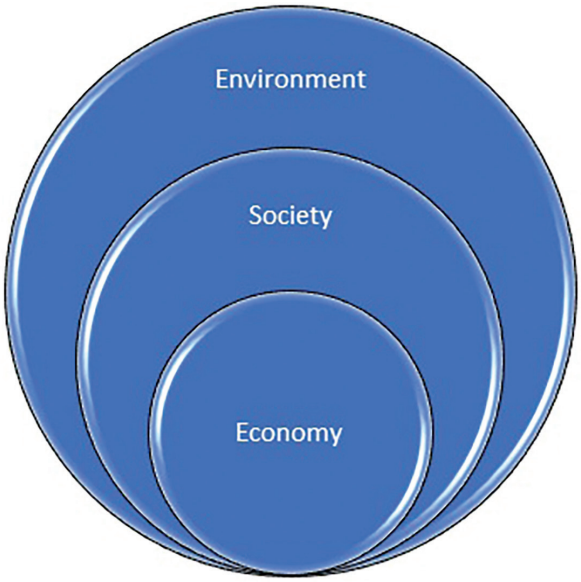
Model 1, with three separate but connected rings – the environment, society, and the economy – implies that each sector is, at least in part, independent of the others (Hopwood et al., 2005). Often, sustainable development is presented as aiming to bring these three into balance, reconciling conflicts. Giddings et al. (2002) argue that even though the rings are portrayed in a symmetrical interrelation, there is no reason why it should be this way. By assuming the separation and autonomy of economy, society, and the environment from each other, this model risks approaching and tackling issues of sustainable development in a compartmentalized manner. The separation underplays the fundamental connections between economy, society, and the environment, and leads to the idea that trade-offs can be made, in line with the approach called "weak sustainability". Weak sustainability assumes that built capital

can replace or substitute natural resources, ignoring the fact "that no number of saw mills will substitute for a forest, no amount of genetic engineering can replace biodiversity and it would be an immense technical problem to construct a replacement for the ozone layer" (Giddings et al., 2002, p. 189).



Model 1. The three spheres of sustainable development

Model 2, which is 'nested' or embedded and is an alternative to the first, the 'nested' or embedded model, sees the economy as dependent on society, and both the economy and society as dependent on the environment. Here, the economy ring is nested within society and society is nested within environment. Thus, this model presents the economy as a subset of society, and the idea is that without society there can be no economy (Giddings et al., 2002, p. 191).



Model 2. Nested sustainability model

Such embedded understandings of economy in society are also seen in Karl Polanyi's theory, in which societal norms such as trust and reciprocity are necessary conditions for the economy to function (Block, 2001; Polanyi, 2001). Within capitalism, society and economy are in a contradictory relationship. The ongoing drive to create self-regulating markets in all major input to commodity production models undermines the fabric of solidarity, community and shared understanding upon which markets ultimately depend (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018). In this sense, economy and the market depend on, and are embedded in, non-financial social conditions. Polanyi distinguishes between formal and substantive economy, in such a way that the formal understanding of 'economic' takes on a logical character, speculating about the relationships between means and ends, whereas the substantive understanding "derives from man's dependence for his livelihood upon nature and his fellows" (Polanyi, 1968). This anthropological take thus distinguishes between economy as, on the one hand, human everyday activity, social interaction and dependency on nature, and, on the other hand, a speculative affair with the aim of optimizing and calculating investments. The former recognizes economic activity as universally human, something which is at the core of the forming of societies (ibid.). A similar differentiation of the concept of economy is represented by Aristotle's two terms for "economy", *chremastisticke* and *oikonomia*, which distinguish between economy as a means to an end, a well-ordered life for the community and the individual (the latter term), and economy as the pursuit of wealth for its own sake (the former term) (Sørensen, 2019; McCulloch & Ridley-Duff, 2019; Daly & Cobb, 1994).

