

What can sociology contribute to the sustainability development goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations?

Short communication

The Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015), focused on the developing countries (the Global South). The new Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs, 2016–2030) are all-encompassing, adopted by and relevant to both more developed and less developed countries. In 2015, the United Nations declared the International Year of Evaluation. A great deal of work ensued building the capacity of nations to engage in evaluation of the SDGs. It also was an occasion to look back at reasons why attainment of the MDG's was largely disappointing. One of those reasons was lack of a comprehensive theory of change, an arena in which sociology has much to offer.

The 17 SDG's represent the highest hopes for future of humankind. There are over 150 indicators attached to the 17 SDG's. The SDG's were politically negotiated and the indicators constitute evaluation criteria for determining progress toward the SDG's.

But the SDG's constitute silos for interventions (anti-poverty, oceans, lands, cities, equity, and environment) and the indicators are simply targets established politically. What is missing from the Sustainable Development Goals framework is a comprehensive theory of evolution and transformation that would integrate global initiatives targeted at attaining the SDG's and support global systems transformation. So, we return to the question that opened this article: What can international sociology contribute?

One window into sociology's potential contribution is to highlight sociological theory, methods, and research that provide guidance on social innovation and societal transformation. To be useful, relevant, and meaningful, the guidance must be theoretically sounded, empirically-based, and substantively relevant. It must address the complexities of the post-industrial era and provide guidance on how organizational change, knowledge generation, social innovation, and societal transformation are interconnected and interdependent.

The exemplar for such a desperately needed sociological contribution can be found in the cumulative body of work of sociologist Jerald Hage, Director of the Center for Innovation, University of Maryland. For more than 50 years, Hage has been addressing social innovation, evolution, and transformation through a multidimensional theoretical framework that is highly relevant to the challenges of the SDGs in particular and the future of global systems transformation generally.

One of the weaknesses I find in working with people involved in development initiatives worldwide is their lack of an understanding of the nature of radical societal change. Sociologists have done a poor job of communicating what we know about how large-scale innovation and transformation occurs. Hage's work is an exception in this regard. I refer not only to his more recent writings on *Restoring the Innovative Edge* (2011) but going back to his pioneering works on social change in complex organizations,¹ and a great body of work in-between.

In what follows I want to provide an overview of the organizational and societal change issues that Hage has insightfully addressed by

Volume 3 Issue 4 - 2019

Michael Quinn Patton

Department of Applied Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Correspondence: Michael Quinn Patton, Department of Applied Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 3228 46th Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55406, USA, Tel (1) 621-729-7881, Email mqpatton@prodigy.net

Received: November 29, 2017 | **Published:** August 16, 2019

integrating sociological theory,² methods,³ and knowledge through a deep and consistent focus on organizational and technological innovation, knowledge generation, and societal innovation.⁴ His work is especially relevant internationally because he avoids narrow disciplinary and knowledge silos. I know of no other sociologist whose work so comprehensively and effectively addresses innovation in the private sector (businesses, corporations, entrepreneurs, and farmers), the public sector (governments, regulatory agencies, and international institutions), nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations, universities, societal institutions, and social movements. Moreover, his perspective on innovation cuts across technology, new forms of post-industrial knowledge, and innovation in complex dynamic systems. He addresses organizational effectiveness, economic development, political dynamics, and urban growth, each of which has its own research specializations and knowledge bases. But he brings these together in a cross-disciplinary and integrated way under the overarching framework of complex societal evolution and transformation, the essence of international sociology's contribution to understanding the world. That synthesis of knowledge across levels from macro to meso to micro offers guidance for achieving a more equitable and sustainable global system, which is the heart of the SDGs.

Here are some highlights from Hage's sociological writings that provide a taste of what his analysis and synthesis offer for achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

1. Reconceptualizing knowledge: "Evidence of the birth of a new order can be seen in the keen interest that many people have in radical solutions to existing problems".⁵
2. New rules: "...business organizations must constantly innovate and constantly upgrade the production process. These are the new rules of competition, and businesses that do not heed these new rules are doomed to failure".⁶
3. Rethinking innovation theory in organizational sociology and management. Rethinking the concept of complexity.

