

Realizing just sustainability through public policies responsive to social inequalities

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Abstract

Sustainability in public policy plays a crucial role in creating a more just and equitable society, taking into account social inequalities that are often overlooked. This study aims to examine how sustainability policies can be designed to reduce social inequality and their impact on various community groups. By considering various aspects of sustainability, including economic, social, and environmental factors, the policy is expected to provide equitable benefits to all layers of society. The success of this policy depends on its design, which takes into account social disparities and involves all relevant parties in its implementation. Therefore, it is important to create policies that are responsive to the needs of underprivileged communities, and to ensure that the implementation of these policies is carried out in a fair and transparent manner. Collaboration between the government, private sector, and society is essential to achieve inclusive and fair sustainability goals. In this regard, periodic policy evaluations are also necessary to ensure that these policies yield optimal results for the entire community. Thus, effectively designed sustainability policies can create a balance between environmental, economic, and social needs.

Keywords:

Sustainability policy; Social inequality; Policy implementation; Community participation; Sectoral collaboration.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global landscape is characterized by a significant paradox: unprecedented technological advancement and economic growth coexist with deepening environmental crises and widening social disparities (Essa & Mardikaningsih, 2021). This duality has compelled a critical re-evaluation of conventional development paradigms, which have historically prioritized economic output at the expense of ecological stability and social equity (Slavnić et al., 2025). Consequently, the international community is increasingly converging on the necessity of a more integrated approach, one

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that seeks to harmonize the objectives of progress with the imperatives of planetary health and human fairness (Cai, 2025).

The issues of sustainability and social inequality are increasingly gaining attention at the global level, especially in the context of economic and environmental development. This reflects a growing recognition that complex global challenges are interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation (Sahal et al., 2023). Sustainability, in a broad sense, not only encompasses environmental aspects but also includes social and economic dimensions, which means prioritizing the well-being of society as a whole. This multi-dimensional approach is essential for creating resilient systems where human prosperity and ecological health are mutually supportive (Issalillah, 2021). Social inequality poses a major challenge in achieving true sustainability, as marginalized groups often lag behind in terms of access to resources, opportunities, and the benefits of development (Leal Filho et al., 2019). This disparity creates a feedback loop where environmental degradation disproportionately harms vulnerable populations, while their limited agency hinders collective action (Naydenov, 2025). In many cases, policies aimed at enhancing sustainability often do not take into account the existing inequalities within society, which ultimately worsen the conditions of already marginalized groups (Kopp & Dorn, 2018). Such outcomes demonstrate that without explicit considerations for equity, even well-intentioned policies can inadvertently reinforce and deepen existing social stratifications (Hwang, 2024).

In a specific context, the relationship between sustainability and social inequality is often evident in sectors such as access to education, healthcare, and decent work. Vulnerable communities, including minority groups, women, and the poor, often face greater barriers in accessing the benefits of sustainability policies (Abashidze et al., 2021). This inequality creates gaps in quality of life that can worsen their socio-economic conditions, even though development policies focus on sustainability (Piketty, 2014). Therefore, a deeper understanding of the relationship between sustainability and social inequality is needed to design more inclusive and equitable policies.

High social inequality in many countries often becomes the main obstacle in creating inclusive sustainability (Kalkanci et al., 2019). Many development policies indirectly prioritize wealthier or more organized groups, while poorer and marginalized groups continue to struggle to reap the same benefits (Atkinson, 2015). For example, policies on natural resource management that focus on conservation often overlook the land rights of local communities or indigenous groups, who depend on these natural resources for their livelihoods (Putzel et al., 2015). Such inequalities exacerbate existing social gaps and cause sustainability policies to fail to achieve their goals for all layers of society (Zahid & Darmawan, 2022).

Furthermore, neglecting the social aspect in sustainability policies often leads to decisions that benefit certain groups, while adding burdens to those who are already marginalized. In this case, social inequality not only worsens the conditions of marginalized groups but also hinders broader sustainability progress (Sen, 1999). For example, efforts to reduce carbon emissions can impact jobs that depend on the fossil fuel sector, but policies implemented without considering a just transition for workers in that sector could exacerbate social inequality (Galgóczi, 2018).

At the global level, despite efforts to promote sustainability through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), existing social inequalities remain a significant issue (Leal Filho et al., 2019). One of the main issues is the disparity in access to technology that can aid in achieving sustainability. The poorer or less educated groups often do not have adequate access to use technology that can improve their quality of life or help them adapt to climate change. Inequality in access to technology and other resources exacerbates social inequality and limits the potential to achieve comprehensive sustainability (UNDP, 2020).

