

Sustainability and Sen's Social Choice – An appreciation and appropriation

Chad Stephen, Turaj Faran and David O'Byrne

Lund University

The primary concern of this paper is collective decision making about environmental questions. The aim is to put forward a new interpretation of Social Choice as a suitable public decision making process for environmental sustainability. Our starting point is Amartya Sen's rendition of Social Choice, which we find extremely relevant to tackling the environmental sustainability challenges. The field of Social Choice explores whether the preferences of individuals for different alternative arrangements in society can be consistently and fairly aggregated into a set of values which represent the values of the society as a whole. The central question is how to interpret the preferences of the individuals. There are three basic ways of tackling this question: a) concentrating on the personal utility of individuals (what we call economic choice); b) focusing on votes or ballots (what we call political choice), or c) drawing on the diverse judgements of moral sentiments of individuals about societies and collectivities (which we call social choice whose ablest representative is undoubtedly Amartya Sen). The paper begins by showing how Sen's social choice is an improvement on the former two. We proceed by discussing how Sen's social choice is operationalized, before subjecting this operationalization to a critical examination aimed at characterizing the larger social theory that underpins Sen's procedure of social choice. In a final section, we try to amend Sen's social choice procedural shortcomings with the Gramscian concept of hegemony and the struggle of social movements for sustainability.