

# Multiple dimensions of sustainability: Towards new rural futures in Europe

## INTRODUCTION

The term ‘sustainability’ has exploded in academic writing in recent years and rural studies is no exception. Conceptualising sustainability has meant needing to deal with the entanglements of the social, natural and economic in one frame. The Sustainable Development Goals of *Agenda 2030: Transforming our World* have been seen as a stunning achievement for having succeeded in marrying goals around economic and/or social development with that of the environment and making this approach an accepted part of an international agreement. The process had begun in 1972 with the *United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* but had never been realised in policy before in quite such a holistic way. In the academy, sustainability, regarded mainly as bio-physical or environmental aspects had tended to be studied separately from critical research on how social and political processes make change possible. Paradoxically, while a critical approach to sustainability had been the focus of academic work in countries in the Global South to which models and technologies for development and the environment are exported from Europe, important academic analyses of sustainable rural environments in Europe itself have been relatively scarce.

Varied conceptions of sustainability can be found in UN documents that have guided policy as well as academic analyses. While some contend that sustainable development has been co-opted by governmental bureaucracies and the market (by decoupling economic growth from its environmental and social implications), others see it as bringing back into a conversation dominated by economic growth and to a lesser extent by environmental questions, the imperative of social justice.

In 2018/2019 when this special issue was first conceived, sustainability was still fairly undiscussed in a rural European context. The term sustainability was linked to rural development policies that were already in place in European rural areas. Although there were exceptions (e.g., Csurgó et al., 2008; Lamine et al., 2019; Marsden, 2013; McAreavey & McDonagh, 2010; Morén-Alegret et al., 2018), as a term, sustainability was rarely conceptualised in rural studies, and a majority of the literature related only to farms and agriculture. Today, while there is a great deal of research that uses the term, it is often taken as a given. There is a need for conceptualising what it means for rural Europe and how we work with it in rural studies.

As our authors show, there is clearly no one answer, and what is sustainable in one place may not be in another. Yet, dimensions and recurring patterns occur when we speak of sustainability,

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and we bring them together in this editorial. By taking up questions that span a wide range of issues crucial for rural areas—from people's intimate relations to their environments to questions of migration, development and governance, we foreground the multiple dimensions of this 'fuzzy' concept in rural Europe. By dimensions, we do not refer to what are normally called the three pillars of sustainability—the social, economic and environmental. For us, all three are intrinsic to thinking about sustainability, and one cannot divide up sustainability into social sustainability, economic sustainability or environmental sustainability. We need to address and conceptualise the intertwining of the economic, social and environmental together with questions of justice for sustainability. It follows then that a crucial thread running through all the articles in this issue is the question of *relationships*—as we (authors in this special issue) turn our focus to the need to conceptualise the relationships that make up the social, economic and the environmental and its inextricable entanglements.

With this special issue, we contribute to a grounded understanding about 'sustainability' in a range of rural contexts and in so doing to shed light on accompanying tensions and implications for the future of rural areas. We also bring attention to how the rural might be changing as a result of this new focus on sustainability. We go on to discuss two key questions:

- What are the multiple dimensions of sustainability in rural areas, and how may we need to think and act in order to realise sustainable rural development in Europe?
- What does a transformation to 'sustainability' portend for the future of rural areas in Europe, and how is it being conceptualised?

Extending beyond human relations and rejecting traditional ontological divisions between nature and culture, our authors bring to light crucial dimensions of sustainability: (1) the imperative of wellbeing, belonging and care; (2) dimensions of power and identity as intrinsic to sustainability; (3) the apprehension of time and space—in other words, sustainability as a process and always in transition, throwing light on shifting forms of work and labour as well as the question of sustainability across scale, of how sustainability is also a result of scalar relations; (4) justice—both social justice and spatial justice are vital to conceptualise for sustainability, and as we discuss ahead, the spatial is all the more important in rural studies where thinking on 'place' is central; and (5) last, we discuss the question of knowledge production on the rural and on sustainability, Knowledge production as a dimension central to all the research we do and actions we take in relation to rural areas. There are, of course, overlap in these various dimensions (such as history and time, justice and the dimensions of power), given the intersecting relationships at the heart of sustainability. However, we have parsed out these five dimensions from our articles and joint discussions as a way to shed light on this multidimensional concept. In the remainder of this editorial, we guide the reader through the collection of articles by discussing our two questions. We highlight the complexity of sustainability to help our understanding of the concept and identify the implications for the future of rural areas in Europe.

