The role of health in the debate of sustainability and human rights

Nowadays the debate of sustainability and human rights is a fixed topic of societal debate. Governments reacted with new laws and regulations like the European supply chain act. But one topic that is regularly missing in this debate is health. Why is it missing? Health is connected to the named topics which are heavily discussed in actual societal debate (Cf. Bonk and Ulrichs 2021; United Nations 2015). In the following it will be stated why health is such an important topic and why it should be included in the societal debate about sustainability and humans rights as well as in new laws and regulations regarding this topic.

Firstly, the question is arising what sustainability and human rights is all about? Sustainability is defined as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations 1987). This definition of sustainability is not just about ecological issues, although this is the first connection by reading it. Sustainability in this case aspires equity. Between the planet and humans as well as between humans of different generations or origin. This is where sustainability is related to the topic of human rights. The UN Charta of human rights states in the preamble that "the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family forms the basis of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (United Nations 1948). This definition is also about equity, but not exclusively. It is also about freedom and peace where it again gets connected to sustainability. All this aspired rights can only be achieved in a healthy and functioning environment. Ecological crisis namely leads to the opposite of the aspired rights. It will probably cause injustice and war (Cf. Bonk and Ulrichs 2021). In addition, here the point is reached where health gets important. Discussing about sustainability and human rights the topic of health is often neglected or just mentioned beside some other topics. But while thinking a little bit more detailed about what health is and what it contains, one comes rapidly to the point that health pervades nearly all the topics which are addressed by the actual debate about sustainability and human rights (Cf. Bonk and Ulrichs 2021). One example is global warming. It causes certain areas to get uninhabitable because of lack of water or insufficient ability of plants to grow. This situation is injustice, of course. But what people makes fleeing and migrating

to other countries is the fear of illness or death caused by this conditions. This is just one example, the connections of factors like this can reach endlessly (Cf. Bonk and Ulrichs 2021). The far reaching scope of health maybe gets even more clear by defining health with the rainbow model of Dahlgreen und Whitehead (Cf. Bonk and Ulrichs 2021; Hurrelmann et al. 2018) (l. appendix). They described factors, that influence health, on different levels. The inner circle of their model describes factors connected to health which can easily be influenced by an individuum. For example the individual choice of food in an industrialized country. By moving to the outer circles of the model, the health influencing factors are more and more depending on general conditions of institutions or politics. If the government is not able to fill the stores with good food, the individuum is not able to choose the healthy option neither to change this state. This is just a small example but it makes the all-embracing influence of health and the connection to all the sustainability and human right topics more clear. This condition of prohibiting an individuum to choose a healthy food option is, of course, also injustice. Thinking this example in a bigger scope, the UN recognized that health pervades all the topics they are standing up for. Health is one concrete goal, named in the sustainable Development Goals (short SDG's) (Cf. United Nations 2015). Additionally, health is by the UN always thought of an side effect and influencing factor of other SDG's (Cf. United Nations 2015). This is how health should be dealt with because, according to the World Health Organization's (short WHO) definition, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (World Health Organization 1948). This sounds like a main goal for probably mostly every human being and is obviously more than just preventing illnesses. Furthermore, this definition of health is also about sustainability and equity because this state can hardly be reached in an destroyed ecosystem with injustice living conditions. Here we are at the point, where the connection between all the topics gets more obvious. Moreover, it can be given an answer to the question, what should be the main topic or the main goal of the societal debate of sustainability and human rights. Health with the definition of the WHO stands above all the goals which are pursued by UN and similar institutions fighting for sustainability and equity.

But getting out of definitions and ambitious goals, another question arises. Namely what is practically done to reach this state of sustainability, equity and health? One

actual governmental step in this direction is the European Supply Chain act. In 2022 the EU government decided to release a law which supposes big companies to monitor sustainability and human right issues along their complete supply chain (Cf. European Commission 2022). But again, what is about health? The topic is not mentioned at all although it is the main part of human wellbeing, as we learned before. Accordingly one could ask: Is the topic of health missing in this legislation? Answers to this question can be diverse but as health pervades all the discussed topics one could also see it in the other way round. Each time something is done for the environment or more justice working conditions, it is also a step for improving the health of populations or individuals. This, again, can be explained by the rainbow-modell of Dahlgreen und Whitehead (Cf. Bonk and Ulrichs 2021; Hurrelmann et al. 2018) (l. appendix). By improving structures on the outer circles of the model, health can be improved for a big part of a population which is depending on this structures.

This leads to the conclusion that on the one hand health is a neglected topic that, due to its importance, should be addressed more directly by governments and laws. On the other hand, every step in the direction of more sustainability and human rights, is also a step for improving health of individuals and populations.

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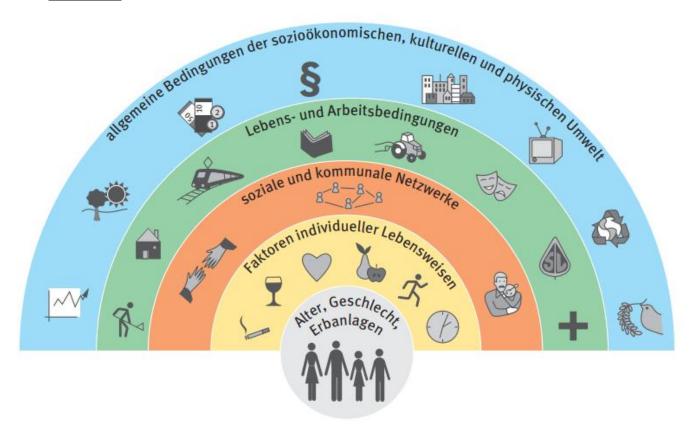
<u>Appendix</u>

Abb. 3.2: Das Regenbogenmodell der Gesundheit von Dahlgren und Whitehead. Quelle: Dahlgren G, Whitehead M. 1991. Policies and Strategies to Promote Social Equity in Health. Stockholm, Sweden: Institute for Futures Studies. (Quelle: Fonds Gesundes Österreich nach Dahlgren, G., Whitehead, M. (1991)).

From (Bonk and Ulrichs 2021).