These debates make it clear that there is no widespread agreement on the relationship between the three dimensions and, furthermore, on what more precisely is included in the three dimensions respectively. Despite the various models and conceptions, a number of questions are left unanswered. These are, for example: What is it that integrates the dimensions, or what does it mean that they are integrated? What are the conceptual preconditions for us to be able to talk about an integrated concept? How do we need to define the three (or more) respective dimensions? Does an integrated view preclude that in principle, there may be contradictions and conflicts between them?

In our analysis, we present an empirically generated perspective on these conceptual questions as we address the question of how social entrepreneurs in ecotourism are both aware of, and apply, their understandings of the dynamics between the three dimensions in the way they practice their services, in their networks, and in the creation of their business models.

Case study method and research for change

The data on which this research is based was collected during a field study of an adventure ecotourism and educational initiative, the EAS, in Nepal, November 2019. The case study organization began as a kayaking school, started by the founding entrepreneur,

Rupak (anonymized), in the course of his self-made career path and life. As his life and work have developed today, in collaboration with a Swedish partner or 'called' Linda (anonymized), he runs this enterprise as a functioning ecotourism, educational initiative, and social business. The enterprise exemplifies an educational business solution within ecotourism, which sustainably integrates social, green, and financial aims. Starting from a simple kayaking school on the beach with five kayaks, it has developed into an adventure tourism business. The case study organization has now recently moved away from being merely profit driven, and has changed its aim and status into adventure guiding for educational purposes. Though this change immediately led to an 80% loss of customers, it also offered an opportunity to emphasize the company's purpose and redefine the commercial side of the business with a renewed focus on its core values as a social, green, and educational enterprise (Brundin & Jensen, 2019). The purpose of the EAS is now to facilitate educational opportunities for young Nepalese people, as well as exchange stays for adventure guide trainees from all over the world, focusing on educating adventure guides for the future who are aware and skilled green sustainability ambassadors, at the same time as being able to competently and safely lead people on adventure expeditions in the mountains and on rivers. Besides offering skills training in mountaineering, river rafting, kayaking, and rappelling, they have also made it their aim to teach permaculture, self-sustainability, zero-footprint daily life and tourism strategies, as well as community engagement by example. The selected case can be described as an extreme case, especially good for learning about something specific in a more closely defined sense (Flyvbjerg, 2006) – in this case, a best practice example of the goal of developing more sustainable practices along several dimensions.

The data material consists of one week's overt participant observation in combination with seven qualitative semi-structured interviews with Nepali and Swedish adventure guide students and with the owners of the organization. We, the researchers, participated in the activities of the eco-adventure guide students led by more experienced adventure guides, thus observing both the behavior of the more skilled guides as well as living the daily lives of the rookies-listening to lectures and learning river rafting, kayaking, and rappelling. Furthermore, we made field visits to Nepal's Tourism Board and smaller farming communities in the Himalayas, as well as doing an interview with a local politician in Kathmandu. The aim of the research was exploratory and critical hermeneutical with an open, investigatory approach, seeking to gather knowledge about the organization as a good example of how sustainable businesses are run by social entrepreneurs, based on the intention of lowering negative environmental social impacts and heightening positive social impacts. So the questions we asked were about both business strategy and the implementation of social and green aims, but also made room for personal narrative input, contextualizing personal as well as organizational developmental processes. The data has been sorted with the intention of finding exemplary situations, ways of organizing, and the way in

which sustainability ideas and theory are expressed in practice, carried out and chosen by people who have not read the theories. This was done in order to begin, practically, to identify what sustainability ideologies, practices, and awareness might look like on the ground, which paradoxes we might find and, not least, how this is worked around by the practitioners, the entrepreneurs, and other participants following the common aim of creating sustainable solutions, locally and as part of a global society.

