CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The Brundtland Report, 1987

It would be no exaggeration to describe the above quote as the most widely cited definition of sustainable development. Equally, sustainability and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are amongst the most widely discussed and reported issues as the world grapples with the consequences of climate change, poverty, conflict, and resource scarcity. Sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) might seem like a clear and straightforward agenda for ending poverty, protecting the planet, and promoting peace and prosperity. Yet, the truth could not be further than that. This is an idea fraught with contradictions and questions about the future of humanity.

Writing in *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*, the sequel of *The Development Dictionary* that was published in 1992, Wolfgang Sachs describes the idea of sustainable development as the expression of an unequivocal mind shift in the geopolitics of development compared to the post-colonial and post–Cold War era from a discourse of progress to that of survival (Sachs 1992, 2018: xiii). Yet, sustainable development is still underpinned by a narrow and one-dimensional perception of
development, one that is tied to a market-driven conceptual framework and a mantra that sees appropriate technologies, markets, and institutional policy reforms as the solution (Kothari et al. 2018). As several of the contributors in the Post-Development Dictionary confirm, there is a pressing need for scholarly work to both deconstruct and re-politicise the idea of sustainable development. We need to critique the social structures that underlie ecological destruction and need to bring to the forefront the multidimensional and alternative visions of sustainable development through an interdisciplinary effort. To all the above I would add the need for a critical approach to the idea and measurement of development as a whole, informed not just by expert and scientific knowledge but by the unique knowledge, experience, and voice of the people at the grassroots level.

It is in this effort that this book aims to contribute first by advancing the idea that genuine sustainable development is more likely to happen through smaller and self-sustained projects rather than institutional efforts that rely on large aid packages and a ‘silver bullet’ mind set; and second by bringing into focus the critical role of communication, voice, and the social relations that are at the heart of such projects. At a time when achieving genuine sustainable development on a global scale entails a multi-stakeholder approach with resources and knowledge drawn from different social groups, communication could not be more crucial (Servaes and Malikhao 2016). In fact, as the world is faced with an unprecedented humanitarian and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that is unravelling at the time of writing, the need and value of communication and social relations has become even more pressing. The physical distancing policies implemented globally to control the disease have only strengthened the importance of and need for communication and social relations to support and bolster our economies and societies. According to the Chief Executive of the Bank of England Andy Haldane, the crisis has exposed the need for recognising the importance of this social capital in the way we measure the success of our societies, placing well-being at the centre (Haldane 2020). The same should apply to our understanding and measurement of sustainable development, with more attention placed on the voices of the people on the ground.

Sustainable development emerged as a prominent development paradigm in the 1980s, with the year 1987 becoming a landmark for the ‘sustainability revolution’ with the publication of ‘The Brundtland Report’ by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). In
this, sustainable development was defined as ‘development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Elliott 1994: 4), with core issues including development, energy, food security, and biodiversity. It can be argued that the Brundtland Report was also a landmark for the establishment of what today is called the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDGs). The SDGs summarise the agenda agreed by the United Nations’ member states to achieve sustainable development between 2015 and 2030, and which continues the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were adopted in 2000. Sustainable development has also been theorised as a form of development and social change, ‘a social process, which has as its ultimate objective sustainable development at distinct levels of society’ (Servaes and Malikhao 2016: 174).

There has been no shortage of criticism when it comes to the reactions to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, succinctly reflected in suggested alternative readings of the SDGs acronym, such as ‘Sustainable Survival Goals’ (Sachs 2018: xiii), ‘Stupid Development Goals’ (The Economist 2015), and ‘Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled’ (Easterly 2015). The reported inadequacy of the SDG Agenda to offer a realistic development policy has recently received considerable criticism from scholars and experts alike. SDGs have been accused to be driven by a neoliberal ideology, failing to invest in health, correct trade injustices, and protect low and middle-income countries, with the COVID-19 pandemic deepening existing undercurrents even further (van de Pas 2020). Early sustainability debates were initially influenced by The Limits to Growth report by the Club of Rome (Meadows et al. 1972), which raised concerns about mass production technologies and consumption patterns and the limitations of perpetual growth. These concerns were captured by the term ‘eco-development’ and the rejection of the idea that economic growth will spread from the few to the masses; but were ultimately rejected by powerful political actors hence paving the way for sustainable development as the new guiding policy (Gómez-Baggethun 2018: 71).

Although at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN’s focus turned onto global environmental threats and the advancement of SDGs directly linked to climate action, land, and water, the sustainable development discourse has shifted the emphasis from social justice to poverty alleviation in line with the economic imperatives of growth (Gómez-Baggethun 2018). The Rio+20 final declaration advocates the need for economic growth in more than 20 articles, championing the conviction that
economic growth and technological progress will offer the solution to environmental issues (Demaria and Kothari 2017). Although the importance of economic growth for human development cannot be denied, it is its non-uniqueness, as a means to development, that needs to be recognised. This requires a shift away from dominant discourses that frame development in line with Western-Northern hegemony and growth, and a recognition of the multidimensionality of human development and well-being. The following section presents three theoretical approaches that exemplify this idea.