What are the multiple dimensions of sustainability in rural areas, and how may we need to think and act in order to realise sustainable rural development in Europe?

## **WELLBEING, BELONGING AND CARE**

Wellbeing, belonging and care are closely connected to the notion of sustainability as they promote improved quality of life, something that is taken up by almost all our authors. Several authors

remind us that economic or bioeconomic objectives prevail over the social or cultural with the result that cultural beliefs and practices, tacit knowledge and traditional collective tenure rights, vital to ensuring sustainability, are denied (Ferrari and Corrado, González-Hidalgo, Homs, Sandström, Santacreu and García, Stiernström, Sutcliffe et al.). Instead, they bring attention to how wider wellbeing derives from pluralistic relationships and interdependencies involving constellations of actors and environments. The importance of nurturing relationships, personal, societal and environmental emerges time and again—whether implicitly or explicitly. Sustainability is dependent on the wellbeing of peoples and environments contingent on the wider social, economic and environmental relations within which the individual is embedded and through which they experience reality (González-Hidalgo, Mahon et al.). The authors all make persuasive cases for considering the inextricability of culture and nature relations as a means to achieving more meaningful sustainability.

Wellbeing is anchored in a sense of belonging that is not merely there but needs to be cultivated. In the context of migration and the needed support for unaccompanied refugee children, Asztalos Morell shows how sustainable development is contingent on creating a personal, emotional sense of belonging to the community and feelings of safety for all its inhabitants. From a governance point of view, belonging is not simply something that happens on its own, and as she shows in the case of young children's sense of belonging in Sweden, it entailed the substantive involvement of wider societal structures, including civil society. As more than one article in this special issue highlights, relations include not only those between institutions and organisations as well as between humans but also more than human relations (e.g., Santacreu and García, Homs; Wadham et al.).

This brings attention to the need to recognise the ethic and work of environmental care as vital for wellbeing and for equitable governance (Arora-Jonsson, 2013, p. 221) and as can be seen from the articles in this special issue, for sustainability. The importance of care both for people and the environment that includes non-human beings, appears in many studies, with authors showing how it is a bottom-up process that ties people to their environments, is cognizant of local contexts and involves interspecies and human–nature relations. The importance of securing wellbeing and a decent life, *Vida Digna*, recurs in Homs' study of small-scale viticulturalists in Catalonia. She shows how producing grapes is tied up with care of the landscape and of other living beings and territorial identity. By securing a just price for their products, winegrowers connect the price of grapes with the sustainability of small-scale viticulturalists. Just prices are closely related to multiple dimensions of sustainability as they cover production costs that allow for the social reproduction of the farming practices as they produce more than grapes—the community, the landscape and social relations that are essential for their livelihood.

Drawing inspiration from the Latin American concept of *buen vivir* (broadly good life), Wadham et al. show the importance of decentering humans for interspecies harmony, including between people and nature for a good life. Through their rich qualitative study, Santacreu and García show how the seascape is crucial for overall wellbeing, is an intrinsic part of each community and is more than a territory for exploitation. They highlight the importance of cultural capital for sustainability, meaning that different communities of humans, animals, knowledge and spaces are tangled through a continuum between sea and land. In all of this, the joy of work such as the 'joy of farming' (McCarthy et al.) is a crucial part of wellbeing for sustainability.

## DIMENSIONS OF POWER, IDENTITY AND HISTORY

Understanding and working with intersecting dimensions of power such as gender, class, ethnicity, race and most apparent in the articles here—age—is central for sustainability. Sustainability is a political concept (e.g., Brown, 2015), and analyzing the explicit expressions of ideological conflict surrounding what it might mean to be sustainable is crucial. As our authors go on to show, contemporary identities and everyday practices in relation to environments and animals that are crucial for identity formation are informed by history (Ferrari and Corrado, González-Hidalgo, Homs, Sandström, Santacreu and García, Stiernström, Sutcliffe et al., Waldenström).