The change perspective of the article

The article presents a critical hermeneutical interest in creating change (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), here combined with an entrepreneurial perspective on change as something inevitable, that presents opportunities, and generates value through community activation (Jensen, 2020). The latter can be regarded as emancipatory, since community activation empowers people by inviting communities to engage and participate in innovative action for applicable and sustainable change. In this way, it invites agency and conscious value-creating practices. The critical hermeneutical researcher emphasizes interpretation and understanding (as opposed to verification or explanation), acknowledges the situated contextual location of interpretation, as well of research and knowledge, and is interested in ambiguities (Kinsella, 2006). In this article, this point is also central to our view of the relationship between research and change. We recognize social science as a part of the society it studies, and in this sense it is situated in, contributes to, and shapes the social reality with which it engages (Horkheimer, 2002). The researcher is also part of, and a participant in, the field he/she studies. A central research aim of the article is to contribute knowledge that opens up new vistas for action and change. Direct participation in change processes through action research, or the formulation of more pragmatic recommendations for practice, are not the only change perspectives in social science. Following Critical Theory, research does not merely describe or interpret social reality, but also aims to contribute to the historical realisation of society as it should be (Sørensen, 2010; West, 1995). In this sense, the critical dimension is added to the hermeneutic quest for understanding.

As we have mentioned, this article has an emancipatory aim, but not in the sense of revealing ideology, or forms of domination, or structural obstacles to sustainability (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), although that could certainly also be a critical approach to studying sustainability, and why it can be challenging to establish practices that support sustainable development. The article seeks rather to shed light on practices and understandings of sustainability at the individual and organizational levels in a social enterprise. We focus on the dynamics of the social level, which seek social transformation through actions (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018). The focus is on the visions, attempts and actions of people striving to lead lives and do business in ways that will bring about more sustainable habits, and who believe that sustainable transitions start with people acting differently.

Analysis and findings: The returning butterflies

Ecotourism can be viewed through three dimensions: environmental conservation and education; as a tool to provide communities with a livelihood; and as a tool to create environmental awareness among tourists and local populations (Wondirad, 2019; Wondirad et al., 2020). In the following analysis of our findings we shall see how dimensions of sustainability are addressed in the context of ecotourism in the EAS, with its focus on education. As the aim of the article is to understand the practical take on the sustainability dimensions, and the way practitioners interpret things, our analysis will be structured according to the dimensions of sustainability. The EAS represents a social enterprise with a specific focus on creating sustainable change through activities related to outdoors adventure-ecotourism and education. The activities of the EAS address issues of sustainability in several ways, and along all the dimensions seen in the models presented. These dimensions relate to the definitions of sustainability presented above, although ecotourism more explicitly stresses the educational dimension, as our study underlines. In the analysis we will explore how these dimensions are interpreted, as well as leading practices in the EAS, in order better to understand better the relationships, balance and potential conflicts between them. We are also interested in how those in the EAS see themselves and their role as change-makers, and will include reflections on this. To start with a hermeneutical approach to how the EAS interprets sustainability, we begin with the owners' own presentation, followed by a critical conceptual analysis.

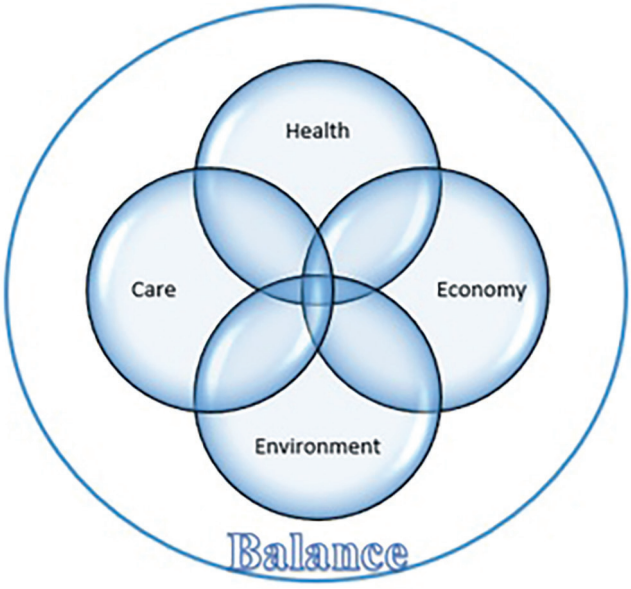
Sustainability as balancing values: How the EAS presents its understanding of sustainability

