



Can security be sustainable? Three perspectives on security and social sustainability: paradox, co-production, and deconstruction

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Received: 27 January 2023 / Accepted: 10 December 2023 / Published online: 3 January 2024
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Abstract

Security and sustainability are prioritized goals in the “Western liberal” world. Maintaining democratic resources while simultaneously strengthening society’s ability to deal with security issues firmly resonates with ideals associated with social sustainability. However, merging normative theories like security and social sustainability produces conceptual difficulties that are hard to resolve. Based on key literature in this field and policy documents from the UN, this article uses conceptual analysis to investigate what boundaries and openings three distinct perspectives of the connection between social sustainability and security might produce. The perspectives chosen as illustrative tools are paradox, co-production, and deconstruction. The paradox perspective pronounces inherently divergent qualities of sustainability and security, which implies a trade-off situation. In contrast, the co-production perspective views social sustainability as a critical component in security issues, while security, in turn, is a prerequisite for sustainability. A third perspective, deconstruction, highlights underlying processes that produce and prioritize specific meanings. The perspectives of paradox, co-production, and deconstruction identify how competing values operate in conceptual configurations, highlighting the limitations and possibilities of security measures to accommodate values of social sustainability. Applying distinct approaches as illustrations for disparate ideological standpoints can deepen the knowledge of how multiple and occasionally competing outcomes are formed while considering the normative foundations enfolding inquiries of security responses to societal challenges.

Keywords Social sustainability · Security · Paradox theory · Co-production · Deconstruction · Competing values

Introduction

Promoting sustainability while ensuring the world is safe and secure for its people and other species is an urgent concern for decision-makers, governments, consumer industries, and ordinary citizens worldwide (Strengers and Maller 2014; Sze et al. 2018). This objective has been a central aspiration in the United Nations conceptualization of sustainable development since the early formulations in the Brundtland

Report from 1987, where it is stated that: “Certain aspects of peace and security bear directly upon the concept of sustainable development. Indeed, they are central to it” (UN 1987, p. 131). These aspects are later specified as poverty, inequality, and uneven distribution of resources, thus appealing to a holistic and convoluted approach to sustainability efforts that associates social sustainability with security (Malmio and Liwång 2023). The conceptualization of security as intertwined with social values has remained a fundamental pillar in the United Nations (UN) peace and development resolutions, communicated as an aim to build a world “free from fear and free from want” (UNDP 1994, p. 24) and to “foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies, which are free from fear and violence” (UN 2015, p. 2). These ideas have also impacted how the defense sector in a Western liberal context has justified its monopoly on violence (Zehfuss 2018), where maintaining democratic values and strengthening society’s overall ability to deal with stress have remained pivotal factors for building a secure society (Bourbeau 2015; Grove 2017).

Handled by Julia Maria Wittmayer, DRIFT Erasmus University, Netherlands.

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While the association between security and sustainability has been an ongoing discussion in the UN over the last 40 years, it has recently gained new momentum, exemplified by the 2022 special report released by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which addresses new threats to human security in the era of the Anthropocene (UNDP 2022). Particular areas of concern include the increasingly visible effects of climate change and its existential consequences (Sahu 2017), augmented by the uneven distribution of resources and global inequality, which has intensified insecurity worldwide (UNDP 2022). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a heightened awareness of how structural inequalities and vulnerabilities shape and aggravate security issues (Newman 2022) and thus made the interconnections of security and social values more apparent. In addition, the rapid development of artificial intelligence has actualized various social problems that profoundly impact security, such as societal polarization (WFE 2023), violent extremism (Burton 2023), and social bias of vulnerable populations in society (Benjamin 2020). These developments have reignited the relevance of acknowledging the intertwined character of sustainability and security as essential factors for development and world peace.

However, the association of security and sustainability has proven itself a source of theoretical inconsistencies, especially when considering the destructive nature of military conflict, which presents deeply rooted assumptions of “security” that contradict the three principles of sustainability: environmental integrity, social equity, and economic prosperity (Elkington 2008; Purvis et al. 2019). Attempts have been made to define and accommodate this conceptual relation, academically and in extensive policy work in the UN, but several theoretical problems remain.

One persistent issue is the normative valence associated with the concepts, which invokes disharmony when they are combined. The normative understanding of social sustainability encompasses a plurality of social values (Raymond et al. 2019) involving multiple stakeholders with conflicting goals (Leal Filho et al. 2022), is context-dependent (Sze et al. 2018), and accentuates a “mess of diversity” (Kenter et al. 2019). Security, in contrast, is heavily influenced by ideals associated with “national security,” which is mainly focused on external threats and territorial security (Luttwak 2001; Newman 2022). This view radically contrasts the holistic and humanitarian approach of the sustainability agenda, which aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels” (UN 2015, p. 3).