Social inequality that occurs in the context of sustainability is a complex issue that requires more attention, as this inequality not only affects social and economic well-being but also long-term political and social stability. Ignoring the aspect of inequality in sustainability policies can exacerbate structural poverty and create greater social tensions, which in turn hinders overall development progress. Therefore, it is important to consider policies that not only prioritize environmental sustainability but also social justice that touches the most vulnerable layers of society.

The main objective of this study is to analyze how sustainability policies can be optimized to reduce social inequality, taking into account the needs and challenges faced by marginalized groups. This study aims to explore the relationship between the implementation of sustainability policies and their impact on vulnerable social groups, as well as to examine ways in which these policies can be designed to be more inclusive and equitable

RESEARCH METHOD

The literature review approach is used to examine the relationship between sustainability policies and social inequality by collecting, analyzing, and evaluating various relevant scientific references. This method allows researchers to obtain a comprehensive picture of the topic by examining various perspectives from the existing literature, whether from journal articles, books, policy reports, and other relevant documents. This literature review relies on secondary sources to understand existing trends, patterns, and findings, which are then compared to draw broader conclusions (Webster & Watson, 2002). In this case, the researchers construct arguments that connect

various theories and findings from the existing literature to identify the relationship between sustainability policies and social inequality, with a focus on the implications of these policies for marginalized groups.

This approach also allows researchers to identify gaps in previous research and provide direction for further studies. In-depth literature studies provide space for critical analysis of various methodologies used by previous researchers, as well as the results and findings they obtained (Hart, 1998). Through this understanding, researchers can develop better theories on how sustainability policies can be designed with consideration of social inequality. In this case, it is important to evaluate whether existing policies are capable of reducing social inequality or instead worsening the marginalized groups.

The literature review method also focuses on searching for empirical evidence related to the implementation of effective sustainability policies in addressing social inequality. Additionally, it is important to examine various sustainability policies that have been implemented in different countries or regions with distinct social characteristics, to identify common patterns or best practices that can be adopted in different contexts (Jabareen, 2008). The researchers used this literature review to draw conclusions about how these policies impact the welfare of disadvantaged communities, as well as to provide recommendations for more inclusive and equitable policies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sustainability in public policy has become a major concern in recent decades, especially as social and environmental challenges become more pressing. This reflects a growing global awareness that conventional development models are inadequate for addressing complex contemporary problems (Becker, 2024). One of the most important aspects of sustainability is its ability to reduce existing social inequalities in society. This positions sustainability as a critical framework for achieving social justice and promoting equitable progress (Laurent, 2024). Sustainability-focused policies aim not only to preserve the environment but also to ensure that the benefits of socio-economic development are distributed fairly across all layers of society. The integration of these objectives is essential for creating a virtuous cycle where environmental health and social well-being are mutually reinforcing. The implementation of these fair policies requires a deep understanding of how social inequalities affect various groups in society and how sustainability policies can be designed to bridge these gaps (Mancebo, 2015; Markkanen & Anger-Kraavi, 2019). Therefore, effective policy design must be evidence-based and tailored to the specific needs of different demographic groups to ensure successful outcomes.

Inclusive sustainability demands that public policies not only involve environmental restoration but also need to consider equal access to resources,

job opportunities, education, and other basic services for marginalized communities (Martin et al., 2020). This redefines sustainability as a socio-ecological system where human well-being and environmental health are fundamentally interconnected (Mardikaningsih et al., 2024). Policies that fail to account for these inequalities have the potential to worsen the conditions of marginalized groups and create social tensions (Prakash, 2020). Such an oversight can lead to policy-induced vulnerabilities, creating negative feedback loops that undermine both social stability and long-term environmental objectives. Therefore, it is important for policymakers to create strategies that not only benefit the majority of society but also provide equal opportunities for the less fortunate. This proactive approach aims to build resilient and adaptive societies where universal benefits are prioritized over narrow, majoritarian gains.

In designing policies that lead to equitable sustainability, inter-sectoral collaboration becomes very important. This necessity arises because complex socio-ecological problems cannot be effectively resolved through isolated, single-sector initiatives. Active community participation and the formulation of data-driven policies can ensure that the policies implemented can have a tangible positive impact, not only on environmental aspects but also on the socio-economic well-being of the community (Bibri, 2021). This dual approach enhances policy legitimacy and ensures that interventions are both empirically sound and socially relevant. Therefore, to achieve sustainability that can reduce social inequality, a holistic and integrated approach is essential (Gani et al., 2021). Such a strategy acknowledges that sustainability is not a singular outcome but an emergent property of a well-functioning, equitable, and interconnected system (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2021).

