

Structuralist vs. Agent-based Approach to Environmental Sustainability – A possible resolution to a polarized debate

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There is a contentious debate both among academic environmentalists and public commentators in civil society between agent-based and structuralist perspectives on how to tackle sustainability problems. It is at times a highly polarized debate, where the former emphasize the importance of individual action whereas the latter point to the existence of structural constraints to sustainability. Our paper acknowledges the existence of one-sided structuralist perspectives that almost completely obscure the role of individual action. Equally we are aware of the nuances within agent-based perspectives in terms of the variety of mechanisms and subjects they encompass. In contrast to both these positions, first we argue for the centrality of structural analysis of concrete sustainability problems, rather than attempts to identify solutions in relation to abstract and imprecise notions like 'pro-environmental behavior' or 'ecological footprint'. Second, we argue in favor of an approach that targets effective structural change to enable the individual for effective actions towards sustainability. Our third argument is that the action of the individual needs not be individualized action; rather, the empowered individual can consciously take part in collective action aiming at modifying the structures which impede sustainable behavior both at the individual and social levels. We substantiate these points with reference to our individual and collective research on concrete cases relating to the themes of coastal management, sustainable agriculture, and transport biofuel.