Another theoretical issue is the underlying notion of security as a “hegemonic normative commitment” (Walker 2016, p. 89), meaning that items associated with this concept

often take precedence over other issues, with the implication that a wide range of societal issues can be reformulated to legitimize a political state of exception (Oels 2012; Sahu 2017; Wæver 1993). Accordingly, the security–sustainability conceptualizations seem to harbor an inherent predisposition that favors a narrow perception of security, indicating a trade-off arrangement of security and sustainability efforts. In effect, the state’s interests remain at the center of security and development aspirations, contributing to an outlook of security in opposition to sustainability resolutions. One initial conclusion is, therefore, that there are precarious elements in this connection that work unfavorably for any reformulation, which makes one wonder, *can security be sustainable?*

In response to this theoretical incongruence, a growing field of research has raised critical questions about the destructive effects of security on sustainability measures by highlighting the ecological, social, and economic imprints caused by military operations on local communities (Bildirici 2018; Jorgenson and Clark 2016; Smaliukiene 2018). Several studies have identified the connection between climate change and security, where the environment is an arena of amplified conflict and a policy area for increased securitization (Barnett and Adger 2007; Busby 2021; Oels 2012; Sahu 2017). The issue of normative imprecision within the concepts themselves has also been addressed from multiple angles, including the inside–outside relationship between national and social security (Neocleous 2006; Walker 2016), the positive and negative value of security (Hoogensen Gjørsv 2012; Kivimaa et al. 2022; Nyman 2016), and conflicting values in the sustainability conceptualizations (Arias-Arévalo et al. 2017; Kenter et al. 2019; Redclift 2005; Stålhammar and Thorén 2019). However, a general trend in this research field is a significant compartmentalization of security and sustainability, while a substantial focus has been rendered on ecological and economic aspects. Hence, there is a need to address the linkage between social sustainability and security and the “conceptual messiness” (Durose et al. 2022) that emerges when laboring on a theoretical understanding of this relationship.

By this positioning, the central contribution of this article is to illustrate, with the assistance of three contrasting perspectives, paradox, co-production, and deconstruction, how values and ideological aspects can influence contemporary world politics and affect the conceptualizations of security and social sustainability. Therefore, with the three perspectives as a starting point, I want to unpack and explore what possibilities these perspectives suggest for the conceptual manifestation of social sustainability and security while addressing the boundaries and openings they present. Specifically, how is the interlinkage of security and social sustainability affected when the three distinct perspectives are applied, and by doing that, can we gain a deeper

understanding of how conflicting values operate in world politics?

The article is structured as follows. The first section clarifies the methodological approach and how the theoretical perspectives of paradox, co-production, and deconstruction have been used as illustrative tools to study the relational dynamic of social sustainability and security. After that, I will continue with the three perspectives and describe their effects on the conceptual pair. The first part addresses the paradox perspective, which stresses an essentialist view of values that convolute a reconciliation of social sustainability and security. The second part focuses on the relationship between security and social sustainability from a constructivist proposition of co-production, which pronounces reciprocity and co-creation. After that, the conceptual association is approached from a poststructuralist perspective of deconstruction, focusing on the underlying processes that produce meaning while paying attention to the hierarchical positioning of values. Lastly, I will discuss what can be discerned from studying the conceptualization of security and social sustainability using the three perspectives.

Methodological approach

This article has proceeded as a conceptual analysis to investigate what boundaries and openings three distinct perspectives of the connection between social sustainability and security might produce. The prime focus is, therefore, not so much on explaining exactly how the conceptual pair of security and sustainability has been discursively discussed in the UN, but rather, in a bricolage-inspired process focused on bringing together concepts, questions, and controversies, identifying how the meaning and the effects of this conceptual pair are altered depending on which perspective is applied (Aradau et al. 2014). In this setting, the three perspectives function as illustrative tools to understand the performative character of concepts in their contextualized materializations rather than analyzing their textual definitions per se (Guzzini 2013). Comparing concepts with various value-based compositions can bring vital information on how their dynamic unfolds in different theoretical frameworks (Garnett 2014) while providing an integrative tool for further theory development (Jaakkola 2020). Furthermore, a conceptual analysis also helps to highlight the circular connection between values and knowledge-making in their influence on governance and security measures (Jasanoff 2004).

The analyzed material consists of five UN policy documents listed in full in Appendix 1. While the selected documents address the connection between sustainability and security using slightly different approaches reflecting on the specific context in which they were created, they provide a generic account of how the conceptual pair has been

discussed in the UN and holds a central position in the evolution of Sustainable Development and its strong association with security. Two of them, “Our Common Future,” also known as “The Brundland Report,” released in 1987 (UN 1987), and “Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” released by the UN General Assembly in September 2015 (UN 2015), are considered canonical documents in the UN work on Sustainable Development (Mensah 2019) while presenting valuable insights on how security has been approached from a sustainability perspective. Three reports were included from the UNDP: “The Human Development Report,” released in 1994 (UNDP 1994), the first report in which “human security” appears, further expanded in “Human Security Now,” also called the Ogata–Sen report, from 2003 (CHS 2003). These two reports are vital documents in the UN formulation of Human Security and have been discussed frequently in academic literature (Wibben 2011). A more recent publication, “2022 Special Report on New Threats to Human Security in the Anthropocene: Demanding Greater Solidarity,” released in 2022 (UNDP 2022), brings an updated account of how security and its linkages to social sustainability are conceptualized today.

In addition, relevant academic contributions and grey literature within security studies, sustainability, and human security have been added to exemplify the divergent standpoints produced by the theoretical perspectives of paradox theory, co-production, and deconstruction. The literature discussed has been applied to illustrate how the relationship between security and social sustainability is altered depending on which perspective is applied. Therefore, a limitation is the textual body on which the study has based its conclusion. However, the focus has been on analyzing the contrasting outcomes produced by distinct ideological vantage points rather than providing an exhaustive literature review.

