Sustainable Production and Consumption

Social Sustainability of Communities: A Systematic Literature Review

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Social Sustainability of Communities: A Systematic Literature Review

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1 Introduction

Social sustainability focuses on the realisation of human well-being, addressing pertinent human needs to improve the quality of life (Lami & Mecca, 2021). Recognised increasingly as a vital pillar of sustainability, it is linked to 11 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. There has been significant research in this field, with studies often contextualising social sustainability within various industries or sectors due to its context dependency. This includes research in the built environment, supply chains, and the agriculture and energy sectors (Afshari et al., 2022; Bubicz et al., 2021). The built environment has been a primary focus of social sustainability studies.

A community is defined as a neighbourhood where residents live and form local interpersonal networks (Wellman, 2005). As the smallest and primary built environment where residents encounter society, the community has gradually become an ideal unit of analysis in social sustainability research (Magee et al., 2012). Social sustainability policies and initiatives are more effectively implemented in communities than at other scales of the built environment (Holden et al., 2016). According to the Bristol Accord (2005), sustainable communities are desirable places to live and work, both now and in the future. They cater to the diverse needs of present and future residents, are environmentally considerate, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equity of opportunity and quality services for all.

Social sustainability is crucial for creating liveable communities (Khamis et al., 2023). However, research highlights the need to enhance community social sustainability across both developed and developing nations (Connelly et al., 2011). A key concern is the disproportionate challenges faced by vulnerable groups, such as the

elderly and low-income individuals, particularly in terms of accessibility (Debrunner et al., 2022). Furthermore, residents' expectations are often neglected and their participation in local decision-making processes is limited (Wang & Shaw, 2018). Additionally, there is widespread dissatisfaction among residents regarding aspects such as social inclusion, social interaction, safety, security, and the quality of spaces and infrastructure within the community (Motealleh et al., 2021; Ziaesaeidi & Cushing, 2019).

Despite the growing importance of social sustainability and the increasing interest in researching community social sustainability, questions such as "What does a socially sustainable community look like?" remain unanswered. Hemani and Das (2016) argued that this concept is often a meaningless label. Khamis et al. (2023) noted that significant differences in the definitions and conceptualisations of community social sustainability complicate comparisons of research outcomes and hinder progress. The ambiguity in conceptualisation obstructs identifying strategies to improve community social sustainability. Few have successfully translated this goal into actionable implementation strategies (Markey et al., 2010). As Missimer and Mesquita (2022) pointed out, the current academic knowledge system regarding the practical implementation of social sustainability is severely inadequate.

A literature review deepens understanding of a research field (Jin et al., 2018). With the increasing interest in community-level studies, various reviews have been conducted. For example, Shirazi and Keivani (2017) critically analysed the theory and practice of social sustainability in the general built environment, identifying ten key formative characteristics of social sustainability through a qualitative meta-analysis methodology. Hofstad (2023) reviewed research carried out in Scandinavia and the Global North, establishing a common conceptual understanding of community social sustainability and operational understanding. However, these either address social sustainability in the general built environment from individual buildings to communities and cities or provide a regional summary, leaving a gap in systematic reviews specifically on community social sustainability.

Therefore, this study aims to understand the social sustainability of communities through a systematic approach. Specifically, this study addresses two research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: How is community social sustainability conceptualised?
- RQ2: What are the strategies for improving community social sustainability?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Sustainability

Social sustainability pertains to human quality of life and well-being, encompassing issues such as equitable access to good facilities and services for everyone, safety, inclusion, participation, etc. (Karji et al., 2019). Initially, following the Brundtland Report in 1987, which introduced the concept of sustainable development, emphasis was placed on economic and environmental sustainability (Colantonio, 2009), while social sustainability was forgotten, neglected, and marginalised (Opp, 2017). The

interdisciplinary, dynamic, and context-dependent nature of social sustainability complicates its definition and measurement (Weingaertner & Moberg, 2014). This situation challenges the sustainable development of communities. Often, community development neglects resident participation and needs (Wang & Shaw, 2018), leading to a deficiency in open spaces, green areas, and facilities for vulnerable groups (Yıldız et al., 2020). Consequently, aspects like the sense of community, safety, health, and place attachment are at risk of diminishing (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). Communities seeking to implement social sustainability face a lack of clear guidelines to follow (Larimian & Sadeghi, 2021).