**Development Beyond Economic Growth: Deconstructing Sustainable Development**

The limitations of the economic aspect of sustainable development have been in the public debates at least since the 1990s during which time we also saw the launch of the Human Development Index (HDI) and a shift in the emphasis of development economics from national income accounting to human-centred policies. In the UNDP report *Sustainable Human Development: Concepts and Priorities* (1994), authors Sudhir Anand and Amartya Sen put forward the idea of human development as a goal in itself that safeguards sustainable development by enhancing people’s capability to live worthwhile lives, without denying the importance of poverty alleviation for environmental protection. These debates also highlighted the need for deconstructing and reviewing the concept of development as a linear process that relies on material and financial growth, and recognising that well-being and quality of life depend as much on social relations and the environment. According to Demaria and Kothari (2017), deconstructing development can pave the way for a matrix of alternative, richer, and more complex views that challenge the dominant ideas of sustainable development and promote ethical values such as solidarity, interconnectedness, inclusiveness, to name but a few. There are at least three theoretical frameworks that have contributed to this deconstruction and will be presented here. These are Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach (1999), Alsop and Heinsohn’ Empowerment Framework (2005), and Dorothea Kleine’s Choice Framework (2013). All three frameworks contribute to a deconstruction of the idea of sustainable development in a way that reveals the complexity of well-being and the multiplicity of resources, processes, and relations that make up development and can also lead to sustainability.
**The Capability Approach**

The capability approach can be broadly described as a normative framework, an approach, or a mode of thinking about normative issues that can be used for the evaluation of individual well-being, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society (Robeyns 2005). What distinguishes this approach from other theories is its emphasis on the need to evaluate well-being and human development not just in monetary terms but also based on different aspects of human life. In other words, human development is approached as multidimensional and should not be reduced to economic growth and income generation. The framework emerged from the work of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in 1980s and has contributed decisively to the development of the Human Development Index (HDI) as an alternative indicator to the GDP per capita that shifted the debate from an economic growth focus to one on human development (Kleine 2013: 21). The approach has also been developed by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2011) as well as other scholars. Although Sen and Nussbaum disagree on certain features of the theory, they are aligned in their critique of utilitarian approaches to human development. Moreover, as Sen’s approach has been described as less prescriptive than Nussbaum’s, I will be referring to his work mostly.

In Sen’s approach, humans are described as a collection of evolving capabilities, with human development being a multidimensional process that depends on objective (i.e. economic growth) as well as subjective values (i.e. what a person has reason to value). With freedom as its central principle, Sen’s theory understands development as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy (Sen 1999: 3). These substantive freedoms are referred to as ‘capabilities’, that is, what people are able to be and to do; the range of which make up the ‘functionings’ available to them (Clark 2005). More specifically, functionings are what an individual ‘has reason to value’ (Sen 1999: 74). These include valuable activities that contribute to people’s well-being, and while some may be focused on survival and material well-being, others emphasise empowerment and self-expression. Based on the concept of functionings, the idea of capabilities encompasses the various combinations of functionings, or the freedom and opportunity to achieve these functionings. Hence, functionings reflect what a person achieves, whereas capabilities correspond to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for a person to achieve in a given environment (Sen 1999: 74–76). From Sen’s perspective, the
capability approach recognises the value of the economy and economic
growth for people’s capacity and freedom to expand their capabilities, but
without limiting development to just economic growth. Economic growth
is seen more like an enabling factor, rather than the only indicator for
measuring improvement (Asiedu 2011). According to Nussbaum, human
well-being should not be differentiated from agency since well-being is
encompassed in whatever an individual values being able to be or do
(2011: 200). The human has no higher purpose than empowering her-
self/himself.

The capability approach is not without its limitations. One of the key
questions concerns individuals’ responsibility towards the community. If
as Sen contends, people ‘must take responsibility for doing things or not
doing things’ in accordance with their agency (1999: 190), it remains
unclear how an individual’s choices impact those surrounding him. In
other words, little attention is given to ‘obligation’ (Deneulin 2011;
Johnstone 2007). Along similar lines, Soper asserts that the capability
approach fails to see humans as ‘responsible agents assuming accountabil-
ity to the world beyond their immediate personal concerns’ (2004: 112).
In other words, and as Dubois and Mahieu (2003) explain, Sen relegates
responsibility to second place at best, after liberty, while relationships with
other humans are conceived primarily as instrumental rather than as intrin-
sic to being human. However, if one’s capability set ought to grow infi-
nitely, it requires that one person’s gain in power does not affect other
people. It needs to be mentioned though that the capability approach
takes the normative approach of ethical individualism, implying that what
ultimately matters is what happens to every individual in the society.

Another central question that emerges from this approach is the extent
to which a person has the resources required to achieve certain function-
ings and capabilities, as well as the ability to use these resources. Here, the
specific and subjective circumstances in which people live and exercise
choices are key, and they are captured through the notion of conversion
factors, that is, the degree to which a person can convert a resource into a
valuable functioning (Frediani 2010). The notion of conversion factors
draws attention to the impact that the socio-cultural context where people
live has on their capacity to aspire and develop functionings and activities
he/she values to pursue. The capability approach acknowledges that peo-
ple may have different opinions about what good life really is, but it also
draws attention to the importance of finding a balance between people’s
freedom to choose the lives they want to lead and their right to have the
required knowledge and resources that will enable them to reflect on what they value, set goals, and pursue these goals (Oosterlaken 2015: 5).

Although one cannot ignore these limitations, the capability approach raises important questions about development and empowerment as it moves beyond economic indicators as the measure of improvement. Instead, development is approached as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy and the things they are able to do. Through elements such as functionings, capabilities, and agency, it draws attention to the need for a deeper understanding of the different aspects of empowerment that underpin human development.

The Empowerment Framework

One of the key contributions of the capability approach stems from the attention that Sen pays to the link between material well-being and psychological and social aspects of development. This connection has been further developed in Alsop and Heinsohn’s (2005) and Alsop et al.’s (2006) Empowerment Framework through the concept of asset-based agency and the role of psychological and social assets in increasing people’s capacity to make effective choices. In this framework, ‘agency is defined as an actor’s or group’s ability to make purposeful choices’ (Alsop et al. 2006: 10), with the achievement of choice constituting a form of empowerment. Amongst the most important assets in understanding and tracking empowerment are psychological and social assets or resources, which might be more difficult to measure than material and financial assets, but they are an indispensable aspect of people’s well-being. Psychological resources may include sociability, self-confidence, and capacity to envision change, while social resources include networks and relationships.