Analytical framework

Previous research describing the relationship between security and sustainability has often relied on “human security,” expanding on notions of negative and positive security as formulated in the traditionalist/widening–deepening debate (Hoogensen Gjørsv 2012; Kivimaa et al. 2022; Nyman 2016). While this application is suitable for describing how the UN, in most parts, has addressed security, it follows a dichotomous reasoning that fails to encompass the full complexity of security when aligned with social sustainability, which includes a wide range of societal aspects. To fully comprehend this dynamic, this article has applied three perspectives: paradox, co-production, and deconstruction. Different values and epistemological orientations underpin these perspectives and represent distinct standpoints of what constitutes “true” security and sustainability. They also allow a

more holistic and flexible analysis to conceptualize security and sustainability as a relational process that materializes differently depending on the perspective involved. How the perspectives have been analyzed is listed in Table 1.

The paradox perspective highlights an essentialist understanding of values as absolute qualities pronouncing differences and clear-cut categories. Essentialist thinking often leads to dualistic categorization, separating distinct elements with well-defined boundaries (Jackson 1999). This epistemological baseline is influential in political realism and proceeds as a commonsensical approach to how security generally operates in world politics, emphasizing explicit categories of enemies and allies with the accumulation of power as a primal concern (Morgenthau and Thompson 1993). Paradoxes have been approached in previous research from many angles. This article has supported its conclusions based on literature from organizational studies to describe the theoretical framework of paradox theory (Hahn et al. 2018; Lewis 2000; Schad et al. 2016). Paradoxes in military philosophy rely on literature from war studies (Luttwak 2001; Morgenthau and Thompson 1993; Rothschild 1995) and critical security studies (Walker 2016; Wibben 2011).

In contrast, the co-production perspective describes a constructivist view of security and sustainability as “two sides of the same coin.” The co-production view is exemplified by the view of development and security described in “Human Security,” relating to the UN’s conceptualization of security. This approach proceeds from constructivist ideas of values as variables that depend on historical, cultural, political, and social contexts (Hopf 1998), emphasizing the interaction between science, values, and policy (Mach et al. 2020). Co-production as a theoretical framework has been widely applied in various disciplines, including studies on global sustainability (Miller and Wyborn 2020), future studies (Durose et al. 2022), and policy research (Wyborn et al.

2019). Co-production is used in this article to illustrate the widening debate in security studies (Hoogensen Gjørsv 2012; Kivimaa et al. 2022) relating to the composition of sustainability and security in the form of human security (Alkire 2003; Hanlon and Christie 2016; Sen 2004), development (Duffield 2007; Nussbaum 2007), and emancipation (Booth 1991).

The third perspective, deconstruction, offers a poststructuralist lens on the relationship between security and sustainability, highlighting the processes that infuse concepts with meaning and valance. Although initially associated with the philosopher Jacques Derrida in his work on critical literary analysis, this approach has been widely used as an analytical tool in critical research to highlight the processes through which meaning is constructed, contingent, and, therefore, changeable (Shepherd 2021). Accordingly, deconstruction provides an approach to the scientific critique of taken-for-granted assumptions on the constitution of the world order (Neocleous 2006; Zehfuss 2018) and how they materialize in policy (Avelino and Grin 2017; Telleria 2021) and highlights questions of power and hegemony (Burke 2002; Walker 2016).

“Three perspectives of security and social sustainability” will continue with a more in-depth analysis of the three perspectives separately.

Three perspectives of security and social sustainability

Paradox

A paradox can be described as a phenomenon that consists of embedded contradictions between various aspects, which seem logical when studied in isolation but absurd

Table 1 Summary of the three perspectives

	Paradox	Co-production	Deconstruction
Focus of attention	Accentuates differences—security and sustainability as a trade-off. Territorial “commonsensical” security	Security and sustainability are co-productive, interdependent, and necessary: human centered	Focuses on the processes that give meaning to normative concepts: process orientated
Theoretical fields	Organizational studies, military doctrine/policy	Global sustainability/future studies/policy research	Critical security/policy studies
Power dimensions	The accumulation of power is the central task	Liberal rationality pronounces protection and betterment of the essential aspects of life	Seeks to overturn hierarchies
Epistemology	Essentialism/realism	Constructivist/humanitarian	Poststructural/messy
Values	Inherent and absolute security and sustainability as trade-offs	Human development and security as co-contingent: “Two sides of the same coin”	External and undecided, value pluralism
Contributions	Paradoxes point to conceptual constructions that provoke tensions	Security is broadened to include social values. Stresses the importance of human development	The context and meaning are not fixed, opens up conceptualizations—acknowledges a power dimension

and irrational when appearing simultaneously (Lewis 2000). Paradoxes tend to accentuate tensions between competing yet interrelated objectives emanating from contrasting logics that operate at different levels in various time frames (Hahn et al. 2018). These tensions often originate in an essentialist understanding of values as fused with inherent qualities (Stålhammar and Thorén 2019), therefore generating polarized either/or distinctions that appear paradoxical when contrasted to other values. Accordingly, a paradox perspective on the relationship between security and social sustainability emphasizes differences and frictions by associating the concepts with absolute values, such as destruction–development and power–inclusion that remain relatively fixed, therefore appearing to obstruct a reconciliation. Furthermore, these values are often arranged in binary opposition, thus presenting a trade-off situation where increased security decreases objectives in social sustainability. An example of this binary construction can be traced in the “Human Security Now” report released by the Commission on Human Security (CHS) in 2003, in how it distinguishes national security from human security:

“Traditional notions on security, shaped largely by the Cold War era, were concerned mainly with a state’s ability to counter external threats.” (CHS 2003, p. 3)

While human security;

”Seeks to protect people against a broad range of threats to individuals and communities and, further, to empower them to act on their behalf.” (CHS 2003, p. 2)

However, because “human security and state security are mutually reinforcing and dependent on each other” (CHS 2003, p. 6), the connection between the two approaches to security produces a paradox.

