

# Embracing Simplicity: Integrating Mindful Consumption and Sustainable Practices into the Pursuit of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals

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**Abstract**— This abstract highlights the significance of simplicity as a fundamental principle for achieving sustainability within the framework of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by influential organizations such as the United Nations. Based on extensive research and literature, it argues that simplicity fosters mindful consumption, resource efficiency, and resilient communities. The abstract emphasizes the importance of integrating simplicity into the pursuit of sustainable development by raising awareness, implementing policies, and promoting collaboration among scholars and world organizations. By acknowledging the potential unintended consequences of the SDGs, such as the promotion of overconsumption, this study suggests that embracing simplicity can align the goals with sustainable practices and contribute to the establishment of a resilient and equitable world for both present and future generations.

**Keywords**— Sustainability, Simplicity, Sustainable Development Goals, Mindful consumption, Resource efficiency, Resilient communities.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the pursuit of a more sustainable world, the integration of simplicity as a guiding principle has become increasingly important. While organizations such as the United Nations have established the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a comprehensive framework for addressing global challenges, there is a growing recognition among scholars and world organizations that simplicity must be incorporated into these goals to foster true sustainability (United Nations, 2015). Simplicity, characterized by mindful consumption, resource efficiency, and resilient communities, offers a transformative approach to sustainable development. Extensive research and literature support the notion that embracing simplicity can help address the underlying causes of unsustainable behaviors and promote a more sustainable future (Elgin, 2010; McDonough & Braungart, 2002; Seyfang & Smith, 2007).

This article aims to shed light on the significance of simplicity as a fundamental principle for achieving sustainability within the context of the 17 SDGs. By drawing on scholarly works and empirical evidence, we will explore how embracing simplicity can contribute to sustainable practices and outcomes. Additionally, we will critically examine the potential unintended consequences of the SDGs, such as inadvertently promoting overconsumption (Brown, 2009). It is essential to highlight the need for scholars and world organizations to advocate for the integration of simplicity into the pursuit of sustainable development. By emphasizing the intrinsic value of simplicity in promoting mindful consumption, resource efficiency, and resilient communities, we can strive towards building a more equitable and sustainable world (Wiedmann & Minx, 2008).

Through a comprehensive examination of the relationship between simplicity and the 17 SDGs, this article aims to inform and inspire scholars and powerful organizations worldwide to reconsider their approaches and embrace simplicity as a transformative path towards achieving the

SDGs (Seyfang & Smith, 2007). By recognizing the potential of simplicity in addressing environmental and social challenges, we can pave the way for effective policymaking, educational initiatives, and collaborative efforts that promote sustainable practices (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). Together, let us embark on a journey towards a more sustainable future by embracing the transformative power of simplicity (Elgin, 2010).

## II. LITRETURE REVIEW

Simplicity, both as a philosophical concept and a design principle, has been widely explored and embraced throughout history. The significance of simplicity in understanding the world was recognized by the Pythagoreans, who pursued mathematical harmony and order (Bulmer-Thomas, 2012). Similarly, Galileo Galilei's exploration of the Law of Fall demonstrated his appreciation for simplicity in uncovering fundamental truths (Dugas, 1955). Isaac Newton's discovery of the law of gravity further exemplified the power of simplicity in scientific breakthroughs (Cohen, 1994). Besides that in the realm of philosophy, simplicity has been examined from different perspectives. Aristotle delved into the complexity of human thought and behavior while seeking underlying simplicity in his exploration of psychology (Robinson, 2016). This idea of minimalism gained traction in critical theory, emphasizing the importance of simplicity in challenging established norms (Piotrowski, 2010).

Simplicity also finds its place in the realm of design. Dieter Rams, a renowned designer, emphasized the principle of "less but better," highlighting the power of simplicity in creating functional and aesthetically pleasing products (Rams, 1995). Don Norman, in his book "The Design of Everyday Things," discussed the significance of simplicity in user-centered design (Norman, 2002). Norman's insights are complemented by Lidwell, Holden, and Butler (2010), who outlined universal principles of design that enhance usability and appeal, reinforcing the role of simplicity in effective

design. And also, in the modern context, the pursuit of simplicity extends beyond design and permeates various aspects of life. Voluntary simplicity, as explored by Aall and Aall (2017) and Burchell and Rettie (2017), involves embracing a simpler lifestyle as a response to consumer culture, leading to enhanced well-being and sustainable consumption practices. Etzioni (2010) and Nelson and Coyle (2019) examine the motivations and practices of voluntary simplifiers, shedding light on the potential benefits of simplicity in individual and societal contexts.