For individuals to be able to convert their resources into agency and empowerment, an opportunity structure is also required. According to Alsop and Heinsohn (2005: 9),

An actor’s opportunity structure is shaped by the presence and operation of formal and informal institutions, or rules of the game. These include the laws, regulatory frameworks, and norms governing people’s behavior. The presence and operation of the formal and informal laws, regulations, norms, and customs determine whether individuals and groups have access to assets, and whether these people can use the assets to achieve desired outcomes.
However, the authors also recognise the interdependency of resources and opportunity structures in terms of people’s need to acquire certain assets to deal with and change existing institutions and norms that impede their agency and development. A useful example refers to women in countries like India and Ethiopia, for whom a change in their psychological resources and their capacity to aspire to a different relationship with their husbands is a prerequisite to changing certain social institutions that govern husband-wife relationships. Although such psychological assets are often ignored, they remain critical in people’s well-being and in our understanding of development as a more holistic condition that is not confined to utilitarian measurements.

The Choice Framework

Dorothea Kleine (2013) has drawn on both the capability approach and the Empowerment Framework to develop her Choice Framework to assess the role of information and communication technologies in development. Kleine employs a people-centred approach to development that starts from the individual, is focused on choice, and attempts to map and understand the different elements of the development process as a system. The Choice Framework builds on the idea of empowerment being connected to the availability and use of choice, as outlined by the other two approaches; and Kleine goes a step further in adding the ‘sense of choice’ and the knowledge that choice exists as another dimension of empowerment (Kleine 2013: 44 in Tufte 2017: 120). The role of non-material assets, such as psychological, social, and informational resources, is also critical in this framework, while Kleine draws attention to the cultural embeddedness of these resources and their interrelation with specific social and cultural contexts. More importantly, Kleine’s work brings to the forefront the aspect of ‘irrationality’ in the process of development, highlighting the ‘complex ways in which individuals’ emotions, beliefs, conscious and subconscious fears … shape their decisions and behaviors’ (Kleine 2013: 25). As such, she makes a strong case about the need to understand and appreciate the importance of non-economic outcomes that are part of people’s well-being and sense of development, which is also demonstrated in the case of Chile. Although Kleine’s Choice Framework and its application to the Chilean communities focuses primarily on development outcomes from their engagement with specific information and communication technologies, her work provides valuable empirical evidence of the
multidimensional and subjective nature of well-being and the diverse and complex ways in which people make sense of their lives.

The three theories presented here share a common interest in and emphasis on the need to study and understand development through a people-centred approach and based on the complex ways in which people experience development and empowerment within specific cultural, social, and political structures. Despite having underpinned public development debates for decades, the humancentric approach is yet to become a prominent dimension in current sustainable development concepts, theories, and discourses. This book presents an attempt to bring the humancentric dimensions of sustainable development into focus through an interdisciplinary intervention that draws from the global food economy and communication and brings together insights from communication and development studies, economic geography, and agri-food studies. However, the core argument the book aims to advance is not one of rejection of neoliberalism and free market capitalism, but of the possibility of alternative approaches to development where capitalist market relations can coexist with and contribute to non-monetary human development. In order to make these alternative understandings visible and comprehensible, I argue that a new ‘language’ is also needed, one that shifts our focus away from established and dominant conceptions of sustainable development, capitalism, and the economy, and allows us to look for less universal and more local and alternative explanations. In this book, this new language is found in weak theory, which has been inspired by queer and feminist studies (Chap. 2).

FOOD: A MEDIATOR IN DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Given its material and social importance, food beckons as an entry point to questions of sustainability that involve joining environmental and socioeconomic concerns. (Hinrichs 2010: 19)

Food can be a window to human cultures and a lens for understanding how people connect with each other, with places, and with the natural environment (Steel 2008). At the same time, food production and consumption can reflect the social, economic, and environmental pressing issues that humanity is currently facing. As the food economy continues to globalise and demand for products such as dairy and meat increases, the
food system continues to create challenges for natural resources putting immense pressure on the environment and people’s well-being (e.g. Kloppenburg et al. 1996; Anderson 2008). Once again, commenting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global food economy is inevitable, especially as the global outbreak has brought to light contradictory predictions regarding the future of the global food supply chains. On the one hand, the crisis has sparked a rise in demand for locally grown food, it has intensified calls for self-sufficiency and resilient local food systems and fuelled predictions for the collapse of global food trade. In rich and poor countries alike, local efforts to provide food supplies to local communities have flourished with new pop-up distribution centres and direct-to-home models, while the breakdown of global supply chains has caused a shift to local produce and people are becoming accustomed to managing with fewer and local ingredients (Fennell 2020).

On the other hand, there is also evidence of the resilience of the global food supply chain, with connectivity and technological advancement having helped counteract the impact of the pandemic through a rerouting of supply chains and swapping food supply sources (Huan-Niemi 2020). Given the reliance of most of the Western world on imported food, it is imperative for governments to keep the global food trade alive but also to secure a level of transparency, traceability, and accountability that will safeguard people’s health and well-being. It also means reducing industry concentration and protectionism, protecting biodiversity, and supporting developing countries (Economist 2020; Institute for European Environmental Policy 2020). As the Chief Economist of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, Maximo Torero Cullen, said recently, global food trade needs to keep going, especially considering it provides a significant source of income and welfare to low- and middle-income countries (FAO 2020). This level of reliance renders global food trade ever more crucial for the sustainability of farming communities in countries of the Global South, but it also makes the need for a more human-centred, innovative, and coordinated approach to sustainable development more pressing (Institute for European Environmental Policy 2020). It is specifically the human-centric element of the global food market that this book wishes to bring to focus, in the pursuit of a more nuanced understanding of sustainable development.