Besides providing a distinct comparison tool, paradoxes can occur in times of uncertainty and ambiguity, where simplified descriptions of a complex phenomenon are applied to overcome cognitive disharmony (Ford and Backoff 1988). Paradoxical reasoning, therefore, typically emerges in contexts characterized by a paradigmatic change where challenging old ideas invoke dissonance and perplexity (Kuhn 2012). As a policy intention and research agenda, sustainable development exemplifies a transformative motion in “setting out a supremely ambitious and transformational vision” (UN 2015, p. 3) for radical change. However, the obsolete core competencies that hinder true transformation appear resistant to alteration, creating a paradox of development and continuity. This is acknowledged in the 2022 Special Report on Human Security as a development paradox:

“Even though people are on average living longer, healthier, and wealthier lives, these advances have not

succeeded in increasing people’s sense of security.” (UNDP 2022, p. iii)

The UN conceptualizations of security thus occasionally appear contradictory and ambiguous. While one explanation emphasizes a functional rationale, where paradoxical descriptions effectively accentuate differences, another conclusion is that the paradoxical interpretation of security emanates from “the contested concept of security” itself (Smith 2005).

According to Merriam-Webster, the dictionary definition of security is “the state of being free from danger or threat,” which appears unproblematically straightforward. However, when probed more deeply, the concept emerges as vague and highly normative. It thus opens up a wide range of politically motivated and occasionally conflicting views of what security, in practice, means (Booth 1991; Nyman 2016; Walker 2016). The most prevailing account of security has been recognized as “national security,” which historically has focused on threats and locating danger, referents to be secured, agents that provide security, and means to contain danger (Wibben 2011). From this perspective, security is understood in deterministic terms as the pluralistic objectives of individuals and states to protect and prevent future attacks from antagonistic threats (Morgenthau and Thompson 1993). As such, it displays a stark association with a concentrated effort to enforce foreign and defense policy mechanisms to avoid, prevent, and win interstate military disputes (King and Murray 2001). In Rob Walker’s words, this understanding of security operates as a hegemonic logic, which has “invoked realities and necessities that everyone is supposed to acknowledge, but also vague generalities about everything and nothing” (Walker 2016, p. 84).

The perception of military reasoning as situated in a realist ontology that is ubiquitous and implicit, yet disorderly and imprecise, supports the paradoxical interpretation of security. This sentiment is illustrated by the (in)famous quote made by Publius Flavius Vegetius in the fourth or fifth century A.D.; “Si vis pacem, para bellum,” “To secure peace is to secure for war” (Vegetius 1475). The proverb has supported the ambiguous dogma of what the military mission, in essence, encompasses and implies circular reasoning where peace is perceived as a prerequisite for war (and vice versa). When constructed in this way, the paradox is not conferred from a platform of opposition but instead appears as a nucleus. As such, the paradox is conceptualized not as cast by either-or thinking but instead forms an integral part of the military organization’s core identity (Luttwak 2001). This type of paradoxical logic accentuates realist ideas of military actions as structural necessities where states are predestined to act in specific ways.

Although it might appear unproblematic when viewed from a military context, the security paradox becomes an

obstacle when combined with the core value in the social dimension of sustainability, which “values life for itself” (UNDP 1994, p. 13). This is partly explained by the ambiguity of the negative connotation of security as connected with destruction while simultaneously being concerned with peace maintenance, thus conveying a positive value. The ambiguous quality is further reinforced through covert ideas of an embedded power asymmetry operating at the center of sustainability efforts. This paradoxical construction appears in quotes supporting ideas of military power as something that can neutralize a potential threat and, therefore, “protect the people” (CHS 2003). As a result, this viewpoint displays an image of people needing protection yet simultaneously being capacitated to autonomy, emancipation, and self-government (UN 2015).

In essence, the historical and political fabrication of security as a “national interest” appears paradoxical when juxtapositioned with the values of social sustainability. It draws a sharp boundary between how the concepts can be merged. A paradox perspective thus leads to the conclusion that a foundational aspect of how security operates is oppositional to ideals relating to the social dimension of sustainability.

To summarize:

- A paradox perspective proceeds from an essentialist understanding of values that fortifies binary evaluation structures.
- Security is theorized in ambiguous terms of negative values associated with destruction, yet is associated with peace maintenance, indicating a positive value.
- Boundaries to conceptualizations of security and social values are fortified by a predisposition that views the concepts as trade-offs, with the overall understanding that national security must be prioritized.
- However, one potential opening for this conceptualization is that pluralistic value systems often appear paradoxical; it does not mean they cannot co-exist.