Sustainability policies have the potential to become a powerful instrument in addressing social inequality by providing a fair and inclusive framework for all layers of society. Sustainability does not only focus on environmental aspects, but also encompasses social and economic dimensions, which are crucial for creating a fair balance in society (Janker & Mann, 2020). To achieve these goals, sustainability policies must be designed with consideration for the needs of marginalized communities, as well as ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities (Butler & Adamowski, 2015). With this approach, policies can reduce disparities and promote equitable welfare across society (Sachs, 2015).

Table 1.
The Three Pillars of Sustainability in Public Policy

Sustainability Pillar	Core Objective	Policy Implementation
Environmental	To protect, preserve, and restore the health of	• Implementing policies focused on environmental restoration.

Social	natural ecosystems and resources to support life for current and future generations. To create an equitable and just society by reducing inequality, ensuring well-being, and empowering all communities, with a special focus on marginalized and vulnerable groups.	• Addressing pressing environmental challenges (e.g., climate change). • Ensuring that development does not degrade the natural world. • Ensuring the fair distribution of socio-economic development benefits. • Providing equal access to resources: education, healthcare, and job opportunities. • Empowering communities and including them in decision-making processes. • Designing policies that specifically address the root causes of inequality.
Economic	To build an inclusive, stable, and fair economic system that supports long-term social welfare without compromising environmental integrity.	• Creating decent and equitable job opportunities • Establishing a fair and inclusive economic framework. • Using instruments like progressive tax systems to fund social programs. • Ensuring economic growth does not widen the gap between social classes.

Source: Author(s) work

Table 1 explains that these three pillars are interrelated and inseparable. Sustainability encompasses environmental, social and economic aspects, which means prioritizing the well-being of society as a whole. Policies that only focus on one pillar (for example, only the environment) without considering the other two pillars will fail to achieve true sustainability and even risk exacerbating the problem of social inequality.

Sustainability can include policies that support the provision of decent jobs, access to quality education and healthcare, as well as affordable housing (Smets & van Lindert, 2016). This achievement heavily relies on policies that consider social justice, with special attention given to vulnerable groups, such as the poor, women, children, and ethnic minority groups. Fair sustainability is not just about the efficient use of natural resources, but also ensuring a fair distribution of development results to those who need it most (UNDP, 2020). Therefore, sustainability policies must consider their impact on various social groups, avoiding policies that only benefit a select few.

As a first step, sustainability policies need to map existing social inequalities and design solutions that address the root causes of these inequalities (Chance, 2020). This can be done by identifying and understanding the structural factors that cause inequality, such as limited access to education, healthcare services, and decent jobs. Policies designed to address social inequality must also consider ways to empower marginalized groups so that they can fully participate in the social and economic development process. In

this case, it is important to involve them in the planning and implementation of policies, so that the resulting policies can reflect their needs and aspirations.

In line with this diagnostic approach, mapping structural inequalities is not just a data collection exercise, but the foundation for formulating precise interventions. This process essentially shifts the paradigm of policy-making from assumption-based to evidence-based. On the other hand, the active involvement of marginalized groups in this process serves as a crucial validation mechanism; their lived experiences and local knowledge provide qualitative context that cannot be captured by quantitative metrics alone. This collaboration increases the legitimacy of the resulting policy and significantly enriches its design, ensuring the interventions designed are truly relevant and implementable. By deeply understanding the dynamics and dimensions of inequality from multiple perspectives, policymakers can move beyond reactive action to proactive design. It is therefore the foundation built through careful analysis and inclusive participation that allows public policy to function optimally as a transformative instrument.

Table 2.

Framework for Designing Public Policy for Equitable Sustainability

Strategic Design Principle	Primary Objective (Action Focus)	Examples of Policy Implementation
Ensuring Equitable Access	To dismantle systemic and situational barriers, ensuring all individuals, regardless of background, have an equal opportunity to access fundamental resources.	• Education: Targeted scholarship programs; development of quality schools in remote or underserved areas. • Healthcare: Universal healthcare subsidies; mobile clinics for isolated communities. • Employment: Anti-discrimination policies in recruitment; vocational training programs for vulnerable groups.
Empowering Marginalized Communities	To shift the position of communities from being passive policy objects to active subjects with the voice, agency, and power to influence decisions that affect their lives.	• Political Participation: Inclusive deliberative planning mechanisms (e.g., participatory budgeting); allocation of representative seats. • Economic Independence: Micro-enterprise capital assistance; support for local cooperatives; securing communal resource rights (e.g., indigenous land tenure).
Addressing the Root Causes of Injustice	To move beyond treating symptoms (such as poverty) to fundamentally reforming the structures, laws, and social norms that	• Structural Reform: Implementation of progressive tax systems for wealth redistribution; land tenure reform to address inequality. • Legal Reform: Revision or repeal of laws and regulations that are discriminatory based on gender, ethnicity.