Fortunately, this situation has been changed. Social sustainability is now acknowledged as a crucial component of overall sustainability, attracting heightened attention from policymakers and researchers. For example, the United Kingdom revised its *National Planning Policy Framework* in 2018 to explicitly "support strong, vibrant and healthy communities", striving for a well-designed, safe built environment with accessible services to foster the health, social, and cultural well-being of communities (Ministry of Housing, 2018). Similarly, the City of Sydney released a *Social Sustainability Policy & Action Plan 2018-2028* in 2019, envisioning a socially just, resilient, inclusive, and culturally respectful Sydney (City of Sydney, 2019). This plan aims for Sydney to be vibrant and inspiring, with a socially connected populace. Additionally, the Township of Langley in Canada released a *Social Sustainability Strategy (2021-2030)*, setting a vision for a connected, inclusive, and resilient community with a high quality of life (Township of Langley, 2020). Scholarly interest in urban social sustainability, particularly at the community level, has similarly increased in recent years (Larimian & Sadeghi, 2021; Shirazi & Keivani, 2017).

2.2 Community as a Research Setting

Whether considering the *Brundtland Commission's Report*, *Local Agenda 21* or SDGs, the local level has consistently been a focal point in the Sustainable Development (Hofstad, 2023). SDG 11 specifically aims to create inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and communities. There are two primary reasons for choosing the community as our research setting.

(1) Community represents an ideal built environment scale for studying social sustainability. As the smallest physical and social unit of a city, communities are more tangible and perceptible compared to larger urban scales (Rauscher & Momtaz, 2015). Focusing on community needs is considered an effective way to enhance social sustainability (Motealleh et al., 2021). Recognising this, many local authorities have adopted the community scale as a practical approach to achieving social sustainability (Shirazi & Keivani, 2019). The strengths of communities are acknowledged and supported in the three government plans and strategies previously mentioned, underscoring the growing importance of communities in urban social sustainability research.

(2) Community needs focused research on social sustainability. Social sustainability becomes a concern wherever there is interaction between people, communities, and societies (Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022). It addresses people's needs within their living and working spaces, striving to enhance community well-being by integrating physical and social designs to create adaptable environments (Washington et al.,

2019). Communities lacking in social sustainability often face physical disorder (e.g., untidiness, inadequate lighting, insecurity) and social disorder (e.g., lack of connection, loss of cohesion) (Massoomeh Hedayati et al., 2021). In some cases, private investors collaborate with local authorities in community renovation and revitalisation projects to define and attain social sustainability, as this also benefits their product sales (Barrado-Timón, 2020; Colantonio & Dixon, 2011).

2.3 Gap in Knowledge

The community is widely recognised as the optimal unit for researching and achieving social sustainability (Magee et al., 2012). Similarly, social sustainability is considered essential for building liveable communities (Khamis et al., 2023). However, a comprehensive review by Shirazi and Keivani (2019) indicated that despite the increase in research on community-level social sustainability, such investigations remain insufficient. Hemani and Das (2016) even contended that there is no clear understanding of "what a socially sustainable community looks like". Missimer and Mesquita (2022) found that many studies avoid defining social sustainability explicitly, leading to a somewhat arbitrary inclusion of related issues. They also highlighted a gap in current academic knowledge regarding the practical implementation of social sustainability. Hence, as Hofstad (2023) concludes in his review, we need more knowledge of conditions and practical solutions for integrating social sustainability in planning and urban development processes at the community level.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study is dedicated to conducting an SLR to synthesise and compare findings from various studies, aiming to address specific research questions (Klein & Müller, 2020). Initially developed within medical sciences, systematic reviews have now been adopted in social sciences (Palmatier et al., 2018). This method involves synthesising research findings in a systematic, transparent, and reproducible manner. It includes identifying and critically evaluating relevant studies, as well as collecting and analysing data from these studies (Davis et al., 2014). Given the current research gaps in community social sustainability, this paper employs a qualitative systematic review approach. In this approach, articles are collected using a systematic review process and then analysed using qualitative methods (Snyder, 2019).