The owners of the EAS demonstrated their consciousness about sustainability in our interviews with them. When asked about their values, Rupak presented them in four steps, which we see as related to a specific interpretation of sustainability. We discovered the importance of *balance* at the EAS, which resonates throughout their description of the idea of sustainability, inspired by the religious and cultural traditions of Buddhist philosophy and the polytheistic Hindu ethnic and natural religious heritage in the area. Rupak explains this when referring to the overall values of the organization:

> "So, first of all our health [1], our physical health, our mental health, our emotional, social balance and spiritual balance. This is our balances, and values, it's our care [2] – how much do we care? Love. Do I have a love to my team? Do I have a love to my partners? Do I have a love to my family? This is very important to us. Then are we caring of the environment [3]? This is very important [the] physical, nature, and also social. This environment is important to us. Are we sharing with our community nearby? Am I sharing with my community in Kathmandu, or

> in Pokhara, for example? That community internationally. That is very important today (...) Are we healthy? Are we communicating alright? Do we have the same goal? Then it comes: Are we economically balanced [4]?" (Interview, Rupak & Linda, 0:21)

In our case example, illustrated by this quote, we see a very clear understanding – that even generates a comparable model – of what sustainability is. Compared to the three spheres, we can draw lines between the practical and theoretical values of "social" and "care"; between "ecological" and "environment", while we conclude that there is a clear overall agreement in relation to financial value as a crucial element throughout all the models we have seen. The EAS introduces a fourth value dimension, *health*, which in our empirical example is considered just as crucial as the three first spheres that were introduced. It seems that this has to do with individual health, which encompasses social and emotional aspects, as well as a spiritual aspect of the individual and existential quality of life. Not surprisingly, this is considered crucial by a community dealing with, and intimately experiencing, reliance on functioning good health and a strong body and mind in their close encounters with raw Himalayan nature, when climbing mountains, canyoning, and white-water rafting. To the adventure guide, the mountaineer, and the kayaker, physical health, and emotional and spiritual balance, are considered as absolute musts for living the good life in a sustainable manner, as well as for survival, and this is interpreted as interlinked both with contact to nature and to fellow humans.



Model 3. Sustainability at the Eco-Adventure School

In line with the sustainability models presented (1 and 2) and the idea behind the SDGs (Constanza et al., 2016), the EAS emphasizes the importance of balance, although the

dimensions are presented slightly differently. The people at the EAS also emphasize the international and local dimensions, and in that sense their practice and interpretation resonate with the sustainable development discourse, although they operate on the basis of their own interpretation. Emphasizing how 'balance', as the fifth and binding element between the four others, plays a key role in sustainable life and behavior, Rupak gives an example of how the entrepreneur can use this awareness when entering sustainably into collaboration with others, for instance, when dealing with politicians:

> "So, our leaders are not understanding our values. They understood the value number four, economic value they understand. But the health, the care, the environment is not there yet. So that is one of the difficulties, so lots of loving needed on a political level." (Interview, Rupak & Linda, 0:36)

The idea then, when an imbalance is observed, is to try and balance that out by introducing one or several of the other dimensions during meetings. For example, they explained to us during the interview that if the atmosphere in the interaction with partners seemed too impersonal, they would then insist on personal face-to-face meetings to start cultivating some of what was lacking, in order to establish something sustainable, which entails all four values being consciously present.

Seeking to protect the environment through education

Our observations and interviews demonstrate that protection of the ecological dimension of sustainability has a high priority in the practice of the EAS. Two initiatives are especially interesting in terms of understanding how environmental concerns are closely related to the social surroundings of the EAS: the way they sort and collect their waste; and their focus on permaculture. When Linda gave us a tour around the premises, we got a chance to see how they have created their own waste sorting system and how they grow their own fruit and vegetables, inspired by traditional farming techniques and advice from local farmers.