Rethinking the concept of integration. Collective learning in interorganizational networks and knowledge communities. Kinds of radical innovation. New knowledge (innovation) in radical societal change.⁷

4. A contingency theory of organizations. Lessons for development change agents organizational change is a new development strategy.⁸
5. The challenge of interdisciplinary learning via cross-fertilization of ideas.⁴

Hypotheses about organizational innovation

- a) The greater the centralization, the more likely the dominant coalition will choose the objectives of quantity and low cost with little emphasis on innovation, and demonstrate effectiveness in this way.
- b) If the organization is polycentralized, then the dominant coalition is more likely to choose the objective of quality and moderate cost with little emphasis on innovation, and demonstrate effectiveness in this way.
- c) If the organization is mixed centralized-decentralized, the dominant coalition is more likely to choose the objectives of quantity and moderate low-cost with some emphasis on innovation, and demonstrate effectiveness in this way.
- d) The greater the diversity of interest groups represented in the dominant coalition, the more complex and varied the choice of priorities will be.
- e) The greater the concentration of specialists, if there professionals, the more likely the dominant coalition will choose the objectives of quality and of innovation.⁹

Hage's hypothesis on transformation

The preceding highlights cannot begin to do justice to the breadth and depth of Hage's sociological contributions. His book on theory construction² should be required reading for all the amateurs generating supposed theories of change with no knowledge of either theory or change. His methodological treatise on Social Causality⁶ clarifies and illuminates the wicked problem in interventions aimed at the SDGs: how to attribute change in complex dynamic systems. For a half-century he has been the go-to sociologist on organizational innovation. A brief overview article like this cannot explicate the depth of his wisdom, scholarly contributions, and intellectual prowess. Rather, what I am leading up to and this article can do is offer a succinct but definitive formulation of the implications of his cumulative studies and insights. It takes the form of a hypothesis that is fundamentally relevant to the attainment of the SDGs, building on pioneering work by Alter and Hage¹⁰ on organizations working together through coordination in interorganizational networks. Here it is, for the first time, Jerald Hage's Hypothesis on Transformation:

The Hage Hypothesis on Social Evolution and Transformation:

Successful evolution and institutional transformation require increased diversity in innovative technologies and skill sets that are integrated into strongly connected and systemically coordinated networks.

Innovation is the way to achieve transformation and evolution, and diversity of cross-sector organizations symbiotically networked into a production/service delivery/idea-innovation development system is what generates innovation. This sociological insight has far-reaching implications for how initiatives targeted at the SDGs are organized and implemented.

Patton¹¹ elaborates these issues and what sociological theory and knowledge can provide in support of societal evolution and transformation.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

References

1. Hage J, Aiken M. *Social change in complex organizations*. New York: Ransom House; 1970. 170 p.
2. Hage J. *Techniques and problems of theory construction in sociology*. New York: John Wiley & sons; 1972. 535 p.
3. Hage J, Meeker BF. *Social causality*. Boston: Unwin Hyman; 1988.
4. Hage J. *Restoring the innovative edge: driving the evolution of science and technology* Stanford, California: Stanford business books; 2011. 328 p.
5. Hage J, Powers CH. *Post-Industrial Lives: Roles and Relationships in the 21st century*. Newberry Park: Sage; 1992. 28 p.
6. Hage J. *Futures of organizations: Innovating to adapt strategy and human resources to rapid technological change*. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington books; 1988. 2 p.
7. Hage J, Meeus M. *Innovation, science, and institutional change: a research handbook*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2006. 592 p.
8. Hage J, Finsterbusch K. *Organizational change as a development strategy: Models and tactics for improving Third World organizations*. London: Lynne Rienner; 1987. 293 p.
9. Hage J. *Theories of organizations: Form, process, and transformation*. New York: John Wiley & sons; 1980. pp.137-139.
10. Alter C, Hage J. *Organizations working together: Coordination in interorganizational networks*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; 1993. 342 p.
11. Patton MQ. *Blue Marble Evaluation*. New York: Guilford; 2020. 248 p.