This study employs the SLR to address two specific research questions: (1) how community social sustainability is conceptualised (RQ1), and (2) what strategies exist for improving community social sustainability (RQ2). The formulation of these two questions arises from the identification of research gaps in community social sustainability. As mentioned in Section 2.3, many studies fail to define social sustainability explicitly, leading to a lack of consistency in the issues involved (Missimer & Mesquita, 2022). We lack clarity on "what a socially sustainable community looks like" (Hemani & Das, 2016) and the strategies for improving community social sustainability (Hofstad, 2023).

3.2 Research Methods

3.2.1 Data Collection

The literature was sourced from two of the largest academic online databases, Web of Science (WoS) core collection and Scopus (Jia et al., 2019). They are frequent sources for literature reviews (for example, Papadonikolaki et al. (2022), and Zhao et al. (2020)). The sampling was as follows:

Step 1: A combination of keywords was used to search the WoS and Scopus database. These keywords were divided into two categories: a) "social sustainability" or "socially sustainable development"; and b) keywords related to community (e.g., community, neighbourhood, "built environment", etc.). Only English language journal articles were considered, as they represent influential research, similar to other reviews in the built environment (e.g., Sanderson et al. (2022), and Papadonikolaki et al. (2022)). The final search criteria were *"social sustainability" OR "socially sustainable development" (Title) AND community OR neighbourhood OR "built environment" OR construction OR housing OR city OR urban (Title) AND English (Language) AND Article (Document Type)*. Terms like “construction” and “housing” were included because they often cover the impact of projects on communities such as Karji et al. (2019) and Paidakaki and Lang (2021), while “city” and “urban” were adopted due to studies at these scales often considering communities as analytical units, such as Yung et al. (2014) and Dianati (2021). This step returned 108 and 237 articles respectively in the WoS and Scopus. After combining the articles and removing duplicates, we ultimately obtained 239 articles.

We searched for the keyword combination only in article title in the WoS and Scopus databases. This choice was made after several search attempts. For example, we searched for the same keyword combination in article title, abstract, and keywords in Scopus. Even with the discipline categories limited, this returned over 1,600 articles. However, most articles were excluded after reading the abstracts because they contributed little to the two research questions. Therefore, we only searched the titles due to time constraints, the need for more efficient search methods, and the desire to reduce the noise level.

Step 2: Manual selection was performed using inclusion and exclusion criteria.

a) Inclusion criteria:

- For articles with “social sustainability” or “socially sustainable development”, and “community” or “neighbourhood” in the title, a scan of the abstracts was conducted. There are fifty-six included articles that focus on the social sustainability of communities, such as the composition and evaluation of community social sustainability.
- For articles with "social sustainability" or "socially sustainable development", and “built environment” or “construction” or “housing” or “city” or “urban” in the title, a complete read of the full article was carried out. There are thirty-five included articles where the analysis unit is community.

b) Exclusion criteria:

- Articles where “social sustainability” or “socially sustainable development” appears in the title without substantive research on the topic. Twenty articles fall into this category; or
- Articles where the community involved is not a community in the built environment, but a community with other meanings, such as a children's community. There are fourteen such articles; or
- Articles where “Social sustainability” or “socially sustainable development” and “built environment” or “construction” or “housing” or “city” or “urban” appear in the title, but its analysis unit is not community, but individual project, urban, or city. One hundred and fourteen articles fall into this category.

The above inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, and ninety-one articles were eligible for full content extraction and analysis. No specific time limit was set for resource selection. However, the selected literature was from 1999 onwards. The concept of social sustainability emerged when the concept of sustainable development became mainstream in the late 1980s and 1990s (O'Hara, 1999).