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| perpetuate systemic inequality and injustice. | • Social Protection: Establishment of comprehensive social safety nets to protect citizens from economic and social shocks. |
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Source: Author(s) work

Public policy, therefore, serves as the primary instrument for translating the principles of equitable sustainability into tangible outcomes. To be effective, these policies must be intentionally designed not merely to mitigate symptoms, but to dismantle systemic barriers. This demands a three-pronged approach: guaranteeing equal access to critical resources such as education, healthcare, and job opportunities; actively empowering marginalized communities to ensure their full participation in society; and fundamentally addressing the root causes of injustice and inequality (Gong, 2024).

However, despite the intention to address social inequalities, the implementation of sustainability policies is often hindered by political and administrative issues. Well-designed policies may fail to be implemented effectively if there is no strong political commitment or if the existing bureaucracy is unable to manage the policies efficiently (Azu, 2016). Therefore, it is important to have an effective monitoring and evaluation system to ensure that policies can be implemented well and achieve the desired impact. Moreover, it is important to prioritize transparency and accountability in policy implementation so that sustainability can be achieved fairly (Raworth, 2017).

Sustainability policies also need to consider the aspect of accessibility to technology and innovation. Technology plays a very important role in promoting social and economic inclusion, as well as creating new opportunities for marginalized communities (Labeeque & Sanaullah, 2019). By using the right technology, such as the digitalization of the education and health sectors, as well as providing access to economic resources through digital platforms, sustainability policies can help reduce existing gaps (Khayru & Issalillah, 2022). Therefore, sustainability policies must include equal access to technology and innovation to ensure that all segments of society, without exception, can benefit from it (Stiglitz, 2016; Brandao Da Silva & Gani, 2022).

Additionally, policies focused on economic sustainability must consider a progressive tax system. Fair tax policies can ensure that funding for sustainability programs comes from contributions from those who are more capable, thereby not burdening groups that are already socially and economically vulnerable (Porter et al., 2020). A fair tax system can also be used to fund infrastructure and social programs aimed at reducing inequality, such as subsidies for basic services and access to capital for small businesses run by vulnerable groups. Thus, sustainability policies not only lead to environmental preservation but also to the equitable distribution of social welfare (Piketty, 2014).

On the other hand, the integration of sustainability into public policy requires a holistic approach, considering that social inequality is not only limited to economic injustice but also encompasses social, cultural, and political aspects. Therefore, effective sustainability policies must consider these dimensions simultaneously, with the aim of creating a fair balance for the entire society. Policies oriented towards social sustainability will be more successful if they consider all dimensions of community life and adjust policies to their real needs (Sen, 1999; Opp, 2017).

Sustainability policies should also focus on building the capacity of communities to adapt to the changes that occur (Halizah & Mardikaningsih, 2022). In this regard, education and training play a crucial role in preparing communities to face it. Policies that support equitable and quality education will provide opportunities for vulnerable groups to improve their quality of life and escape poverty (Madani, 2019). In addition, this capacity building will also help communities manage changes and challenges related to sustainability, whether it is related to climate change or socio-economic changes (Tilman et al., 2002).

In many developing countries, sustainability is often seen as something separate from social inequality, whereas the two are actually very closely related. Policies that focus solely on environmental sustainability without considering social inequality have the potential to create social tensions and conflicts. Conversely, policies that prioritize social sustainability without considering environmental aspects can also threaten long-term survival. Therefore, it is important to design policies that address environmental preservation while also enhancing the social conditions of society (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010).

Addressing social inequality through sustainability policies also means strengthening institutions that can oversee their implementation. This includes the establishment of independent bodies that can monitor the impact of the implemented policies, as well as ensure that these policies align with their original objectives. The government must pay special attention to enhancing the capacity of relevant agencies to address sustainability and social inequality issues. Without strong institutions to implement and oversee policies, equitable sustainability will be difficult to achieve (Böhringer, 2007; Bowen et al., 2017).

In order to ensure that sustainability policies can achieve their goals fairly and equitably, community participation is very important. Policies designed without involving the community in the planning and decision-making process tend to be ineffective in addressing social inequalities. Active community participation in policy design and evaluation helps ensure that policies reflect community needs and aspirations, and are implemented accurately and fairly (Cornwall, 2008).