The Nepali head of the EAS, Rupak, says:

> "This, what you today in the West call permaculture. This has been practiced in Nepal for hundreds of years. And still is, ok! It's just the modern word we have. But in the geographical situation in Nepal, you're looking at all the terraces (...) When you're looking in the hills over here, on the sunny side is terrace, and that's where the farming is, and the North-face side is the forest. So it has been balanced this way all along. So, what we [*the EAS*] want to do, our idea is to do old tradition farming. Making little modern facilities and avoiding chemicals. It's not rocket science. (...) bring the East and West together. The knowledge and the

> modern technique from the West, and then old traditional knowledge from the East. And get them in one location (...)" (Interview, Rupak & Linda, 0:28).

It also became clear on the tour that their environmental efforts are challenging. Despite their efforts to sort waste on their own premises, it is difficult and expensive to find someone to collect the waste. We were told by both Linda and a Nepali employee, Binod, that the usual procedure is to burn waste, including plastic waste, or to leave it lying around, something which some of the neighbours do despite persistent efforts to talk to them. In the surrounding local community there is no great awareness and no infrastructure to handle waste in the way that they do at the EAS. So the EAS organizes waste collection days to raise awareness in the neighbourhood and also to involve local schools by having the children take part. Binod has played a central role in this and has become involved with voluntarily teaching children about recycling at local schools, and also arranging regular community involvement days in the local area, where people are invited to participate and learn about recycling in their households. In relation to the involvement of local school children, he said:

> "And one of the groups collected 16 bags of trash. And we thought, okay guys, we're going to take you all here at EAS. And we brought them all here. We showed them how we manage our trash here, using those trash bins, our recycling centre" (Interview, Binod, 0:42).

This raising awareness in everyday life about the environment in general, and waste collection in particular, has been part of a learning process for Binod himself:

> "I didn't know anything about that [sorting trash]. We are a really different culture of it. Even in our school, teachers don't teach about that stuff. And still, many Nepalese, they are burning plastic in front of their house. And we are coming from that culture. So, that was totally new for me, recycling, reusing. (...) It took time for me to learn too." (Interview, Binod, 0:23).

This acknowledgement that it has taken a learning process to realize, gain insight into, and find ways to change his habits for the benefit of the environment motivates him to enter into community activities and share his knowledge.

The strategy of the EAS towards the surrounding community is to use learning and education as tools to propagate knowledge about sustainability and boost sustainable behavior. The green agenda is also integrated into their educational model for all students and employees who go through their program. The ambition to function as an ecotourism guide brings in the green dimension as a "zero-footprint" aim, which means teaching tourists, colleagues, and local communities how to take care of nature

when moving around in it, from the point of view of waste management and the optimization of natural resources. As we have mentioned, making an environmental impact is not easy. First of all, just spreading good practices to the local community takes a lot of effort, and without any supportive infrastructure around waste collection it is even more challenging to actually change practices. While being shown round the premises and the surrounding area by Linda, we were told about a big sand quarry nearby destroying the environment, as well as dams on the river that change the ecosystem and water supplies in the area. From a more critical perspective, one could therefore view their efforts as only a niche activity without any broader impact, and conclude that the efforts made here are merely a small symbolic act in relation to the global range of environmental challenges. To those at the EAS, the environmental dimension and the educational efforts related to it have a local focus, starting with everyday life and life skills more generally. Rupak told us in an interview how their original educational ambition involved teaching and sharing knowledge, and providing adventure guide education for young Nepalis who have faced challenges in traditional schools.