3.2.2 Data Analysis

We thoroughly reviewed the selected articles, focusing on the aims, methods, results, and conclusions. Content analysis method and meta-analysis method were employed, and the results were used to answer RQ1 and RQ2. Content analysis is the primary method. It systematically and objectively interprets textual data to make valid inferences and describe specific phenomena (Riffe et al., 2019). It serves various purposes, such as identifying the focal points of individuals, groups, or institutions, and developing themes and trends in the content studied (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). Meta-analysis is a secondary method. It can clarify the state of a research field and discover whether certain specific topics remain constant in research by systematically evaluating and collating existing sources and information (Cooper, 2016). Further, it can facilitate in-depth investigation of the relationships between specific variables (Littell et al., 2008).

Coding and grouping in content analysis can be based on predefined systems, frameworks, or analysis of collected data (Wang et al., 2021). Scholars have not reached a consensus on what constitutes social sustainability (Farhadikhah & Ziari, 2021), let alone strategies for improving it (Hofstad, 2023). There is a lack of universally recognised systems or frameworks in this field. Therefore, this article relied on an analysis of selected papers. Based on a preliminary analysis of the data in the articles, we summarised and identified the indicators of community social sustainability and various strategies. Each indicator or strategy has distinct attributes that distinguish it from others. This constituted our initial schemes. Such coding and grouping method has been widely applied in academic research (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Hu et al., 2019). Furthermore, a meta-analysis was applied to analyse the research on the relationships between indicators as well as the relationships between strategies.

We independently pretested the initial scheme. The coding and categorisation process was iterative. By alternating between the textual content and the analysis output, we gradually refined, adjusted, and validated the scheme to obtain the final version. The level of reliability of the scheme was thus ensured. However, potential human errors,

such as fatigue, personal bias, and perception, were acknowledged throughout the whole analysis process (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to systematically check the accuracy of the coding during the process. In addition to self-validation, the independent coding and grouping results were compared between the authors. Discrepancies were then discussed to reach a consensus.

Following the recommendations of Snyder (2019), the SLR process is illustrated in Figure 1.