This book approaches the global food economy through the prism of the so-called alternative food production and distribution practices that are captured by the umbrella term ‘Alternative Food Networks’ (AFNs)
Alternative Food Networks will be discussed in Chap. 2. At this point, suffice it to say that the contribution of AFNs in the dominant sustainability discourses and in the conception and development of the UN’s SDGs is primarily framed around environmental considerations, food security, and hunger eradication (see FAO 2019), and around the expectation that sustainable food systems should become more environmentally sound and economically viable for a larger percentage of community members (Feenstra 2002: 100 in Hinrichs 2010: 20). Their sustainability promises are premised on the adaptation and promotion of environmentally benign farming practices, such as organic farming, value addition from differentiated and artisan production methods, as well as on the reduction of ‘food miles’ (Renting et al. 2003; Marsden et al. 2000; Schonhart et al. 2009). The reduced physical distance that certain types of AFNs are associated with, such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farmers’ markets, has been at the heart of localisation arguments that champion localism and local-scale food networks as inherently more beneficial for ecological sustainability, food security, and social justice than globally extended networks. Such arguments are predicated on the assumption that local food systems of production and consumption will yield economic, environmental, and social benefits for communities, while the notion of ‘community’ is also defined in terms of locality, ignoring the fact that communities can exist at all scales (Born and Purcell 2006). Underlying these discussions is the idea of the conflation of global agriculture with capitalist food systems. In this case, local networks are championed as spaces of resistance against the growing industrialisation of the food system (Kaufman 2004, 338).

Such arguments and dualisms have already been contested, with scholars advocating for recognition of the significance of interdependencies between local and global food networks for sustainable development (Goodman et al. 2014; Kneafsey et al. 2008). This book contributes to this body of work by adding a communication perspective and unearthing the critical role played by relations and communication practices in global food networks and why these matter for sustainable development. Food production and consumption enfold multiple socio-material processes and vibrant social worlds that create opportunities for unpredictable social change and development and that need to be considered and understood better (Preiss et al., 2017; Ofstehage 2017). More importantly, food is produced through an array of human relations and social networks that are crucial for sustainable development and that also provide an entry to
questions and considerations of the multifaceted nature of development, and particularly, the human and social side of it. The case of globally extended Alternative Food Networks encapsulates this relational nature of food production-consumption and therefore lends itself to deeper investigations of the role of food production and consumption in sustainable development. In her recent book *Voice and Participation in Global Food Politics*, Alana Mann describes food as the mediator in a process of social learning for social change and for re-establishing connections with what we eat and with the people who produce it (Mann 2019: 3). To this I would add that food is also the mediator in communication practices and social relations that are essential to sustainable development.

Global Alternative Food Networks are also a manifestation of the global market and capitalist relations and a component of the global food supply chain architecture. Although they are permeated by neoliberal discourses of economic development and they epitomise many of the ills of the global market, they also rely on trusted relations between food growers, intermediaries, and consumers that exhibit a more social and human-centric side of market relations. For this reason, they offer a platform where an alternative side to capitalism can be made visible; and once again communication provides a valuable tool that allows us to revisit traditionally economic actors, such as businesses and consumers, as agents of sustainable development.

Finally, the case of global AFNs inevitably raises questions about the cooperation and relationships between producer and consumer countries that are traditionally located in the Global South and North, respectively. Sustainable development discourses promoted through academia, international organisations, and the media often encourage an understanding of these relations as relations of dependency that obscure the heterogeneity of the South and undermine the agency of its people. Ultimately, deconstructing sustainable development requires that the voices of these people be heard. Communication is the thread that can bind together the different dimensions of sustainable development as this is experienced by the people. In fact, Sen makes an explicit reference to the role of communication in human freedom, quality of life, and formation of values (Sen 2009: 335–337). In this book, communication is also approached as a tool that can bind together different practices and social relations that underpin the global food economy towards sustainable development.
COMMUNICATION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The focus on communication encompasses the effort of this book to advance an understanding of development that is determined by people and their relations, where communication becomes ‘the essential thread that binds them together’ (Fraser and Villet 1994). A focus on communication not as a deliberate intervention but as a process that permeates social life and social change can help unearth the less visible routes and paths through which people’s knowledge and wisdom can inform theories and practices of development. Communication, interpersonal and mediated, is at the heart of sustainable development with institutions such as UNESCO and the World Bank’s Communication for Sustainable Development in Operations (SDO) unit working towards strengthening the capacity of institutions and individuals to make the best use of available communication resources for their sustainability. For communication to contribute to sustainable development, it needs to encourage a shared understanding of communities’ values and everyday problems and promote solutions that are desired by the communities above all. Yet, at the same time, the complexity and ambivalence of sustainable development make communication difficult to achieve and be effective (Kleinen-von Königslöw 2018). According to a PANOS report, one of the reasons why the promises made in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) failed was the lack of recognition by policymakers and development experts of the vital role of communication (Wilson et al. 2007). The report recognises that communication and sustainable development are inseparable as it is through better communication and information processes among people and between people and governments that communities can achieve change. This requires investment in building healthy civil society, good governance, and media and communication systems that will facilitate the participation of marginalised communities in social, political, and economic processes and change. Although communication remains vital and integral in sustainable development, and it is through communication, transparency, and knowledge sharing that global risks can be addressed, it is not explicitly mentioned in any of the 17 SDGs (Servaes 2013).