The community and the social dimension

Our case demonstrates a strong orientation not only towards nature, but also towards the community, and the acknowledgement of a mutual dependency on the local community. The social dimension covers a broad range of issues and is defined through such concepts as justice, social cohesion, the sustainability of the community itself (Polèse & Stren, 2000), social interaction and local networks, and the accommodation of social needs (Langergaard, 2020). This focus on the local community is expressed through the everyday practice of the EAS, which we witnessed through our observations: feeding themselves from their own permaculture garden as far as possible; educating Nepali and international adventure tourist guides; and spreading knowledge and initiative locally. The locals have free access to their premises to collect plants to feed their animals and they also have access to places of worship on the EAS premises. As we have mentioned, it is Rupak and Linda's ambition to draw more systematically on local knowledge about permaculture for their vegetable garden. Furthermore, the local waste collection days have been so organized that Binod and other young Nepalese employees at the EAS can play a central role in communicating with neighbors, schools, and the local community in general. These activities involving the local community reflect an awareness of the social dimension of sustainability, as well as of the dimension of ecotourism as related to the well-being of local people (Wondirad, 2019; Wondirad et al., 2020). In terms of our case study, the social dimension is interpreted along the dimensions of social interaction and local networks in certain place-specific ways. And as we have said, the EAS also attempts to teach school children and local people about waste collection. In this sense, there seems to be a strong connection between the social and ecological dimensions of sustainability as practiced by the organization. There is one further element of the social dimension, namely the work of

the Nepali employees that we have interviewed and the way they participate in a variety of activities, including kitchen work, besides learning kayaking and raft guiding. They are trained to lead expeditions and this means that they can also go abroad and work elsewhere, for example, in Japan. Binod tells us in the interview that they themselves consider these as life skills that they do not learn in school.

Overall, their educational strategy could be seen as encompassing two not entirely compatible dimensions from the distinction between 'schooling' and 'education' as presented by Van Poeck & Östman (2018). 'Schooling' involves an assumption that one can teach a particular truth about society and introduce the individual into a social order of a certain regularity. Teaching about waste management based on a specific solution from a societal and political context with an entirely different infrastructure might then be seen as teaching a specific solution by attempting to transfer it into a new context. 'Education', on the other hand, enables people to emancipate themselves, offering them the possibility of disidentifying with the social order, including developing their own reflections and solutions. By also focusing on life skills to make employees and students capable of growing and developing skills that open up new opportunities for them, we will argue that they are drawing on this idea of education. This indicates how ambiguities and contradictions related to sustainable development and education for sustainability are also prevalent in practice. Since we are dealing with various dimensions and complex problems, this is not surprising.

Economy as a means to an end

These examples are all indicators of people making efforts to re-think their value dimensions (model 3) and sustainability dimensions in integrated ways. The data material indicates that Rupak and Linda consciously see financial value as integrated with other values and dimensions but, interestingly, balance in financial resources is viewed more as a means to other ends than as an end in itself. As Rupak explained:

> "Economic balance means, do you have a good economy that we can do another project when we start? Do we have good economy for my team, and they can have a good education, they can have good homes? Their families are safe and supported? Are their children going to good schools? These are my economic values. That is very important otherwise, we will not be sustainable (...) or deliver a good education." (Interview, Rupak & Linda, 0:21).

Earlier, when the business was growing, the EAS was more of a playground for adventure-seeking tourists than a learning facility, and over time the owner had to make a choice in order to stay true to the original business ambition.

> "EAS had the original idea of teaching and sharing knowledge (...). So then, I had to do what was needed and start something. I needed

> to create something, and that became EAS. Because I need a platform to share that knowledge and ideas and so on." (Interview, Rupak & Linda, 1:30)

It was decided to change the business model a few years ago, which shifted the core focus from traditional tourism back to a stronger focus on the educational aspect, and on the values and core purpose, also demonstrates an effort to consciously integrate the value dimensions in practice. Before the re-invention of a value foundation showing a balance between all four of the EAS values, the organization had up to 14,000 visitors per year, which ended up conflicting with the educational purposes of the organization and also putting a strain on the natural flora and fauna of the site itself (Brundin & Jensen, 2019). When we interviewed Radju, one of the Nepali employees, about this, he said:

> "After the alcohol was banned, the camp changed. It's very changed because now you can see lots of butterflies, lots of birds. But back in time it's very hard. I don't know why. But you see that tree in front of the bamboo? [...] That used to be very small. When we stopped alcohol selling and people came less, it grew very big. I was surprised about that [...] When people came less here, everything became green" (Radju, 0:34).