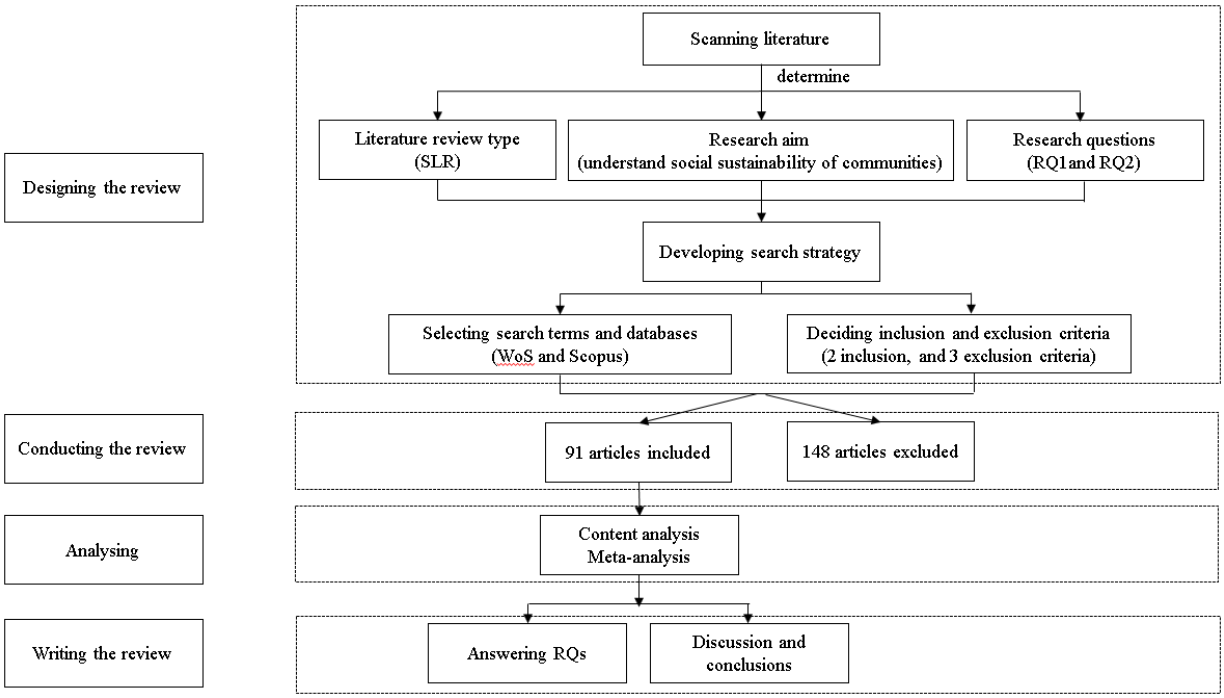


Figure 1 Conducting process of SLR

4 Results

4.1 Defining Social Sustainability in the Community

4.1.1 Conceptual Framework of Community Social Sustainability

The results of the content analysis align with our expectations. Defining a 'socially sustainable community' concisely proves challenging due to the inherent complexity of social sustainability and the variety of research perspectives among scholars. However, in identifying indicators, we identified four unique conceptual frameworks. Each framework serves as an umbrella, incorporating multiple indicators in varied ways.

(1) A socially sustainable community can be defined by enumerating its key indicators of community social sustainability. This approach is direct and unambiguous.
However, a potential drawback arises when numerous indicators are involved, making it challenging to encompass all within a singular definition. For instance, Larimian et

al. (2020) describe a socially sustainable community as one offering equitable access to facilities, services, and affordable housing, fostering a secure and engaging environment for community interaction and participation, and engendering a sense of satisfaction and pride among residents, thereby making it a desirable place to live presently and in the future. Based on these criteria, the authors developed a conceptual framework incorporating six indicators: social participation, safety and security, social equity, neighbourhood satisfaction, social interaction, and sense of place. Larimian and Sadeghi (2021) subsequently adopted this definition in their study.

(2) The social sustainability of a community is conceptualised as a combination of physical and social attributes. Physical qualities pertain to tangible infrastructure, such as the availability and accessibility of community services, building density, and typology, whereas social qualities encompass elements like equity, social interaction, and participation. This dual perspective forms the basis of a series of studies by Shirazi and Keivani (2019), Shirazi and Keivani (2021), and Shirazi et al. (2022). These studies posit that the social sustainability of a community is fundamentally shaped by residents' perceptions of both its physical and social dimensions. The authors introduce a 'triad' of social sustainability, comprising neighbourhood (physical attributes), neighbouring (social attributes), and neighbours (demographic profile). Consequently, a socially sustainable neighbourhood is characterised as a space where residents engage in meaningful social interactions and activities, meeting both physical and social criteria at a satisfactory level.

(3) The social sustainability of a community is organised into two meaningful dimensions, i.e., substantive dimension and procedural dimension. The substantive dimension pertains to the essence of social sustainability and its encompassing themes, including social cohesion, social capital, and socio-cultural characteristics. In contrast, the procedural dimension concentrates on the methodologies for achieving these aims, focusing on elements like participation, equity, and accessibility. Notably, the realisation of substantive social sustainability is contingent upon the effective implementation of procedural social sustainability. This dual-dimensional approach underpins the research conducted by Suopajärvi et al. (2016), Hofstad (2023), and (Mouratidis et al., 2024) on the social sustainability of a community.

(4) Community social sustainability is conceptualised through a pentagon model encompassing person, place, people, perception, and process, as proposed by Akcali and Cahantimur (2022). This model synthesises and innovates upon the previously mentioned perspectives. It considers the impact of residents (person), along with the physical and social qualities of communities (place and people), and residents' perceptions. The process dimension reflects procedural considerations. Akcali and Cahantimur (2022) and Akcali and Ispalar Cahantimur (2023) underscore the interconnectivity and iterative influence of these dimensions on social sustainability. Additionally, they highlight the adaptability and flexibility of future neighbourhood spaces, integrating these qualities into the process dimension as dynamic elements.