In the field of communication studies, there is now a rich depository of theories and methods that employ communication to address specific sustainable development issues, including rural development, poverty reduction, natural resource management, and gender equality. A combination
of methods including communication campaigns, marketing techniques, as well as more creative and participatory methods such as storytelling and participatory video are often used to raise awareness and influence attitudes on environmental issues (Servaes and Lie 2015). Academic perspectives on communication and sustainable development can be broadly organised in two categories: science communication and development communication. While the former engages mostly with environmental and climate change communication, and with more strategic approaches to communication, the latter pays more attention to participatory communication approaches for rural and human development. This book is positioned in the latter category, and the role of communication in sustainable development is examined through the prism of the field of academic and applied research that is commonly known as Communication for Development and Social Change, which will be introduced in Chap. 3.

Interestingly, and despite the field’s consistent preoccupation with sustainability and development issues, it remains a separate and distinct field and is rarely positioned within the academic and research area of sustainable development. Nevertheless, it has provided a wealth of empirical and conceptual knowledge of the power of communication, as an intervention and as an everyday practice, to affect economic and social change and to give people tools to make change and achieve appropriate and sustainable development (Fraser and Villet 1994). It is the aim of this book to bring to light the value that this field can offer to our understanding of sustainable development not as the outcome of unidirectional and market-driven development processes but as an experience and an embodied subjectivity that occurs and is shared through social relations. The analysis of communication is complemented with theories and concepts from the broader field of communication studies, which are fruitful in demonstrating the different types of communication and relations that happen outside institutionalised development programmes and can still contribute to community well-being and sustainable development.

These relations will be explored through the context of global food networks and the interaction/communication between three actors: farmers, small businesses, and consumers across three continents. This communication can be interpersonal/direct or mediated/indirect. In either case, the focus is on communication that is informal, ‘silent’, and less visible but has the power to lead to social change in significant ways. The power of this communication is encapsulated in the concept of weak communication that will be introduced in Chap. 3. It aims to capture the
integral role of communication in development through communication practices and relations that are embedded in the structures of the global food market and include trade relations (Chap. 4), representation (Chap. 5), and information and knowledge exchange through the spaces of the internet (Chap. 6). The concept of weak communication also embodies the performativity of knowledge and the need for a new language that will pave the way for the disruption of dominant discourses of sustainable development. In this book a new language is found in queer theory and feminism scholarship and will be unfolded in Chaps. 2 and 3 setting the context for the remaining chapters. In Chap. 4, the idea of weak communication is explored through the trade relations that connect farmers in India with small businesses in Europe and North America. These relations are based on a close interaction that can prove empowering for the farmers’ community, contributing to different aspects of their social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Chapter 5 engages with communication in the form of farmers’ public representation through the marketing and promotional material employed by fair trade organisations and brands. Here, the concept of weak communication illuminates the ‘weakly’ theorised impact of these representations on the farmers’ well-being. It also paves the way for a novel empirical investigation of the empowering effect that the process of self-representation can have on farmers’ well-being and sustainability. An experiment that involves Indian farmers’ production of their own videos and representations confirms the need to lift the voices of grassroots and marginalised communities in the study of sustainable development. In Chap. 6, the focus shifts on another weakly theorised aspect of the relations and communication practices that underpin the global food market, namely the interaction between producers and consumers across the globe. Apart from food, people’s consumption involves information and knowledge about food, which shapes their habits and behaviour not just in their private sphere but also towards the environment and the distant farmers. The chapter demonstrates the power that a more direct and personal interaction between producers and consumers can have on consumers’ perceptions and attitudes towards food and, more importantly, their perceptions about their own role and responsibility towards the environment and the people who grow our food. In this case, farmers’ expertise and digital technologies become essential instruments in consumers’ role in sustainable development. Through the relations and communication practices that are unpacked in these three chapters, the book aims to contribute to the research and practices of sustainable development in a
two-fold manner. On the one hand, it seeks to highlight the need for communication to be prioritised by and placed centrally in the work of scholars in the social and natural science disciplines. On the other hand, it aims to draw the attention of communication scholars and practitioners to the development opportunities that reside in communication practices that happen organically, such as in the structures of the global food market. It is by engaging with such communication practices further that the field of communication can contribute to development discourses beyond communication studies.

**The Case of Kerala in South India**

The core ideas of this book are explored and illustrated through the experience of a farming community in the district of Wayanad in the Indian state of Kerala. Agriculture is the most important sector of the Indian economy, accounting for 18 per cent of India’s gross domestic product (GDP) and for more than 50 per cent of the population’s employment (IBEF 2019). India is also among the countries whose agriculture and food economy trajectory has been shaped by land reforms and development programmes promoted by international development organisations and scientists (Chap. 2). By focusing on the state of Kerala, this book offers empirical and experiential knowledge that is rather un-representative of India. Instead, the Kerala case provides a suitable and rich context for challenging conventional understandings of development and illustrating the central role that food production plays in this.

The case of Kerala’s development experience represents what is often described as the ‘development model’ thanks to the state’s significant success in attaining a high HDI and high standard of living without rapid economic growth. This achievement both contradicts and challenges the presumptions and predictions of all economic development theories that see social development, demographic transition, and human well-being as positively correlated to GDP (El Khoury 2016; Thottathil 2014). Kerala’s success, on which Amartya Sen’s capability approach has also drawn on, is predicated on augmenting basic human capabilities through a long history of reforms that dates to the nineteenth century (Parayil and Sreekumar 2003). The trajectory of Kerala’s development success is beyond the scope of this book, but it is worth recognising some of the factors that contributed to this success, achieved with little foreign aid and with a key role played by grassroots movements and community economies (El Khoury
Among those factors are the meaningful land reforms, access to primary and preventative healthcare, promotion of education and literacy, especially among women, efforts to reduce social and income inequalities, and public action and mobilisation of peasant farmers and agricultural and industrial workers (Parayil and Sreekumar 2003). A particularly significant factor was the open and cosmopolitan outlook of Kerala that resulted from its rich history of trade relations and cultural links with the rest of the world, especially as a spice exporter, since as early as 3000 BCE (Chattopadhyay and Franke 2006). Although Vasco da Gama’s arrival at Calicut paved the way for the domination of the Portuguese over the spice trade and for Western colonialism in the sixteenth century, this era also established Kerala’s full integration into Western capitalism and the global food economy (Sreekumar 1993). Currently, Kerala continues to play a key role in the country’s export business with more than 80 per cent of the state’s agricultural products being exported (El Khoury 2016: 303).