Co-production

In contrast to the sharp boundaries presented by the paradox perspective, the co-production view offers a broad theoretical spectrum where the interdependency of knowledge, culture, and power is at the center of inquiry (Durose et al. 2022; Miller and Wyborn 2020). Co-production provides a constructivist framework to expand notions of science (Wyborn et al. 2019), emphasizing reciprocity and exchanges between various stakeholders (Durose et al. 2022), and is a valuable tool for improving critical analysis and addressing normative research (Jasanoff 2004; Miller and Wyborn 2020). Analyzing security and social sustainability from a co-production perspective thus means a co-constitutive approach to producing and organizing

knowledge and governance rather than treating them as separate domains (Mach et al. 2020; Turnhout et al. 2020). Accordingly, co-production contrasts the realist ideology that seeks to disconnect elements of nature, facts, objectivity, and policy from those of culture, value, subjectivity, emotion, and politics (Jasanoff 2004).

When viewing the relationship between social sustainability and security from a co-production perspective, the outcome is that although social sustainability and security can be seen as derived from very different core values, there is a deep connection between them. Not only are they connected, but they are also co-constitutive since a basic level of security is required to realize a sustainable future. Conversely, legitimate security can only be achieved through sustainable development. This sentiment permeates the UN 2030 Agenda and is illustrated by Sustainable Development Goal 16 as an overarching objective to:

“Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” (UN 2015, p. 14)

From a co-production perspective, security proceeds from a normative frame where security is viewed as a positive value associated with a solid emancipatory agenda (Nyman 2016). The positive view of security is a prominent cornerstone in “human security,” originally intended to extend the narrow understanding of “national security” to endorse a value-based framework focused on conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Hanlon and Christie 2016; Hoogensen Gjorv 2012). A vital part of this extension includes a humanitarian approach centered on the people’s well-being, highlighting the fulfillment of basic personal needs such as being fed, fully clothed, and safe from harm (CHS 2003; Sen 2004). This concept thus invites an analytical level of security focused on how people and communities can manage their needs, rights, and values concerning international security (Alkire 2003). However, this softer approach to security is not entirely separated from national security since good governance is recognized as an imperative factor for making people feel safe. This sentiment is especially prominent in the Human Security Now Report, where it is stated in several places that human security complements “state security” (CHS 2003). Therefore, the force of violence can be deployed by states that react to threats from extra-state actors to assure people that their human rights are protected and secure (Hanlon and Christie 2016). Another critical point is that even though the level of analysis is focused on the individual, the determinants of human security are affected by past courses, such as colonization and war, while ongoing developments, like climate change and trade liberalization, generate precariousness that can accentuate future vulnerabilities (Barnett and Adger 2007; UNDP 2022).

One essential component in the co-production perspective of security and sustainability is emancipation. According to this view, security and emancipation are two sides of the same coin. Security equals the absence of threats, thus freeing people (as individuals and groups) from physical and human constraints, making them more emancipated (Booth 1991). This way, emancipation is the key to achieving “true” security. This idea is also notable in “The Capability Approach,” developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, who link the social dimension of sustainability with a broad meaning of security through the concept of capabilities referring to aspects of basic human needs (CHS 2003; Nussbaum 2007; Sen 2004). The capability approach is closely related to human rights and guided by the principles of social justice and emancipation. Emancipation is further associated with development ideas, which connect insecurity and conflict with underdevelopment, since “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth is essential for prosperity” (UN 2015, p. 8), while; “greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and influence the world, which is vital for development” (UNDP 2022, p. 27). Accordingly, it is crucial to include social elements in marginalized communities as critical focus areas to build sustainable peace (UNDP 1994). Therefore, effective states should protect and improve people’s lives in ineffective ones since providing this help will enhance security everywhere (Duffield 2007).

The idea in the co-production perspective is that security and sustainability are both interrelated and co-contingent and that:

“Sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security, and peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development.” (UN 2015, p. 9)

A co-production thus undoubtedly opens up a broad application of how the concepts can be merged. However, there is also a possibility that the broad implication of a co-production view can add to conceptual confusion, imprecision, and vagueness while implying that a diverse range of human activities can be turned into security issues, which can justify undemocratic measures. Furthermore, another issue is the view of development and security as co-contingent. The overriding logic in this assumption is that development reduces poverty and diminishes the risk of future instability, thus contributing to improved global security. However, development as a necessary precondition for security can lead to intensified climate change, with negative consequences for both social sustainability and security. Furthermore, the development concept relates to a particular rhetoric, which serves to justify and disguise the prevailing patterns of global hegemony (Walker 1981). In effect, the assumption that the Western world is the most developed

and, accordingly, both responsible and entitled to “saving” the rest of the world is reinforced. Consequently, viewing security and social sustainability as co-produced does not resolve the issue of power asymmetry but instead supports it in a reconciliatory vocabulary.

To summarize:

- The view of co-production understands security and sustainability as co-productive, interdependent, and necessary. The values of sustainability and security are given equal importance.
- This view proceeds from a positive perception of security focused on emancipation and humanitarian values. The connection between human security and development is an essential feature.
- Even though the security concept is broadened, it still favors traditional views of security, which present boundaries for further conceptualization. The embedded power dimension is reinforced by benevolent images of “the Western protector.”
- Potential openings include incorporating social values in the concept of security while pushing for the importance of human development to overcome poverty and inequality.

