Making sustainability tools sustainable: Categorization and tagging of existing sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation tools

Sustainability has become a catch-all term in the business lingo. Many claims of sustainable process and outcome are quickly debunked as they clearly violate any simple definition of sustainability. At the same time, the current logic of business which is grounded in profit maximization runs counter to the principles of sustainability and sustainable development. This is already a big barrier to sustainable practices in business. For those who may be genuinely interested in engaging with sustainable practices and processes, there is a rather murky landscape in relation to practical tools and methods. There are numerous tools that purport to be effective in guiding sustainable action, but there is no way to tease them out from one another or determine their usefulness beyond the hyperbolic claims of their proponents, who are often consultants or consultancies.

Besides, the issue of sustainability is very complex, making it a very cognitively taxing concept to comprehend and interact with. There are multitudes of dimensions and perspectives that one needs to take into account and weigh some dimensions higher than others. We, therefore, need a more systemic approach to understand and evaluate the existing tools and methods for sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation. Absent this, the complexity and difficulty of engaging with sustainability hinder individual action and lead to opting for easy, visible, and short term initiatives instead of meaningful action. The most clear example is resorting to greenwashing and superficial lip service to sustainability.

We need to find effective tools and methods that can guide the compromise among the UN SDGs and facilitate choices for the best courses of action which reduce the potential harms and increase the potential benefits. One way to do that is to curate a toolbox where tools with different objectives and assumptions guide this decision-making process, or different stages of the process. For this toolbox to be an effective help, it needs to provide information on several dimensions: who the audience of the tools is (individual, student, policymaker, business owner, entrepreneur, executive, teachers, educators, etc.), which stage of development the tools are more or less relevant to, what are the objectives of the tools, in which constellation they are more or less applicable (individual, team, or groups), whether there is evidence of impact, can they be sequenced together with other tools, are there any examples of their successful deployment, etc.

This master’s thesis is therefore an attempt to organize the existing tools and methods related to sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation. The candidates will have to parse through a portfolio of tools and methods as their ‘empirical data’ and classify them across a number of different dimensions. This classification will be done through a tagging system that allows a ‘wizard’ like system of filtering enabling the matching of users to the relevant tools depending on the objective of the task at hand, context, evidence of impact, or similar criteria. The student pair will receive a database of methods and tools that has been compiled with some rudimentary tagging and system of organizing. It is encouraged that more tools and methods be added to the database.

Last but not least, depending on the final outcome of the project, the candidates ‘may’ receive support to continue the work on the toolbox from Chalmers Innovationskontor. This will include paid a couple of summer job positions.

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