But while trade has been one of the key drivers in Kerala’s development, it also proved to be the source of adversity for the state, especially following trade liberalisation and WTO policies that led to a sharp decline in the prices of agricultural products. This was coupled with high price instability leading to loss of income and high unemployment rates (Joseph and Joseph 2005; Shiva 2001; Vasavi 1999). Kerala’s traditional exports became subjected to the volatility of global markets, and the situation deteriorated further in 2001 with the removal of quantitative restrictions (QRs) on 714 mostly agricultural imports, the lowering of tariff levels, and the fierce competition for exports in the international market (Jeromi 2007; Joseph and Joseph 2005; Palackal 2019). During the 1980s and 1990s, the Indian government’s fiscal crisis meant that along with the decline in agricultural output, Kerala’s manufacturing sector also slowed (Thottathil 2014).

Kerala’s agrarian crisis was inevitable given the state’s dependence on the world market (Mohanakumar and Sharma 2006). At the same time, the crisis encouraged an ecological countermovement. This was to battle the damaging consequences of the practices dictated by industrial and commoditised agriculture, such as mechanization, mono-cropping, and excessive use of chemical fertilisers, that transformed agriculture into a cash crop–based business (Palackal 2019; Thottathil 2014). The countermovement was instigated by the Kerala government, and in a policy document released by the Biodiversity Board and Kerala’s Agriculture Department in 2010, the government introduced a strategy for the
promotion of organic farming and conservation of agro-biodiversity across the entire state. The organic farming programme—accompanied by the required certification schemers—has provided new opportunities for farmers to work with distant buyers and participate in globalised commodity chains on more favourable terms, while it has also enabled the formation of local groups and cooperatives (Thottathil 2014: 108–109). Although the state has clearly been a key actor in this initiative, the role of organic farmers from the periphery of Kerala’s agribusiness has been decisive in the development of this countermovement and the establishment of a collective identity not just among farmers but also NGOs and other like-minded individuals (Palackal 2019).

The significance of this organic countermovement is two-fold: on the one hand, it signals Kerala’s embracement of traditional, natural farming methods as a path to a more sustainable future. On the other hand, it is indicative of its vibrant civic culture and its long tradition of cooperative movements and community economies that have been an integral part of Kerala’s economy (El Khoury 2016: 256). From this perspective, Kerala represents a social, cultural, and agricultural context where movements, such as the organic countermovement, articulate the significance of the community and cooperative culture that underpins the formal economy. It is a context that lends itself to the study of the social relations that underlie formal economic transactions in the global food economy and through which alternative understandings of development can be drawn.

Situated in the north east of Kerala and home to Kerala’s organic export movement and organic certification institutions (Thottathil 2014: 85), the Wayanad district is set high on the Western Ghats, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a biodiversity hot-spot. Wayanad has a long history of trade activity as evidence suggests the existence of trade routes to Wayanad even prior to the colonisation of India (Cheriyan 1999). It is also believed that the hill tribes were involved in international trade activities, trading in forest products (Münster 2012). Agriculture is the backbone of Wayanad’s economy, and although the area is emerging as a tourism destination, it is also considered a backward district characterised by land alienation and degradation, with very few agro-based industries. It is currently included in the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2015; Martin and Rajesh 2013).

Wayanad is also known for being one of the most seriously distressed agrarian districts in India and one of the most affected by farmer suicides, having been hit by a series of economic and ecological crises since 1990s.
(Münster 2012; Vakkayil 2010). As Münster (2012) explains, the chemicals that were heavily used to boost productivity and profit during the economic boom years resulted in a catastrophic damage to the soil and a rise in cancer incidents among the local population. A severe drought in 2004 and an epidemic of plant diseases made matters even worse. The ecological crisis coincided with the economic crisis and crash of market prices for cash crops that hit Kerala during the late 1990s, leaving many farmers with heavy debts (Vakkayil 2010). For many of them, suicide was the only way out of this crisis, given the lack of support from the state and the minimal government investments (Krishnakumar 2004). Although the economic and ecological crisis remain the first reason for the majority of suicide cases until the mid-2000s, farmers’ suicides in Wayanad have also been attributed to other reasons, including physical illness, family problems, and even the pressures of a consumer culture (Jeromi 2007).

After 2000, Wayanad witnessed the rise of a consumer culture that put additional pressure on families to borrow money in order to keep up with a rising middle class, but which also culminated in further debt and suicides (Münster 2012).