Addressing identity formation, a dimension often not addressed enough in relation to sustainability, is in fact crucial for success and wellbeing. For example, Sutcliffe et al. demonstrate how traditional articulations of professional agricultural identities are being destabilised by wider political discord over the role of agriculture in the contemporary pursuit of an environmentally sustainable future. They show the ambiguities of identity formation in relation to agricultural growers and question the notion that environmental values are insufficiently embedded in conventional agriculture to ensure self-driven sustainability gains. Instead, they point to deeply held values about the need to care for and connect experientially with the land and the yearning that some farmers expressed to prioritise taste over appearance and re-harmonise consumption patterns with natural seasonal cycles. They call for an understanding of the complexity of history and identity formation as this can open pathways towards greater commitment to environmental protection.

In a similar vein, Santacreu and García trace how identity formation for fishers starts in childhood and is strongly tied to the environment. Social actors make decisions based on a range of factors within which they are embedded, including values, life experiences and political systems. This emphasizes the importance of analyzing the metaphors, stories and symbols embedded in the everyday and in collective experiences as well as in the techno-scientific aspects of sustainability. History, remembered, imagined or reconstructed is central in these processes. Sandström uses Bauman's concept of *retropia* to show how some back-to-the-landers were striving for a return to an ideal and imagined superior 'sustainable' past. History is in this case constructed to project a future utopia.

In a different and yet similar process, in their study of brownfield sites in Czechia, Navratil and colleagues show how nostalgia shapes individual preferences and identities and thus community preferences for how former 'brownfields' sites—that is, derelict or unused facilities from collective farms from the communist era, are to be re-used. The authors argue that the older generation's preference for agricultural activities on what is often marginal land reflects how the present is influenced by the past, even as, the authors argue, a historical gaze distorts what is in the viewer's frame. Personal perceptions and subjectivities are important for how sustainability is understood, and nostalgia in this case was part of this subjectivity. Older people's preference for agricultural re-use of brownfield sites in agriculturally marginal areas reflects a desire to return to collective farms of the past where they considered they had a better life. Collective farms were heavily subsidised and considered impossible to maintain in the post-communist period. Even if maintaining such intensive agriculture on marginal lands was, as the authors imply, unsustainable, older inhabitants in these areas still experience a loss of identity and community and a strong sense of powerlessness as a result of the change of regime after the communist era. This understanding of identity on the part of oneself and by research is thus essential for us to conceptualise and work towards sustainability. Brennan et al. too found age to be an

important influence on desires and wellbeing, with nuances emerging due to access to services and farm continuity, all of which have an impact on sustainability. And yet, subjectivities are not static, and we go on to discuss this further when we touch upon the dimensions of time and space.

Intersecting dimensions of class and residence too make themselves apparent in what is sustainable. Pikner et al. show the importance of rural areas in global change through a study of public negotiations and everyday practices linked to who could access the countryside during the global covid pandemic. They show how second homes in Finland and Estonia while ultimately promoting wellbeing represented a group with assets, that to our minds, raise important questions of social and spatial justice—a dimension that we take up further below.

Similarly, gendered relations lie at the heart of work with sustainability. Drawing on feminist thinking in her study on forest fires in Spain and Sweden, González-Hidalgo shows how gender inequalities suffuse how disasters are managed. Arguing that while fighting forest fires is considered a ‘masculine’ endeavour, women in both places were responsible for managing key but unrecognised tasks during, before and after the fires. In both countries, women were not only part of fire-fighting brigades but also created care networks during the emergency—collecting food and communicating with neighbours, as well as being involved in everyday care of the forests to prevent future forest fires. Asztalos Morell highlights the significance of ethnicity for how rural sustainability plays out in everyday life. Her study shows how boundaries are drawn as refugee children in some municipalities are denied recognition as equal members of society and their perspectives considered irrelevant. Such exclusionary and racist practices reinforce ethnic difference, fuel xenophobic attitudes and erode human flourishing, undermining the potential for sustainable rural futures.

## IN TRANSITION AND ACROSS SCALES

Sustainability is a shifting concept. The time and space of sustainability are crucial dimensions in understanding what it means. As is very clear from the formal definition adopted by the Bruntland Report, working for sustainability is our moral obligation to other living beings and to future generations. The importance of leaving behind a world worthy to live in for future generations ensures that the dimension of time is embedded in the notion of sustainability. Similarly, movement—such as migration, new people and new forms of work are a part of daily life in rural areas. Our authors highlight the importance of bringing attention to the nature of work and especially when forms of work are changing drastically through new technologies and digitalisation as well as how work is embedded in particular places and at the same time a result of relations across scales.