Deconstruction

As discussed in “Paradox”, the paradox perspective implies a narrow conceptual boundary due to the fixed core values associated with security. At the same time, the co-production perspective described in “Co-production” suggests a conceptual openness that is too broad. Still, the power dimension is something that neither of the views adequately addresses. Thus, instead of identifying the variables that allow or inhibit a conceptual configuration of security and sustainability, another potentially more fruitful question is to ask what security “does” and how its performance affects the values of the concept to which it is attached. This undertaking invites a deconstructive approach that moves beyond scrutinizing specific components of security and social sustainability to focus on the underlying logic that infuses these concepts with valance and meanings.

Deconstruction is a philosophical and literary analysis associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida that analyzes *how* language produces meaning and what consequences particular readings produce. It is not a method, a philosophy, or a practice, but something that happens when the arguments of a text undercut the presuppositions on which it relies, and the deconstruction takes on a life of its own (Culler 2008). Accordingly, this perspective involves a shift from exploring the meanings of the concepts to questioning “what remains to be thought, with what cannot be thought within the present” (Royle 2000, p. 7). To

understand where a deconstructive approach might fill the gaps, let us briefly return to the paradox perspective and its pronounced distinctions of opposing categories. One explanation for paradoxical thinking can be attributed to the Western idealization of logocentrism, which values presence, the factual and real, as the highest goal in knowledge production (Culler 2008). However, this ideal is upheld by the constitution of its presumed opposite, accentuating binary relations that typically imbue a hierarchical valuation process (Zehfuss 2002). Accordingly, how we understand the world and its textual descriptions proceeds from differentiation, where “every concept is inscribed in a chain or a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences” (Derrida 1982, p. 11). These binary constructions are, however, neither stable nor reflect reality per se, and as soon as they are uttered, they fall apart (Edkins 2013). Ambiguities and paradoxical constructions can, therefore, accentuate undecidable elements in conceptualizations, which open possibilities “to transform concepts, to displace them, to turn them against presuppositions” and, in that process, produce new configurations (Derrida 1987, p. 22).

In other words, undecidable elements are neither one thing nor the other, and at the same time, they are simultaneously both. They can, therefore, illustrate how the arrangements for a particular phenomenon's possibility can simultaneously be the conditions for its impossibility, thus opening “the experience of the impossible” (Derrida 2007).

Thus, although the connection between sustainable development and security in most parts is strikingly straightforward, it also contains undecided elements that open a deconstructive movement. This is exemplified by the following quote from the Brundtland Report:

“The absence of war is not peace, nor does it necessarily provide the conditions for sustainable development.” (UN 1987, p. 3:24)

The quote portends an undecided and uncertain space between war and peace and that sustainable development is not *necessarily* achieved through a state of peace. This statement, therefore, implies that the categories of war and peace could be something else, thus revealing an undecided element in their conceptual constitution. Another example is found in a quote from the Human Development Report:

“Human security is more easily identified through its absence than its presence. And most people instinctively understand what security means.” (UNDP 1994, p. 23)

This quote identifies security as an absence and *something most people instinctively understand*. What is implied by *absence* is the opposite of security, which is *insecurity*. The implication is, therefore, that security as a dominant

category can only materialize through the continuous fabrication of its presumed opposite, insecurity. Not only is the universalist claim of security as an ultimate and overriding human value reinforced, but its association with military force is implicit, exemplified by an excerpt from the same report below:

“The battle of peace has to be fought on two fronts. The first is the security front where victory spells freedom from fear. The second is the economic and social front where victory means freedom from want. Only victory on both fronts can assure the world of an enduring peace...” (UNDP 1994, p. 24)

Accordingly, the undecided structure of “security” is what produces and maintains “presence” and creates a more stable construction for the undecided element of “the absence of war.” This reading, therefore, fortifies a commonsensical notion of security as a human necessity and justifies a “security first” perspective forged around “its claim to embody truth and fix the contours of the real” (Burke 2002, p. 5). The undecided element of security appears to attach itself to a deterministic idea where the quest for more security is a chronic condition.

Social sustainability, too, carries undecided elements in its conceptualization. One example is the relationship between the emancipation of individuals and the universality of the common good. The liberty and emancipation of the individual are potent ideas in linking social sustainability with security. Yet humanity is often approached as a “single and universal identity,” described as the “people.” This universal identity is extended in the Special Report from 2022 to encompass the whole planet:

“The world is not only interconnected but also characterized by deep interdependencies across people as well as between people and the planet.” (UNDP 2022, p. 27)

The tension between the individual and universal extends the dimension of time, where the current generation and the next are approached as a unity with similar needs and demands. This contradiction can lead to ‘dark’ and ‘unintended’ effects of social change, intensifying power struggles and added inequalities (Avelino 2021). The universalist claim epitomizes questions of power further, appearing in conceptual configurations through philanthropic expressions of protection:

“Human security is deliberately protective. It recognizes that people and communities are deeply threatened by events largely beyond their control.” (CHS 2003, p. 11).

This type of sentiment reveals an undecided element in the vocabulary of sustainable development that seeks to

empower people yet describes them as lacking agency and needing protection.