The Nepali employees also told us how it was very hard work tending to the guests who drank alcohol, and that their working life was pretty exhausting back then. Not long after this decision was made, and action taken to restore the balance between health, care, economy and the environment, the butterflies, which had not been seen during the purely profit-seeking period of business, returned, as mentioned in the above quote. Another more symbolic interpretation of this way of dealing with the natural surroundings is to see the social entrepreneur in ecotourism as navigating between ecology and the market.

Relating these experiences of those at the EAS to their view of sustainability as a matter of balanced values, we realise that how, and indeed whether, balance can be achieved also depends on the understanding of the different dimensions in themselves, and that in this particular case it might have been more a question of a trade-off in order to ensure balance. Critical voices, arguing that the different sustainability dimensions are rarely in balance, and that the "much-hailed win-win" accounts (Griessler & Littig, 2005) often overlook the fact that economic arguments often triumph over social or environmental ones in practice, call for critical reflection on the potentially conflicting relations between the dimensions. At the EAS, such a conflict was in fact emerging as their way of doing business, with a focus on profit and a traditional, commercial customer orientation, was beginning to use up too much energy and affecting both place and people in negative ways. Only when the decision was made to give priority to other values – a focus on education and learning and also a systematic focus

on ecological concerns – did Rupak re-experience the balance that he has formulated and aims for. This fits in with the critical view of the economy as substantive (Polanyi, 1968), and as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself (McCulloch & Ridley-Duff, 2019; Daly & Cobb, 1994). It indicates an embedded relationship between the value dimensions, in the sense of an open recognition of the value of care through the mutually interdependent community, but also a dynamic relationship. This in turn calls attention to the need for a constant, dynamic involvement with, and reflection on, the specifics of the different values in concrete practices. For social entrepreneurs, such an ongoing reflection and involvement through practice, action, and learning – also involving business partners, the local community, politicians, educational institutions and a number of other partners – is a conscious strategy to pursue change.

Change makers: The social entrepreneur in sustainable ecotourism

It appears from our analysis that social entrepreneurs interpret and practice sustainability in their own ways, but they are also influenced by the international development discourse, as well as by local culture, practices and religion. They have an international outlook, and operate through engaging in like-minded collaborative networks all over the planet with the notion of balance in mind. Other than consciously and actively performing and inducing balance between the four values in their collaborative efforts and initiatives, the EAS staff, as social entrepreneurs, simultaneously work consciously with *education and learning*. In terms of community learning, we see an activation and involvement of the local community. This activation leads to both individual and social learning processes, and to innovation and entrepreneurial action, all aiming for sustainability. According to Vare and Scott (2007), Education for Sustainable Development implies a close connection between education and social change: a learning process, rather than "rolling out" a pattern of predetermined behavior. As mentioned above, the EAS seems both to stress learning as a process (education) and to teach predefined solutions (schooling). Vare and Scott (inspired by Scott and Gough 2003) also distinguish between two different sides of ESD: one which facilitates change in what we do and promotes certain behavioral skills for tackling well-defined and agreed needs; and one which builds the capacity to think critically about what experts say, and about the contradictions inherent in sustainable living. Here it appears that the EAS works more with the former rather than the latter, although it does seem to navigate and balance between the various dimensions and the learning processes through which they can be comprehended and reflected upon.