Mirroring the findings of many of the articles, McCarthy et al. show how sustainability is context-specific, so what is sustainable for a farmer on one part of Ireland may not hold true in other places (within Ireland or beyond). They also draw attention to the importance of temporal aspects of sustainability as subjectivities change over time. They show how intergenerational and tacit knowledge of particular landscapes is embedded in social and familial relations. Individuals constantly negotiate between conflicting values such as farming as a desirable lifestyle but with a potentially diminishing quality of life.

Ferrari et al. and Santacreu and García discuss the intricate power relations that accompany new technologies as different actors, from high-level policymakers to farmers and fishers are implicated in the processes. Risks include the expulsion of smaller farms and small-scale

fishers, a dependency on technology providers, a deepening digital divide and erosion of the cultural and social basis of sustainability. In both studies, new technologies were presented by external agents in an unproblematic way as a solution to help achieve sustainability yet without sufficient attention paid to emerging challenges such as environmental problems associated with intensive dairy farming or overfishing and seabed damage. In so doing, the authors draw attention to the contested nature of sustainability. Technologies can make old forms of production untenable and create the necessity for new ones, all the while eroding farmers' autonomy.

While sustainability is context-dependent, it is also scalar. Both Asztalos Morell and Florin show how different scales of governments, sometimes across countries, as well as a range of stakeholders beyond government are needed for sustainable lives. Scale is not benign, it is political and configurations result from contestations about the role of the state (international, national and regional) and the local population. For example, Asztalos Morell's study reveals tensions between local communities, the state and municipalities in the support and services provided to unaccompanied refugee children. Here, the burden of work and responsibility is high and compensation by the government unfairly low. The lack of a co-ordinating authority contributed to uncertainties among asylum seekers showing deficiencies of multilevel governance. She points to the imperative of collaboration across scales but also the vital importance of civil society's engagement in counterbalancing authoritarian municipal practices.

Florin argues that scale is vital to understanding sustainability. Tensions between different scales of governance can interfere with how sustainability is enacted on the ground. He tracks how the mobilisation of the concept of sustainability in a project spanning three countries in Fennoscandia encouraged local actors in rural areas to become leaders of projects for nature conservation as well as development. However, the lack of state engagement and potential conflicts between regional and national levels discouraged them from committing to the initiative. Illustrating the scalar dynamics of sustainable development implementation in a European rural context, he warns that approaches that aim to boost local participation can in fact discourage it, if the reduction of the role of the state is not accompanied by resources, formal rights to democratic representation or/and an acknowledgement of past work—issues that are echoed in Asztalos Morell's description of the multilevel governance of immigrant populations in Sweden.

Relations between actors within different scales of governance also come to light in Stiernström's article on mining in Sweden. In a context where local government has little formal power in mining activities, actions are shaped by a multiplicity of actors who create a vision of the future that is equated with economic growth. In a tug-of-war between ideas of sustainable development or 'survival through sacrifice', a dominant political line in favour of mining is established within local politics. In an interesting sleight of hand, this leads to a process wherein sustainable development becomes translated into 'that which must be sacrificed' for economic growth.

Brennan et al. probe how abstract, global concerns about sustainability become relevant to local, everyday contexts. That question is of interest to EU policymakers who have sought to align agricultural policy with the objectives of wider sustainability policies (also apparent in Ferrari et al., McCarthy et al.). They devise a composite index using Irish Farm Accountancy Data to assess variations in social sustainability among the main farm enterprises in Ireland. They highlight the importance of policymakers failing to achieve effective policy if they fail to address local priorities, a point also taken up by several others (e.g., Waldenström, Ferrari et al, McCarthy et al.), who all show how values that go far beyond economic rationality, influence sustainable pathways for actors.

## SOCIAL AND SPATIAL JUSTICE

Justice is contextual and yet is also normative, moral and ethical, and that makes it an important dimension to conceptualise separately from an analysis of the dimensions of power, identity and history discussed above. Vulnerability and resistance are central to conceptualisations of justice, and these are also most apparent in rural–urban relations and central to questions of spatial justice in particular.