Furthermore, simplicity plays a role in emotional well-being and happiness. Hill (2013) explores the concept of simplicity as a means to overcome struggles and find contentment. Ong (2010) highlights the importance of simplicity in fostering positive experiences and emotional well-being from a social psychology perspective. In addition to this the discussion on simplicity extends to broader societal debates and economic perspectives. Schor (2014) examines the sharing economy and the implications of simplicity in redefining economic systems. Elgin and Mitchell (2013) discuss voluntary simplicity as a response to consumer culture, highlighting its potential to shape a more sustainable and fulfilling society.

In conclusion, simplicity has long been recognized as a powerful concept that permeates various domains of human existence. From ancient philosophers to contemporary designers and scholars, the pursuit of simplicity has provided insights into understanding the world, enhancing design, promoting well-being, and reimagining societal structures. Embracing simplicity can offer us clarity, focus, and a path towards a more balanced and meaningful life (Taylor, 2021).

The concept of simplicity as a minimal use of resources has been a subject of exploration by numerous individuals. However, a comprehensive and precise analysis of its minimum limit appears to have eluded researchers thus far. However, in this regard, an ancient source dating back 2600 years provides us with insights into the limit of simplicity through the teachings of Buddha. The teachings of Buddha regarding the four necessities of life - clothing, food, lodging, and medicine - emphasize their proper use and consideration (Ariyesako, 1998). According to Bhikkhu Ariyesako, the Buddha instructed his followers to approach these necessities with mindfulness and purpose. For instance, the robe should be used to protect against cold, heat, and insects, as well as to cover the body modestly (Ariyesako, 1998, Chapter 3). Similarly, almsfood should be consumed mindfully for sustenance and to alleviate hunger, without indulging in excess or for mere pleasure (Ariyesako, 1998, Chapter 3). The Buddha also highlighted the importance of suitable lodging for shelter, privacy, and protection from the elements (Ariyesako, 1998, Chapter 3). Furthermore, medicinal requisites should be used with the intention of relieving illness and promoting well-being (Ariyesako, 1998, Chapter 3). The teachings of Buddha on the four necessities of life provide guidance for practicing simplicity and contentment, emphasizing the appropriate use of these essential elements to support a balanced and purposeful existence.

Similarly, there exists a definition of needs within the realm of Western knowledge. Needs encompass the fundamental requirements and desires necessary for a person's well-being and survival, as well as for achieving a satisfactory standard of living (UNDP, 1990). As this definition is endorsed by the United Nations, it is intended to be applicable globally. However, it is evident that this definition differs slightly from the Eastern knowledge domain's understanding of needs. Specifically, the Western definition includes the additional notion of "maintaining a good quality of life," which introduces the potential for confusion and blurs the distinction between basic needs and excessive consumption patterns. In essence, this expanded definition paves the way for a lifestyle centered around high levels of consumption that surpass the fundamental necessities of human existence.

Sustainability is a widely discussed and researched topic across various disciplines, including environmental science, economics, and sociology. Scholars have provided valuable insights into the concept, significance, and application of sustainability in different contexts.

The concept of sustainability revolves around the idea of meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It encompasses three pillars: environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Environmental sustainability focuses on conserving natural resources, reducing pollution, and minimizing the negative impacts of human activities on ecosystems (Boons & Lüdeke-Freund, 2013). Economic sustainability aims to promote economic growth while addressing inequality and ensuring equitable resource distribution (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002). Social sustainability emphasizes social justice, inclusivity, and the well-being of communities (Hansen & Schrader, 2017).

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), outlined in the 2030 Agenda, play a crucial role in guiding global sustainability efforts (United Nations, 2015). These goals address diverse challenges such as poverty eradication, climate change mitigation, sustainable consumption and production, and biodiversity conservation.

However, sustainability also faces criticisms and challenges. Scholars have highlighted potential trade-offs and conflicts between different dimensions of sustainability, such as the tension between economic growth and environmental conservation (Banerjee, 2003). Ongoing debates exist regarding the adequacy of current sustainability practices in addressing pressing global issues, including overshooting the Earth's carrying capacity and the necessity for transformative changes in economic systems (Brown, 2015; Steffen et al., 2015).