The suicides and agricultural hardships led to the involvement of the Catholic Church with a group of religious activists forming the Indian Farmers’ Movement (INFAM) in 2000. Amongst the key priorities of the movement was the replacement of chemical-intensive practices with organic farming methods, the development of alternative marketing channels, and the writing-off of small farmers’ debts, a demand that was actually met by the Indian government in 2008. INFAM also realised the importance of organic certification for the opening of new market channels in Europe and America, which would give the farmers’ products a competitive edge in foreign markets. This led to the establishment of ‘Organic Wayanad’, a charitable society and cooperative that serves as an internal control system and ensures farmers meet the criteria for organic certification. It provides training and support during the farmers’ organic conversion and liaises with foreign buyers. The formation of Organic Wayanad was followed by the setting up of the Indian Organic Farmers’ Producer Company (IOFPCL), a producer company that is a combination of a private limited company and a cooperative society and acts as a liaison entity between the organic farmers and the buyers (Thottathil 2014; Vakkayil 2010). Apart from the significant enhancement to the soil

1 http://vanamoolika.org/organic-wayanad
ecology, the benefits of organic farming methods have encouraged many farmers in Wayanad to focus on organic products for export, turning Wayanad’s agrarian sector into export oriented (Thottathil 2014).

Kerala and the district of Wayanad represent a rich socio-cultural context that lends itself well to examining and understanding the various possible ways in which food, communication, and well-being come together in the context of food networks and the global food economy. The economic development of Kerala and the gradual spread of consumption culture are juxtaposed with many farmers’ search for a more spiritual connection to nature and the land through more radical alternative farming practices, such as zero budget natural farming, especially following the struggles they faced during the agrarian crisis (see Münster 2016, 2017). This context raises interesting questions about the different ways in which farmers and their communities negotiate well-being and sustainable development. Moreover, the entrepreneurial spirit and high literacy levels of many farmers have given them the confidence to engage in export relations and negotiations with foreign buyers.

The farmers who participated in the research presented in this book are all members of the ‘Organic Wayanad’ Cooperative. Between the start of this research in 2014 and at the time of writing, the number of members registered with the cooperative has doubled, from around 200 to 420 members, all of whom had organic certification for the products they were growing for export and for the domestic market. From those, half of them were also fair trade. The size of the farms varied, and it ranged between 12 acres and a quarter of an acre. The areas that were visited for the research and where the farmers were located and interviewed were in the town of Pulpally and the surrounding villages, which included Thrissilery, Kundala, Thondarnad, Seetha Mount, and Amarakuni.

A NOTE ON GENDER

Although gender power relations have not been at the heart of this book, a note on the role of women in the agricultural sector of Kerala, and specifically in the villages of Wayanad where the data has been collected from, is paramount. A trend that is worth noting and was also present in the farming community that took part in this research concerns the fact that women’s presence has been more visible in their role as housewives rather than as farmers. This is despite their unquestionable contribution to farming activities that range from cultivation to marketing (Kodoth 2004).
One explanation is found in the changing cropping pattern and the growing size of the farms. It has been reported that the move from subsistence farming to cash crops has driven more women into domestic work, while women in households with larger farms are also less involved in farming (Arun 2012). At the same time, household dynamics and women’s headship mean that women continue to be involved in the maintenance of the farms and in economic decisions that concern the household and the farm. This is especially when their husbands take office jobs that keep them away for long hours (Arun 2012). In Wayanad, women work mostly as co-farmers and their critical role in the running of the farms was acknowledged by their husbands. However, during the fieldwork, very few women agreed to take part in the discussions, which is a typical challenge when conducting research in patriarchal societies (Momsen 2006). Without dismissing or downplaying the significance of women’s knowledge and experience, their underrepresentation in this project should be seen in the context of the broader limitations of any study that focuses on a narrow case of investigation, especially in complex local landscapes such as India. Hence, in this study, women’s knowledge is underrepresented in a similar way that the knowledge and experience of other farming communities and tribes has also been excluded. The empirical evidence presented in this book is by no means generalisable, and the aim of this work was to offer initial insights in sustainable development through a communication perspective rather than draw conclusive inferences.

**Research Process, Positionality, and Reflexivity**

The methodological tools employed in this book fall under what is best described as a transdisciplinary, mixed-method approach that draws from the field of social sciences. It aims to bring to light some of the lessons that can be learnt from communities and communication processes that so far have received little attention in the study and understanding of sustainable development. Although the departing point of the work that has brought this book to fruition was a straightforward qualitative inquiry into buyer-farmer communication in trade relations (Chap. 4), the data that emerged from this inquiry and my immersion as a researcher in the work of the specific Indian community of farmers not only generated new knowledge around the role of communication, it also sparked a process of reflexivity among all the parties involved—farmers, buyers, and researcher—a joint process of knowledge production and new insights for the researcher and
the participants. This changed the nature of the research to more interactive, collaborative, and participatory as the voice of the participants became embedded in the design of the research process. Hence, without negating or undermining the existence of a certain degree of researcher bias, this is mitigated by the valuable knowledge and experience that participants brought into this process. At the same time, it is this collaborative and participatory nature that turned this research from an attempt to observe and understand relations and communication processes to a project that facilitated social and economic change in the farming community that took part in this project. In this case, the participatory and community-based approach enabled the connection of different scales in the food network, from the farming community to the local society and the global market.

The organic way the research developed allows for a chronological description of the different methodological steps that were taken for the completion of this project. Hence, the point of departure was the inquiry into the interpersonal communication that is embedded in trade relations and connects farmers with the foreign buyers that facilitate the farmers’ entry into the global food market. The emphasis on interpersonal communication as a form of communication that supports the structures of food networks but remains invisible was driven by the need to create a pathway to a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of sustainable development through a people-centred approach and through the voices and the perceptions of the people that were most affected, that is, the farming communities. This part of the inquiry consisted of focus groups with farmers in Wayanad and five of their buyers in Europe and North America. The choice of a qualitative research method was the most appropriate for achieving a more holistic understanding of the communication process and for capturing the underlying meanings and issues that matter to the participants.