Mahon et al. and Stiernström identify the importance of normative constructions of sustainability and of urban–rural relations. Spatial justice involves contesting top-down and urban-centric growth-driven notions of success, which frames the rural as underperforming, dependent and problematic (Mahon et al.) or, as Arora-Jonsson and McAreavey observe, in perpetual crisis. Brennan and colleagues report that poor levels of wellbeing and hence sustainability are recorded by farmers in more geographically isolated regions in relation to farm continuity and social connections. Mahon et al. discuss ideas about spatial justice to examine the way in which citizens achieve a ‘good life’ by taking account of the specificity of place, social institutions and individual capacity to act.

Stiernström’s study shows how mining areas become sacrifice zones that are regarded as remote and out-of-the-way areas that can be exploited for the greater benefit of urban areas. His study brings to the fore inequalities that are bound up in a strained relationship between resource extraction ‘out there’ and profit generation in financial centres as critical metals are seen to be needed for future development and sustainability. He describes instances where sustainability becomes a set of practices brought by external actors to a place. The creators of this narrative—mining companies, the state—are powerful, pointing to the urgency of economic survival and revenue generation for the municipality. In the process, many local politicians believe that their efforts towards sustainability are rendered powerless and their voices drowned out in larger mining debates.

Uneven urban–rural relations are picked up by Pikner et al. Their study of mobilities in Estonia and Finland during the Covid-19 pandemic shows how the rural as a socioculturally constructed ‘safe space’ opens up a new dimension of sustainability including safety and concerning the rights to be protected but is limited in various socioeconomic factors to people with assets. Asztalos Morell’s study of unaccompanied refugee children in Sweden as well as Mahon et al.’s study on how rural-based Non-Governmental Organizations in European contexts reflect on spatial justice and fairness, foreground questions of morality and ethics in considerations of rural sustainability as central to social justice.

González-Hidalgo discusses how being vulnerable may open up opportunities to discuss and debate what communities think are the main challenges or ongoing issues for sustainability and social justice in their local contexts. In a relational analysis of forest fires in Sweden and Spain, she draws on feminist conceptions of vulnerability to show how vulnerability need not be about passivity and incapacity to cope as conventionally believed. Rather, it is a complex and multidimensional process, a source of resistance as well as an emotional and care-related process that opens up new interconnections between peoples, nature and the state. She calls for engaging with local communities’ experiences of vulnerability and agency after acute forest fires to show the blind spots of rural and forestry plans that seek to suppress vulnerability at any cost through the maximisation of wood production and high investments in fire-extinction technologies.

Questions of justice emerge in a context of innovation, new technologies and digitalisation—who has access to them and who can afford them, some of which we have discussed above. Farming, forestry and fishing are being transformed through both the use of new technologies and digitalisation but also from the expectations of what they can deliver. This is brought to our attention by Santacreu and García, Homs, González-Hidalgo and Ferrari et al. Not unlike the expectations of what technologies might deliver for farming and fishing (Santacreu and García, Ferrari et al.), González-Hidalgo shows how high investments in forest-extinction technologies seek to suppress vulnerability at any cost, which in turn stymies the potential for bottom-up sustainability.

## **POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

Knowledge production too takes place in relations—in everyday farming, in the movement to rural areas, in meetings to tackle forest fires, out in the fields, forests and seas as well as in universities as we write this editorial. As many articles suggest and Wadham et al. point out in particular, sustainability and the good life require hard work, collaboration and purposeful active learning. In addition, as all our authors indicate, sustainability is a result of contested politics of knowledge production—on what it is and the future it projects.

Vigilance needed in accepting mainstream definitions of sustainability, calling for careful attention to the question of sustainability by whom and for whom and importantly for what place (see Stiernström). Waldenström argues that the local social context for learning and the construction of farming knowledge in Sweden has been weakened over the past decades. Farmers are increasingly embedded into new relations with a range of actors dependent on how their production is embedded institutionally and on regional characteristics. With increased commercialisation of agricultural advisory services, opportunities for important ‘back-office’ activities among advisors are limited, resulting in less time to monitor research and scientific progress. This has led to farmers in regions with more extensive farming being neglected by actors engaged in advisory services and in the construction of knowledge produced by such actors. Farmers have turned instead to knowledge from disparate sources, including the Internet rather than conventional channels that previously characterised the field.

As several authors (including Brennan et al.; McCarthy et al.; Waldenström; Santacreu and García) bring to our attention, sustainability is also something that is constructed in everyday work and thought. González-Hidalgo uncovers the way knowledge is produced from below. She observed how communities located in forested areas of Spain not only believed in an alternative forestry system but also had proactive discussions about the challenges of forests in rural areas, exchanging scientific information about local species. Different meanings of sustainability were at play for farmers in Homs’ study in relation to the tensions over meanings assigned to ‘quality’. At the heart of this lay knowledge production and the shift towards organic farming and what quality entailed.