To advance sustainability, researchers have explored various approaches. These include business models for sustainable innovation, which seek to integrate sustainability principles into organizational practices (Boons & Lüdeke-Freund, 2013). Social learning perspectives provide insights into sustainable consumption and the role of collective learning in promoting sustainable behaviors (Hansen & Schrader, 2017). Frameworks for understanding sustainable behavior in different cultural contexts have also been

proposed, recognizing the importance of cultural factors in shaping sustainability practices (Shen et al., 2020).

In summary, sustainability is a multidimensional concept that addresses environmental, economic, and social aspects. It is guided by global goals and principles outlined in the SDGs, but challenges and debates persist in its implementation. Researchers continue to explore innovative approaches to promote sustainability and address its complexities in diverse sectors and cultural contexts.

In this literature review, we have provided a brief discussion on the concepts of simplicity, needs, and sustainability. It is important to note that these concepts are subject to different ideologies, leading to conceptual conflicts and common criticisms within their definitions.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This research paper employs a qualitative approach to examine the relationship between simplicity and sustainability and to explore the potential of simplicity as a transformative course towards achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The methodology involves a comprehensive review and analysis of existing literature, scholarly works, and empirical evidence related to simplicity, sustainable development, and the SDGs.

- **Literature Review:** A systematic literature review was conducted to gather relevant academic papers, books, and research articles. Keywords such as "simplicity," "sustainability," "Sustainable Development Goals," and "mindful consumption" were used to search electronic databases, including academic journals and reputable online repositories. The literature review provided a foundation for understanding the theoretical frameworks, conceptualizations, and empirical studies related to simplicity and its role in sustainable development.
- **Data Collection:** Primary data collection was not conducted for this research paper, as it primarily relies on a synthesis of existing knowledge and scholarly works. However, secondary data sources, such as reports and case studies from reputable organizations like the United Nations, were consulted to gather empirical evidence and real-world examples of simplicity-oriented initiatives and their impact on sustainable development.
- **Data Analysis:** The collected literature and empirical evidence were analyzed thematically. Key themes and sub-themes related to simplicity, sustainable development, and the SDGs were identified and organized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Data analysis involved synthesizing information, drawing connections between different sources, and identifying patterns and trends related to simplicity and sustainability.
- **Framework Development:** Drawing upon a comprehensive analysis of the literature and empirical evidence, a conceptual framework has been constructed to elucidate the intricate relationship between simplicity and sustainable development. This framework encompasses essential concepts, principles, and factors that underpin the pivotal role of simplicity as a catalyst for transformative change towards the attainment of the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs). Furthermore, in order to enhance the efficacy of this endeavor, the 'connect-the-dots' methodology has been employed, diverging from conventional approaches.

### IV. DISCUSSION

In our literature review, we have explored three interconnected concepts: simplicity, basic needs, and sustainability. Jayantha et al. (2020) emphasize that simplicity plays a crucial role in achieving sustainability. Moreover, it has been acknowledged that simplicity and basic needs are in harmony with each other. However, it is important to acknowledge that the definition of basic needs has encountered contradictions and inconsistencies. Nevertheless, several studies by authors such as Maslow (1943), Streeten (1981), and Emmerij (2010) underscore that individuals have four fundamental needs for survival. Thus, this discussion is firmly rooted in the core definition of basic needs.

Let's first discuss the definition of sustainability that is globally accepted and endorsed by the United Nations. According to the United Nations (1987), sustainability is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition highlights the importance of fulfilling present needs while ensuring that future generations can also fulfill their needs. In our analysis, this definition aligns with our index since sustainability is rooted in the concept of simplicity, which emphasizes relying on basic needs. Therefore, there is no discrepancy in this definition, as it encompasses the fundamental principle of sustainability and the relationship with basic needs.

Based on this definition, the United Nations has established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is important to note that these SDGs serve as targets rather than being a process in themselves. As Robbins and Coulter (2017) suggest, "Goals are aspirational dreams, not a process. Objectives, on the other hand, provide the roadmap for achieving goals." This highlights the significance of objectives in guiding the path towards accomplishing goals. However, it should be recognized that while targets hold importance, objectives also play a crucial role in shaping social behavior and driving progress towards sustainable development. Therefore, considering this context, our main emphasis should be on the recommended approaches to attain the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals while aligning them with the concept of 'basic needs'. It is important to reiterate that basic needs encompass the four fundamental elements essential for human survival.