A deconstructive reading of the conceptual relationship between security and social sustainability implies that, on the one hand, these concepts are volatile and open to various interpretations while, on the other, exhibiting opposing core values that appear *impossible* to merge. However, this conclusion simultaneously involves a *possibility* since society needs security to fulfill the essential components of social sustainability, such as governing institutional justice, spreading resources more fairly, and protecting democratic functions (UN 2015). In this way, linking security to social values acknowledges how socially constructed identities and ideologies (re)create structural (un)certainities that underpin violent conflicts and consider these questions necessary items on a security agenda. In contrast to the co-production perspective, where social sustainability and security are seen as two sides of the same coin, a deconstructive approach acknowledges that merging security with social sustainability is “possible only on the condition of being impossible” (Derrida 2007, p. 451). Security and social sustainability are thus in the process of ongoing co-creation, producing a “state of dynamic equilibrium” (Ben-Eli 2018, p. 1339) in which they hold each other in check while continuously conditioning the existence of the other.

A deconstructive perspective can thus open a more flexible conceptualization of security and social sustainability in presenting a link between opposing categories. As such, it can create a framework that gives meaning to contradictions, showing how they are perspectival and fluctuating. It further highlights how power operates, often conceptually construed in benevolent cloaking as “development and protection” while reproducing hidden assumptions and problem formulations that legitimize unsustainable practices (Avelino and Grin 2017). However, this perspective also allows for relativistic conceptualizations, where the normative valence of these concepts risks diluting the conceptual meaning (Collier et al. 2006).

To summarize:

- The meaning of a concept is not a decided quality. Therefore, a deconstructive approach focuses on the processes that produce meanings.
- Concepts have an undecided disposition, which embodies impossible and possible manifestations of values, which removes their hierarchical positioning.
- When boundaries are not fixed, new approaches to conceptualizations are opened while hidden assumptions, such as power, are acknowledged.
- Because the meaning, context, and realization are not fixed, this can lead to relativistic interpretations and unforeseen deconstructions.

Discussion: openings and boundaries

The perspectives discussed in this article have been used as illustrations to expose different manifestations of the conceptual connection between social sustainability and security while addressing the boundaries and openings they present. As described above, the paradox perspective fortifies a dualistic categorization with clearly defined boundaries, whereas a co-production perspective approaches security and sustainability from a pluralistic lens with interdependent elements. The third perspective, deconstruction, suggests an approach to sustainability and security that moves beyond the dichotomous structure of constant tensions while highlighting how power operates through hidden assumptions. So, what can the illustration of perspectives tell us about the relational dynamics between social sustainability and security? In addition, is it possible to reconcile these concepts?

In the following, I will consider these questions from the dimensions of values, the opposition between fixed and unstable components, and the production of power and normative approaches to security and social sustainability.

Dimension of values

A critical parameter in analyzing the three perspectives of security and social sustainability is the dimensions of values embedded in the concepts and whether or not they should be treated as an inherent autonomous domain or as an external and context-dependent factor. The dimension of values does not have to be an either-or position, nor is it a static condition. However, depending on how the dimension of values is construed, reconciling values with disparate value-based origins will be either more accessible or challenging.

If we view values as having an intrinsic quality with distinct conditions, normative sources, and standards (Erman and Möller 2015), then a conceptual merging will be more complex, especially when the values are highly normative and ambiguous. Values in this perspective become more fixed and inflexible, illustrated by the paradox perspective, which pronounces differences and binary oppositions. However, even though values with an absolute and fixed position may cause tensions and paradoxical arrangements, they can also teach us something by pointing out potential scopes of friction. The other perspective on values is that they are not inherent nor absolute but have an external and, hence, a variable quality, which means they depend on contextual influences and, therefore, have a more interchangeable character. In this setting, the values depend on other factors that change dynamically, exemplified by

the co-production perspective. This means a shift in focus from defining the qualities of a particular concept to studying actual situated practices in the context that can help make conclusions about security and social sustainability for that specific case. A deconstructive approach shares this propensity. However, this perspective focuses more on studying the process where concepts become intricately infused with values while highlighting the hierarchical ordering principle that follows with this structuring. This leaves an open dimension where the values of security and sustainability are concurrently decided and undecided. However, while this undertaking is an essential aspect of any critical interrogation, it might lead to “so what” conclusions that do not help to bring about conceptual clarity.

The opposition between fixed, interchangeable, and fluctuating components

As discussed in “[Three perspectives of security and social sustainability](#)”, one problem with the conceptualization of sustainability and security is the inherent value attached to each concept, which appears fixed and resistant to alteration yet, as illustrated by the deconstruction perspective, carries an element that remains in constant motion. This constitution invites alternative normative positions, which causes conceptual imprecision, nurtures ambiguousness, and imbues relativistic interpretations. However, due to the fixed element, potential openings are impeded. This opposition is characterized by different arrangements of fixed and interchangeable components of security and social sustainability. As argued in this article, security encompasses a fixed hegemonic logic that obstructs any reformulation to include social values. Thus, a conceptual understanding of security is inextricably grounded on a paradoxical structure emphasizing both negative (destruction) and positive (protection) aspects. It has clearly defined boundaries, accentuating differences and forming a normative baseline that appears rigid and inflexible. In this view, security supports an unappealable claim of military violence as “the ultimate solution,” meaning that security takes precedence over other values. In contrast, social sustainability is a concept consisting of highly interchangeable elements that are not decided, displaying a plurality of values (Kenter et al. 2019) and reinforcing a high degree of uncertainty regarding how it should and could be defined (Leal Filho et al. 2022). In practice, this means that the fixed component of security remains relatively unaltered, even though it is filtered through the generous lens of the co-production perspective, which ultimately reproduces the dichotomous understanding of security and sustainability it initially set out to challenge.