Several articles draw on comparative and relational analyses to yield insights across different geographies, highlighting similarities, connections and contradictions within and among different contexts, reflecting the importance of multiple values and knowledge systems (Arora-Jonsson and McAreavey, Ferrari et al., González-Hidalgo, Mahon et al., Pikner et al.), showing an increasing need for wider, scalar and relational perspectives essential for knowledge production on this multidimensional concept. Arora-Jonsson and McAreavey also call for more attention to methodologies that also focus on the material while holding on to the discursive approaches that have



dominated rural studies in the recent past but which inadvertently cemented discourses on the crisis and urban–rural divides.

Given all this, we ask:

What does a transformation to ‘sustainability’ portend for the future of rural areas in Europe and how is being conceptualised?

Based on the wide range of contexts across rural Europe taken by the articles in this special issue and across different sectors, we argue that a transformation to sustainability is contingent on a normative stance that affirms the importance of always considering the social, environmental and economic in different contexts, keeping in mind questions of justice, both social and spatial as well as paying heed to the moral and ethical in any given situation. Importantly, the articles show how the ‘rural’ itself is changing as different claims are made on rural areas in the name of sustainability.

Using examples from Europe, this special issue brings together aspects of vital importance to our futures as we transition into something new: the importance of wider human and non-human relationships for a sustainable future (Wadham et al.), the role of migration and movement for questions of sustainability (Asztalos Morell; Sandström; Pikner et al) as well as spatial justice and in particular in relation to the urban (Mahon et al; Pikner et al; Stiernström); power relations among different stakeholders, especially with national, regional and local authorities (Florin; Stiernström); agri-food transitions (Homs; Sutcliffe; Brennen et al); vulnerability and resistance in face of environmental crises (González Hidalgo); questions of equity, gender, class and age that constitute sustainability or unsustainabilities (Navratil et al; González-Hidalgo, Pikner et al, Sandström and many others); and implications of digitalisation for what sustainability may be (Aларcon Ferrari et al) as well as the construction of knowledge about sustainable environments (Waldenström; González Hidalgo; Arora-Jonsson and McAreavey). The authors in the issue lead us to consider the need for appropriate, richer characterisations of sustainability.

As several authors point out, the economic, and to some degree the environmental, has often been prioritised in favour of questions of the social. Recognising the entanglements with the social and environmental and working towards a world that takes social justice seriously would entail new places and relations that call for an ongoing discussion about inclusion and fairness. As we discuss above, sustainability can reflect diverse meanings according to distinct political positions. This demands a politics of justice where not only are the social, economic and environmental held in one frame but one where the inclusion of different people and scales is called for. As some of the articles show, local places are not just local. The articles in this special issue show how sustainability in practice often derives from the intersection of diverse factors and groups of people involved in discussions of sustainability in any one place. They are tied into relationships through institutions, government, policies and migration at many scales. A discussion of these interrelationships cannot be avoided for sustainability that is not only imposed from above.

Importantly, taking sustainability seriously in rural Europe would mean dealing with questions of morality and justice, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions of gender, class, age or ethnicity and an ongoing discussion of what is fair and just. Whose knowledge counts on what the rural is thus of central importance and recurring question for all of us working in rural Europe. Taking an optimistic approach, Arora-Jonsson and McAreavey argue that addressing sustainability, that is, the entanglements of the social, economic and environmental, allows researchers and policy-makers to move beyond a deficit approach—of the rural in crisis—and better recognise material assets by paying greater heed to the environmental in rural studies. The entanglements of the

economic and environmental with the political and social at the same time grounds affords us with a wider gaze that pays attention to intersecting issues such as race, ethnicity and gender while also acknowledging different scales of governance.

This special issue is the culmination of one part of a process where several of us working with rural development in Europe at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences embarked on a process of reading, discussing and writing on the many dimensions of sustainability. We were delighted when Ruth agreed to join Seema as co-editor of the special issue and the overwhelming response that we received from all our authors writing on sustainability in rural Europe. Our work is far from over, and we look forward to new forms and joys of working for a sustainable rural Europe!

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