4.1.2 Indicators and their Relationships

Irrespective of individual scholarly perspectives, certain indicators consistently emerge with notable frequency, thereby forming the bedrock of the conceptual

framework for community social sustainability.

(1) Social Equity

This particular indicator emphasises the necessity for equitable access to public facilities and services, such as school, healthcare, culture, recreation, transportation, etc. (Akcali & Ispalar Cahantimur, 2023; Shirazi & Keivani, 2019). This access is essential irrespective of individual differences in age, gender, physical condition, or socioeconomic background (Larimian & Sadeghi, 2021; Pazhuhan et al., 2023). Additionally, accessibility to affordable housing and employment opportunities is sometimes incorporated into this indicator (Mouratidis et al., 2024). Social equity ensures that people have access to resources that facilitate participation in community life, along with opportunities for personal development and enhancement (Colantonio & Dixon, 2011).

(2) Participation

Community participation refers to people's participation in local public policy and decision-making processes, community activities and issues. For example, residents participate in local planning and community organisation (Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; Langergaard, 2019), and resolve local disputes (Motealleh et al., 2021). Participation contributes to the satisfaction of residents' needs and expectations and strengthens their connection and responsibility to the community (Akcali & Ispalar Cahantimur, 2023).

(3) Social Inclusion

A socially inclusive community is characterised by social mixing, signifying diversity across various dimensions. This diversity encompasses individuals and families of differing social status, wealth, ethnicity, race, age, gender, education, and profession cohabiting within the community (Shirazi et al., 2022). Hence, the demographic and household characteristics of the community are often used to measure this indicator. Socially inclusive communities are marked by robust spatial connectivity, and a supportive environment for cultural diversity (Mohamed et al., 2022; Shirazi & Keivani, 2017).

(4) Social Interaction

This indicator encompasses the social activities and networks within the community, as identified by residents' engagement in social interactions (Shirazi & Keivani, 2019). These interactions include a range of interrelationships, from casual conversations to participation in leisure activities (Akcali & Ispalar Cahantimur, 2023; Colombo et al., 2021). Scholars often measure this indicator using items such as "number of neighbours known by name" and "number of friends in the neighbourhood." Such social interactions can elevate residents' perception of community quality, potentially bolstering cohesion and social capital (Hofstad, 2023; Shirazi & Keivani, 2017). Conversely, communities with limited social interaction may achieve social inclusivity, yet lack a strong sense of attachment among residents (Larimian & Sadeghi, 2021).

(5) Sense of Place

This indicator, as a phenomenological and existential concept, is used to identify the relationship between residents and the community's built environment (Hemani et al., 2017; Motealleh et al., 2021). It includes relationships with the physical built environment (i.e., place attachment), relationships with community members (i.e., identity), and belongingness (Larimian et al., 2020). Measures such as "proud to the community", "missing the neighbourhood when being away for too long" are frequently used to assess this indicator. People who identify with their "place" are more likely to continue living there, conserve it (Hofstad, 2023), and build long-term relationships with their neighbours (Shirazi & Keivani, 2019).

(6) Safety and Security

This indicator pertains to the degree of safety and security experienced by individuals in their community, encompassing both the safety felt while navigating the community and the security experienced during interactions with other residents or in community activities (Larimian et al., 2020). Safety could be subjective and hinge on individual perceptions (Mouratidis et al., 2024). It encompasses aspects such as traffic safety and the levels or apprehension of crime (Shirazi & Keivani, 2019). Items such as "feeling safe during the day" and "do not worry about crime in my neighbourhood" are commonly used to measure this indicator. Safety and security are critical for facilitating community activities and the residents' presence within the community. A community perceived as safe and secure fosters trust and reciprocity among residents, whereas its absence can contribute to increased crime (Hofstad, 2023).