The first goal of the United Nations is "No Poverty." As part of this goal, the UN aims to implement social protection programs to address poverty issues (United Nations, 2015). This includes the implementation of social safety nets such as cash transfer programs and social insurance schemes to provide assistance and support to individuals living in poverty. However, two issues arise from this approach. Firstly, while it primarily focuses on social security measures, it indirectly contributes to the fulfillment of basic needs. It can be argued that social security encompasses certain wants that go beyond

basic needs. Secondly, the goal does not explicitly address the issue of excessive social security benefits for the wealthy, which may result in resources being allocated away from fulfilling basic needs.

Another measure employed to achieve the first goal is ensuring access to basic services. This includes efforts to provide vulnerable and marginalized populations with healthcare, education, clean water, sanitation, and affordable housing (United Nations, 2015). While these initiatives are commendable, it can be argued that education, although recognized as a fundamental human right, may not directly align with the concept of basic needs. Additionally, the concern raised earlier resurfaces in this context as well. Namely, the potential neglect of addressing the issue of excessive resource consumption by affluent communities. To achieve global sustainability, it is imperative to embrace a perspective of simplicity that considers the basic needs of all individuals and works towards their fulfillment.

Another objective of the first goal is to promote employment and economic empowerment (United Nations, 2015). This involves creating job opportunities, supporting entrepreneurship, providing skills training, and facilitating access to financial services. However, it can be argued that these measures may not align with the principles of simplicity or the fulfillment of basic needs. It is evident that these actions can potentially contribute to overconsumption, as they may foster a culture of economic growth without considering the sustainability implications. Breyer and Sendzimir (2017) discuss the relationship between sustainability and economic growth, highlighting the need for sustainable economic growth that is compatible with simplicity and environmental stewardship. They emphasize the importance of aligning growth objectives with principles of sustainability and simplicity.

Another objective within the first goal is to promote social inclusion and reduce inequality. These objective addresses key themes such as tackling inequalities and fostering social inclusion. The operational objectives of this goal encompass ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all, regardless of factors such as gender, age, disability, and more. However, it can be argued that these objectives do not directly address simplicity or basic needs. Instead, they align with human rights slogans that emphasize the importance of equal rights for everyone (Panchal, 2019).

They discuss policies related to sustainable development as part of the first goal among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This includes promoting sustainable agriculture, fostering resilient infrastructure, and ensuring access to affordable and clean energy, among other objectives. When examining the promotion of sustainable agriculture, various aspects such as environmental stewardship and economic viability are considered. However, there are two significant discrepancies in this approach. Firstly, there is a misconception that through protecting the environment leads to sustainability. In reality, sustainability is achieved through simplicity or the fulfillment of basic needs, where society adopts a simpler way of living that also encompasses environmental protection. Secondly, attempting to address

global issues through non-simplistic models contradicts the essence of simplicity.

Only the first Sustainable Development Goal has been examined in this analysis, albeit not comprehensively. Nevertheless, this brief assessment reveals a deviation from the original concept of sustainability. Instead of sowing the seeds of simplicity for the fruition of sustainability, there appears to be a conscious or unconscious cultivation of the seeds of overconsumption. Unfortunately, this global transgression has been masked by the pervasive use of euphemistic language.

## V. CONCLUSION

This article aims to assess the concept of sustainability in its original sense, particularly exploring the link between simplicity and sustainability. It recognizes simplicity as the fundamental factor in achieving a sustainable society. The evaluation of sustainability is conducted based on this cause-and-effect theory. In addition, the analysis incorporates a criterion derived from literature sources, namely basic needs, which encompass food, housing, clothing, and healthcare.

The first goal among the 17 sustainable development goals established by the United Nations, which have been implemented globally, has been critically analyzed in this study. The key finding of this analysis highlights that while the Sustainable Development Goals are presented with favorable language, the actual processes associated with these goals often contradict the principles of sustainability. It has become evident that instead of promoting simplicity, these programs tend to encourage overconsumption, which is antithetical to sustainability. Moreover, there is a notable confusion between basic needs and desires, which is prevalent among academics and practitioners. However, given the pressing global need for sustainability, it is imperative that scholars collectively strive to reinforce the true essence of this concept. To achieve this, a clear understanding of the foundational meaning of sustainability is crucial. In conclusion, I extend an invitation to global organizations such as the United Nations and scholars engaged in this field to reassess the concept of sustainability from the standpoint of simplicity.

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