In this regard, a deconstructive approach might present a solution by offering a view of values as a process in “the making” and, hence, not a fixed thing since “context is never

absolutely determinable” (Derrida 1988, p. 370). Because the structure of concepts is ambiguous, everything depends upon “how one sets it to work” (Derrida 1987, p. 22), which implies that security, too, can be “overturned” and situated differently. For this to work, however, it is vital to acknowledge the “messiness” exhibited by a mosaic reality composed of intricate clusters of competing values originating in different disciplines, contexts, and political orientations. In this perspective, the conceptualization of security and social sustainability proceeds from a processual perspective, which endorses a pluralistic value system composed of infinite possibilities.

Power and normativity

In addition, a dimension of power in these concepts arises from the intersection of instrumental objectives in the sustainability agenda and the normative approaches utilized to address these objectives. Instrumental objectives focus on task completion and strategic problem-solving while neglecting the normative complexities brought to attention through the undecided elements. Focusing on problem-solving is an approach that is, as suggested by Vince and Broussine (1996), a strategy to control uncertainty, which is a fundamental part of the normative application of sustainability. However, a problem-solving approach includes an implicit element of power that carries a compelling influence in policymaking. It is, therefore, essential to deepen the understanding of ideas that motivate different standpoints and the theoretical tools that ground the choice of selecting and implementing policy (Bicchieri and Mercier 2014). The paradox perspective acknowledges the accumulation of power as the essential goal for stakeholders in world politics, a goal that can never be fully reached. The co-production perspective approaches power from a softer proposition of liberal rationality, which strongly favors the protection and betterment of the essential processes of life associated with the population, economy, and society (Duffield 2007). However, as Turnhout et al. (2020) argue, a co-production perspective also allows elite actors to shape processes that serve their interests by pronouncing a view of power that leans on idealistic and humanitarian ideals. This view proceeds from a positive view of security, tightly connected with ideas of development and emancipation as a prerequisite for joining security with social sustainability. However, there are problems with this broadening, as it tends to reproduce the hidden assumptions on security, power, and development it initially was set out to challenge. These assumptions proceed from the idea of the protector and the protected and cement a power hierarchy which, arguably, does not sit well with the ambition in the UNDP Report that “people should be able to take care of themselves” (UNDP 1994, p. 24). In both cases, the comprehension of power strengthens Western hegemony

and fortifies ideas of development as a linear progression. The perspective of deconstruction might offer a solution to the power dilemma by leaning on an understanding of power as something that is never settled, but in continuous motion. Understanding power in this setting allows for conceptualizing security and sustainability as a deconstructive movement where the logic of a value-based position contradicts the position being affirmed. In this way, the different perspectives define the boundaries of the other, and as such, they also present openings.

Conclusion

The three perspectives described in this article reflect on the underlying tensions formed by disparate ideological foundations, which condense into questions of what is to be sustained and what or who is to be secured. These are critical questions to address, especially considering the complex issues the world is currently facing, which require a constant renegotiation of what values society wants to promote. To seriously address these questions requires a high degree of conceptual flexibility in responding to the intricate mixture of political motives and ethical challenges that arise when probed more deeply. The answer to these questions also sets boundaries and openings for how these concepts can be merged.

The three perspectives of paradox, co-production, and deconstruction show that the conceptualization of security and social sustainability motivates different agendas that can inform how future policy is constructed and can be a productive way to sharpen the analysis of how this conceptual relationship might be approached. Recognizing the dimension of values that underpin these conceptualizations, especially by paying attention to fixed and interchangeable components and how normativity and power operate, could ease the way for integrating a conceptualization of security to accommodate the values of social sustainability. Yet, as argued in this article, the security–sustainability conceptualizations harbor an inherent predisposition that reproduces a hegemonic perception of security, leading to a continuous trade-off arrangement of security and sustainability efforts. Another point of departure is understanding the perspectives of paradox, co-production, and deconstruction as a dynamic interrelation where various aspects can be highlighted in multiple settings. This also applies to the wide range of actors approaching the conceptual pair in policymaking, who must deal with this complexity when defining the boundaries and openings for conceptualizing security and sustainability. Applying distinct perspectives as illustrations for disparate ideological standpoints can deepen the knowledge of how multiple and occasionally competing outcomes are formed beyond dominant categories. Experimentally

bringing together concepts, questions, and controversies can lead the way for opening up discussions of what is taken for granted in a world of ever-increasing complexities (Aradau et al. 2014) while inviting us to reconsider the normative foundations on which any inquiry into security responses to societal challenges is based.

This article has contributed with an analytical tool of illustrative perspectives on how the conceptual relation of security and social sustainability can be approached. However, to gain a deepened understanding of how this plays out in the real world, the perspectives should be empirically studied in actual situations by analyzing how different actors engage in discursive arguments and how this is reflected in world politics.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-023-01450-w>.

Funding Open access funding provided by Lund University. The Swedish Defence University financed this study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no other conflicts of interest.

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