As change makers, social entrepreneurs might produce small changes in the short term which reverberate through existing systems to catalyze major changes in the longer term. According to Alvord et al. (2004), this requires them to understand not only the immediate problems, but also the larger social system and its interdependencies. Although the EAS focuses closely on the local level and everyday practices, it also works in its own way to initiate long-term changes by creating awareness and

ambassadors. The insights from the case study demonstrate that learning and education are important to the social entrepreneur as a way of creating in practice change and balance between the core values, in interaction with networks. In this way, by creating small changes and by acting as ambassadors, social entrepreneurs might contribute to the adoption and dissemination of eco-conscious and socially sustainable practices. In the EAS there is an awareness and an attempt to mobilize resources to this end, and to act as ambassadors for everyone they meet along their way. In that sense, there is an awareness of being part of a wider system of actors and structures that they cannot change alone. However, they do say that they have a strong sense that also smaller changes and learning may be part of bigger transformations.

We acknowledge that the systemic level could have been included for a more comprehensive study (or explanation) of broader institutionalized contexts, in which a variety of forces, institutions, and actors define and struggle for or against the forces promoting a sustainable transition. Instead, the article analyzes a social level dynamic, experience and social action (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018, p.68), as well as world views associated with the pursuit of sustainability. By shedding light on and bringing forth ways, however small, of breaking with "business as usual" and thus demonstrating alternative ways, or "cracks", in the larger hegemony of strategic and instrumental approaches to "corporate sustainability", the everyday experience basis for emancipation and change becomes visible. Like Gibson-Graham's (2006) strategy for research as denaturalizing and expanding the economy by shedding light on the myriad projects of alternative economic activism, this article seeks to visualize, and be part of, expanding understandings of the economy (Gibson-Graham 2006), and particularly to emphasize a solid practice of value fostering on the basis of an understanding of the economy as embedded (Polanyi, 1968), or as a means to other ends.

Conclusion

The article has addressed sustainability as a broad concept, commonly represented as encompassing (at least) three dimensions: social, economic, and ecological. The research literature offers several different suggestions as to how we may understand the relation between these dimensions and what each of them refers to. This has led to some ambiguity about the concept. This article has sought to contribute to our understanding of sustainability by applying critical hermeneutics in order to understand how actors in their specific contexts (in this case social entrepreneurs in adventure tourism in Nepal) interpret and practice highly theoretical and often contradictory aspects of sustainability. Our analysis shows that our case study organization understands sustainability as the balancing of four dimensions, which the actors continually keep in mind in their activities: care, health, economy, and the environment. But the study also shows that such a balance is not always easy to reach, and the different dimensions may be in conflict. Not until the organization decided to change its overall strategy and focus on the embeddedness and integration of their core values,

even though this led to a decline in customers, did the butterflies, which were not seen during the simply profit-seeking period of the business, return to the area. The case analysis shows that the essential activity and dynamic through which this organization works to create change is *education.* With concepts taken from ESD and ESE, the analysis shows that the EAS applies different strategies, which include both "schooling", in the sense that certain solutions to ecological problems are taught, as well as "education", which focuses on life skills and the independence required to reflect critically. Through small changes, driven by an integration of their respective values and by acting as green ambassadors, social entrepreneurs might contribute to the adoption and dissemination of eco-conscious and socially sustainable practices. In this sense, the article has zoomed in on the action level dynamics for change, and hopefully this will help elucidate two ways of working towards a more sustainable future: by breaking with "business as usual" and demonstrating alternative ways of seeing "the economy".

About the authors

Christine Revsbech Jensen is PhD in anthropology, specializing in social economic and educational understandings of value. She has carried out ethnographic field works in the US, UK and most recently in Nepal, and as an international researcher, she engages in teaching international programs such as Social Entrepreneurship and Management. She is involved in the Interreg Va, Deutschland-Danmark project: "JUMP – Jobs through edUcation, Mobility and Practice" as postdoc.

Luise Li Langergaard is PhD and Associate Professor at Department of People and Technology, Roskilde University. Her research centers on social entrepreneurship, social sustainability and social change. Her particular interest is on critical and normative perspectives on the democratic and political dimensions of social entrepreneurship, social change, and on alternative economies for sustainability.

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