(7) Spaces and Infrastructure

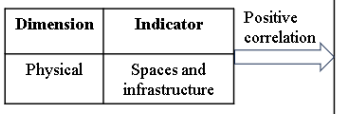
The spatial arrangement and infrastructure configuration within a community are pivotal urban form issues in the built environment, which encompasses the size, shape, and layout of an area or its components (Mohamed et al., 2022). This built environment significantly influences social sustainability, a topic that scholars approach from varying perspectives. Shirazi and Keivani (2019), Shirazi and Keivani (2021), and Shirazi et al. (2022) contend that physical qualities of community spaces are intrinsic to urban form, assessing it through parameters like density, mixed land use, urban patterns, street networks, building typologies, and the quality of centres. In contrast, Akcali and Cahantimur (2022) and Akcali and Ispalar Cahantimur (2023) advocate for a greater emphasis on socio-spatial aspects over urban form design in social sustainability studies. Their approach integrates urban form factors but adopts a more place-centric perspective. Effective spatial and infrastructural designs are vital for addressing basic needs, fostering relationship-building, and enhancing residents' physical and social well-being (Ziaesaeidi & Cushing, 2019). Conversely, other researchers, such as Alipour and Galal Ahmed (2021) and Abed and Alzghoul (2023), argue that while the built environment is not a direct component of social sustainability, it exerts a substantial impact on it.

(8) Community Satisfaction

Community satisfaction is defined as "the degree to which the environment satisfies a person's need" and refers to the difference between an individual's desired and actual quality of their community (Pazhuhan et al., 2023). Determinants of community

satisfaction include the satisfaction of residents with their immediate environment and community quality (Shirazi et al., 2022), housing satisfaction (Larimian & Sadeghi, 2021), etc. Items such as "this neighborhood is a good place in which to live" and "I am happy with the size and condition of my house" are used to measure this indicator.

When identifying indicators, some studies were found to further analyse the interrelationships between various indicators. Our meta-analysis indicated that a predominant focus is the relationship between "spaces and infrastructure" and other indicators, with most studies identifying a positive correlation. For example, well-planned spatial arrangements and superior infrastructure are linked to heightened social interaction, improved safety and security, increased social inclusion, greater community participation, a more profound sense of place, enhanced social equity and community satisfaction. Please see Figure 2 for details. However, some studies, like Larimian et al. (2020), report mixed effects, such as a negative correlation between perceived high density and safety.



Dimension	Sub-dimensions	Indicators	Sources
Social	Procedural	Social equity	(Larimian et al., 2020; Roosta et al., 2022; Shirazi & Keivani, 2019)
		Participation	(Abed et al., 2022; Akcali & Ispalar Cahantimur, 2023; Larimian & Sadeghi, 2021; Motealleh et al., 2021)
	Substantive	Social inclusion	(Mohamed et al., 2022; Shirazi & Keivani, 2019)
		Social interaction	(Abed et al., 2022; Akcali & Ispalar Cahantimur, 2023; Janssen & Basta, 2022; Motealleh et al., 2021; Salih et al., 2021; Shareef & Ahmed, 2023)
		Sense of place	(Akcali & Ispalar Cahantimur, 2023; Shirazi & Keivani, 2019; Stupar et al., 2020; Ziaesaeidi & Cushing, 2019)
		Safety and security	(Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; Akcali & Ispalar Cahantimur, 2023; Roosta et al., 2022)
		Community satisfaction	(Shareef & Ahmed, 2023; Shirazi & Keivani, 2019)

Figure 2 Relationship between the "spaces and infrastructure" indicator and other indicators

The interplay among other indicators has also been explored. For example, social inclusion contributes to social equity (Meinhold et al., 2014). Communities with better accessibility, indicating higher social equity, typically exhibit a stronger sense of place, enhanced safety, and increased participation (Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; Shareef & Ahmed, 2023). Figure 3 presents the results of the meta-analysis. Scholars have not yet given sufficient attention to this field.