The first focus groups with the farmers took place in February 2014 and involved 30 participants. They were combined with individual interviews with the Chairman of IOFPCL at the time and the Coordinator of Organic Wayanad. The interview process was facilitated by a local interpreter. The buyers were interviewed between August 2014 and January 2015. Four of the interviews were conducted on Skype and one in person in the UK. Four of those buyers are small-medium enterprises, wholesalers, and retailers, while one of them is a bigger alternative trading
organisation. At the time of the interviews, all buyers had organic certification, and four of them were also certified by fair trade.

The focus groups and interviews aimed to shed light on their relationships and communication beyond the strictly market exchanges, as well as the possible ways in which they contribute to the farmers’ growth and development. The findings from these group and individual discussions (Chap. 4) not only revealed the importance of interpersonal communication for farmers’ agency, but they also paved the way for the continuation of this research as both farmers and buyers expressed the desire to build closer relations with each other, while farmers also signalled their need to be heard and valued by the local society and the global community of consumers. It was from this point onward that the research assumed a participatory nature with the conversion of the findings from the first round of focus groups into an action plan that involved the farmers, two of the buyers that had already been interviewed and two new buyers. The plan comprised a storytelling experiment and the production of short videos (Chap. 5). The idea was conceived in September 2016 during a second round of focus groups with the farmers in Wayanad. The initial objective was to revisit the farmers, observe possible changes in the participants’ perceptions and practices that could be linked back to their relation and communication with the buyers, and collect new data from more farmers. The fact that as a researcher I had already built a relationship with the farmers and the farmers had also began to think more collectively about their communication with the buyers, with consumers, and with each other worked as an enabling factor for this part of the research. Hence, the focus groups offered farmers a safe setting and ‘communicative’ space to not just start a conversation with each other (Bergold and Thomas 2012) but to also develop new ideas and a plan of action.

It was during this stage of the process where the participants also began to take more ownership of the research (Russo 2012) by deciding to produce a number of short videos with the use of a mobile phone camera, or short written stories and still images. During these discussions action-oriented goals were also set, with the farmers planning dissemination events for sharing the videos with the local community. The story creation took place between October and December 2016, leading to twenty videos and six written stories. In January 2017, a second block of five focus groups were held with 20 of the farmers who took part in the videos to
discuss and reflect on their experience of making the videos. The participation of the buyers occurred in a rather natural way, as four buyers (all in Europe) that work more closely with the farmers’ group became aware of the storytelling experiment and they offered to organise screening events for their own consumers in their respective locations. In research terms, the buyers’ involvement in this stage of the research was the result of the knowledge that was co-produced between the researcher and the farmers. At the same time, the screening events organised by the buyers produced new insights that informed the farmers’ actions and the researcher’s analysis and evaluation.

Following the completion of the video production, the videos and stories were shared with food consumers in the UK through a website that was designed using a free web hosting provider, and where all material was uploaded. Focus groups with consumers were held in the UK in May and June 2017. Ten mix-gender focus groups were held in total, consisting of five participants each. Five of the focus groups took place in London and five in the Midlands. The groups were homogeneous in terms of age, while all participants had expressed some interest in organic and fair trade products. Although the sample is not representative, the objective of these group interviews was to gain initial insight into consumers’ reactions to the farmers’ self-representation, rather than to generalise the findings to the entire population. The participants were asked to watch the videos and/or read the stories of the farmers prior to the discussion. Finally, a third block of six focus groups was conducted in Wayanad in September 2017, with 20 farmers who had taken part in the videos and 20 farmers who had not taken part, but had been informed about the project through their colleagues. During these discussions, the consumers’ responses were delivered to the farmers through a combination of verbal narration, a presentation of quotes and extracts from the discussions, and a presentation of short videos that were shot during the focus groups with the consumers.

The focus groups with the farmers who followed from the completion of the video production and from the consumers’ reactions offered a space for discussion and reflection for the farmers who ultimately informed their action. As they reflected on the consumers’ enthusiastic feedback (Chap. 5) and on the value of the videos for their own internal

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2 The participants in the UK were recruited through a recruitment agency. The moderation was done jointly by the author and an independent professional moderator.
use, two new plans of action emerged. One plan included the organisation of screening events in two different regions, in Kerala and Karnataka, which took place in September and October 2017. The second plan concerned the production of new videos that would focus on the different stages of production of specific spices, such as turmeric, to be used for marketing purposes, through the foreign buyers, and for raising awareness among local farmers for the benefits of natural organic farming. Since then, I have held occasional individual interviews with farmers and officers from Organic Wayanad to discuss their experiences and aspirations.

In light of this book’s quest to encourage an understanding of sustainable development through the prism of communication and the voices of the farmers in Kerala, I feel that it is my obligation to recognise my positionality and the fact that my education, and my background and experiences as a European person would inevitably affect my observations and analysis. However, although I am an ‘outsider’ to the social, cultural, and political context of the farming community that I studied, this is partly mitigated by the close friendships and personal relations that I had developed with people from Kerala long before this study took place. These friendships were critical not only in facilitating the collaboration with the participants, the conduct of the interviews, and the translation/interpretation of the discussion, but also in enabling me to interact with the farmers even outside the data gathering spaces (e.g. in community events) and forge relations with them. Although interactions are an expected outcome of conducting fieldwork with qualitative methods (Patton 2002), my previous contact and knowledge with the local culture and the presence of Keralite friends during the fieldwork gave me an identification and connection with the farmers that was crucial for gaining their trust and acceptance. The trusted relationships also proved significant for maintaining reflexivity through prolonged engagement and repeated interviews with the same farmers as well as member checking. At the same time, although my familiarity with the community’s culture enhances the research process, being less familiar with their work and their farming practices enabled me to maintain a healthy distance, placing the farmers in the position of the expert (Berger and Malkinson 2000).
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