To achieve equitable sustainability, sustainability policies must be designed inclusively, transparently, and participatively. Reducing social inequality is not an easy task, but with the right policies, it can be addressed through community empowerment, fair distribution of resources, and creating equal opportunities for all layers of society. This is an important step to ensure that social, economic, and environmental sustainability can be achieved in a balanced manner, thereby providing positive impacts for all segments of society (Kalkanci et al., 2019).

By implementing fair and inclusive sustainability policies, society can move towards a more balanced and equitable future. This requires the government and policymakers to design policies that consider all layers of society, with special attention given to vulnerable groups. Policies that are responsive to social inequality will open opportunities for all parties to participate in sustainable development, whether economically, socially, or environmentally (Mackenzie et al., 2017; Arifin & Darmawan, 2021).

However, to realize effective policies, close cooperation between the government, the private sector, and society is necessary. Without active participation from all parties, sustainability policies risk failing to achieve their goal of reducing social inequality. Therefore, it is important to continuously evaluate and adjust policies to ensure they remain relevant to the ever-evolving conditions of society. A clear system of oversight and accountability is also very important to ensure that the policies implemented truly benefit the entire community (Abramovich & Vasiliu, 2022).

The concept of sustainability fundamentally transcends mere environmental preservation. It represents a robust framework for societal progress, built upon an unwavering commitment to the equitable distribution of social and economic advantages across all communities. Approaches that isolate ecological goals from human welfare are inherently flawed, as a healthy planet and a just society are not separate objectives but are inextricably linked. True sustainability requires recognizing that environmental degradation and social inequality often stem from the same systemic failures (Mardikaningsih, 2021). Therefore, any solution aiming for long-term viability must address both challenges concurrently, ensuring that the pursuit of ecological balance also advances human dignity and economic fairness for everyone.

The primary instrument for realizing this integrated vision is deliberate and conscientious policymaking. Policies that actively dismantle barriers to social and economic mobility simultaneously build the foundation for lasting environmental stewardship. When individuals and communities have equitable access to resources, education, and stable livelihoods, they gain a direct stake in the preservation of their environment (Sajjapong et al., 2022). Conversely, environmental initiatives that neglect principles of social justice risk creating unintended negative consequences, such as deepening poverty or dislocating

populations (Nuraini et al., 2022). Such failures create a fragile system where progress is easily reversed, because persistent inequality breeds social friction and erodes the collective will required for sustained action.

Therefore, the ultimate measure of a successful sustainability agenda must be recalibrated. It is found not in ecological metrics alone, but in its tangible capacity to enhance the dignity, well-being, and agency of the most vulnerable populations. Empowered communities with secure livelihoods and a voice in decision-making become the most effective guardians of their natural surroundings, transforming from passive recipients of policy into active architects of a better future. This is the true legacy of our efforts: building an enduring world where prosperity is shared, justice is universal, and the environment is protected not as a separate asset, but as the shared home for all humanity.

CONCLUSIONS

The overall study shows that sustainability policies can play a key role in reducing social inequality and creating a more just society. The sustainability in question is not only limited to environmental aspects but must also encompass social and economic dimensions. Policies that address social inequality can yield more inclusive outcomes by ensuring that marginalized groups receive equitable benefits from available resources and opportunities. Therefore, such policies must be based on a deep understanding of the existing inequalities within society and must be able to design programs that can reach all layers of society, especially those who are most in need.

However, to achieve equitable sustainability, more than just good policies are needed. The process of transparent and participatory implementation and evaluation is key to ensuring that the designed policies can create real changes in the socio-economic life of the community. Additionally, policymakers need to ensure synergy between the government, the private sector, and the community in designing and implementing sustainability policies. Without close cooperation and effective oversight, sustainability policies risk failing to deliver the expected results, especially in reducing social inequality.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

As it relies primarily on a literature review approach, the analysis is constrained by the availability, quality, and scope of secondary data, which may not fully capture the real-world complexities of implementing sustainability policies amid social inequalities. The absence of empirical validation limits the ability to measure direct causal relationships between policy design and social outcomes. Future research should therefore adopt mixed-method or longitudinal approaches to examine how inclusive

sustainability policies perform across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts. Further exploration could also focus on the intersection of digital innovation, governance transparency, and community participation as key enablers of just sustainability. By integrating empirical evidence with participatory frameworks, future studies can offer more grounded insights into how public policies can effectively bridge the gap between environmental objectives and social justice.

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