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THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

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As numerous international declarations and assessments have made clear, a comprehensive and well-integrated response is necessary to understand the complex interrelationship between social, economic and ecological sustainability. This is particularly compelling given the urgent global need to increase the sustainability of agriculture, a key issue in food safety, climate change and rural development.

Rather than being stand-alone entities, agricultural systems are deeply rooted in broader ecological, social and economic frameworks. Therefore, meeting the challenges of agricultural sustainability requires an integrative approach that transcends traditional sector boundaries. This approach must acknowledge the interconnected nature of these dimensions and recognize the multifaceted nature of sustainability [1].

To unravel the complex relationship between social, economic and ecological sustainability, a well-integrated response is indispensable. Not only do agricultural practices affect the environment by resource depletion, loss of biodiversity and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, but they also have an impact on the

social fabric, such as rural livelihoods, equity and community resilience. In economic terms, agriculture is a bedrock of global trade, employment and national economies, particularly in developing countries. Nevertheless, the systemic complexity of agricultural sustainability presents enormous challenges for researchers, policymakers and practitioners alike. In spite of these challenges, the quest for a comprehensive and integrated understanding of this complexity is a worthy endeavor. Without it, the risk of addressing symptoms rather than causes will remain high, with the potential to lead to incremental rather than transformational change.

There has been a rapidly increasing number of agricultural sustainability assessment instruments, which reflects the growing global interest in the environmental, social and economic dimensions of agricultural systems. There remains, however, a significant lack of consensus on what constitutes ‘sustainability’ or ‘sustainable agriculture’, particularly when examined from a societal perspective. The reason for this lack of agreement is that sustainability assessment instruments have different backgrounds, priorities and objectives, which leads to different understandings of what the social dimension should encompass and how to operationalize its subject matter. Some instruments, for example, emphasize measurable indicators, such as labor rights, equity and access to resources, and others focus on more subjective criteria, such as farmers' perceptions of their quality of life. As criteria and indicators for assessing ‘social sustainability’ often vary according to geographical or cultural context, the geographic scope of the instruments has further contributed to this disagreement [2].

There are many different agricultural production systems across the globe, influenced by factors such as climate, socio-economic conditions and cultural norms. As a consequence, the objectives of the developers of instruments often take preference over a uniform (and scientifically agreed) definition of social sustainability. This has contributed to the fact that some of these tools often overlook a clear definition of social sustainability or fail to ensure the operational robustness of their assessments. For example, some tools are consistent with international frameworks, including United Nations and International Labor Organization conventions, and prioritize human rights and worker well-being, while other instruments focus on more narrow dimensions, such as individual well-being or community-level impacts.

The importance of the social dimension is highlighted by recurring topics such as labor conditions, the quality of life of farmers, and the broad social impacts of agricultural activities. However, there is an immediate need to take a step back and develop a well-rounded, concept-based definition of social sustainability in agriculture. This approach must integrate all relevant social dimensions, including geographic differences and content-specific subtleties, in order to create a more powerful and inclusive instrument for assessing the sustainability of farms. Such clarification would not only increase the effectiveness of the instruments, but also ensure that they better respond to the complexity of the global agricultural system.

The social conditions vary widely across the globe, further complicating the conceptual ambiguity. Social structures, cultural norms and economic realities in different regions are so different that developing a standardized framework to assess the social dimensions of agricultural sustainability is challenging. The production system varies greatly even within the agricultural sector in terms of labor practices, community participation, and socio-economic impacts, which are all shaped by the local context. These variations are a major impediment to the creation of universally applicable sustainability assessment instruments.

At present, most research on rural development focuses on different indicators of the social and economic progress of rural areas in order to measure their level of economic development. Some of these indicators include regional Gross Regional Product (GRP), household consumption, employee wages, and net tax revenues from production, among others. Together, these economic indicators provide researchers and policy makers alike with an important tool for measuring the economic situation in rural areas, and enable them to more accurately analyze the effectiveness of economic policies. However, these instruments focus primarily on economic growth and do not fully capture the state of sustainability in rural societies. For example, while growth in Gross Regional Product (GRP) may imply economic prosperity, relying on economic indicators alone to measure sustainability is partial if there is a lack of social security for the rural labor force, an unequal income distribution, or a lack of improvement in the quality of life of those working in agriculture. Therefore, a more comprehensive and multiple faceted indicator system is needed in building a sustainability assessment system in order to more accurately reflect the true state of the rural society.

In summary, moving to sustainable development needs a big change in how we look at and judge agriculture and rural areas. By using whole and combined methods, people involved can deal with the difficulties of sustainability better, making sure that economic growth goes with fairness and protecting the environment. Making standard rules, with strong data and good theories, is important for improving sustainability checks and helping farming and rural communities become stronger. This full way of thinking will let policymakers, researchers, and workers make good decisions that help long-term success and nature's balance, making a better future for everyone.

List of references

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