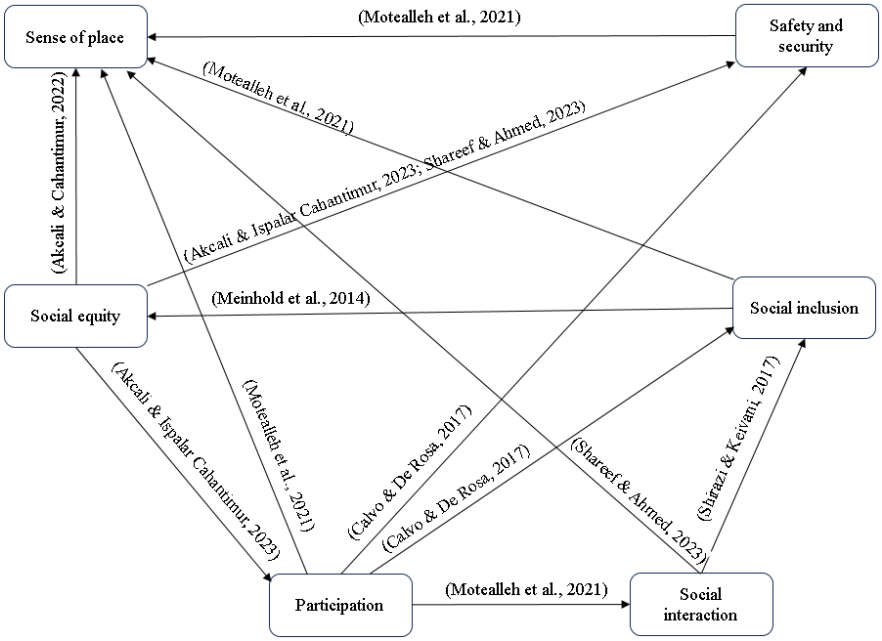


Figure 3 Research on Relationships Between Other Indicators

4.2 Achieving Community Social Sustainability

As described in the Introduction, communities in both developed and developing countries face un-socially sustainable development. It is foreseeable that achieving social sustainability will not be a linear and consistently forward-moving rational process (Langergaard, 2019). Based on the content analysis of 91 papers, it was found that the existing literature exploring this problem is still in its infancy, lacking systematicity. The following four strategies are mentioned more frequently.

4.2.1 Planning and Designing Community Spaces and Infrastructure Properly

Planning and design are appropriate tools for achieving social sustainability goals. The interests and needs of local residents must be considered, as this is fundamental to residents being able to rely on the community to meet their needs (Alipour & Galal Ahmed, 2021). Given the diversity of social needs among various stakeholder groups, it becomes imperative to delineate planning priorities and address conflicts (Stepanova & Romanov, 2021).

On the one hand, the planning and design of open spaces, green areas and landscapes should be the focus (Itma & Monna, 2022; Stupar et al., 2020). Communities need well-designed parks, gardens, and squares (Salih et al., 2021). Appropriate structural forms, landscaping, and preservation of historic buildings are also essential (Yıldız et al., 2020). Open Spaces should be universally accessible within the community, characterised by multifunctionality and adaptability to cater to the diverse and evolving needs and expectations of residents (Akcali & Ispalar Cahantimur, 2023). Furthermore, residents should be provided with alternative modes of transportation, such as sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and other public transportation (Alipour & Galal Ahmed, 2021). A comprehensive traffic management plan is necessary (Shirazi et al., 2022).

On the other hand, social facilities, daily operation places and services are essential. A detailed analysis of the social needs and daily activities of the community is needed to improve social facilities and provide critical services (Akcali & Ispalar Cahantimur, 2023). For example, accommodating age-friendly facilities for elderly populations within aging communities (Chan et al., 2019), or offering housing options for varying income strata (Yıldız et al., 2020) are noteworthy initiatives. The development of places for daily operations (e.g. shops, coffee bars) not only provides goods or services to residents, but also provides quasi-public spaces (Lamanes & Deacon, 2019). A mixed land-use policy augments the feasibility of implementing this approach (Janssen & Basta, 2022).

4.2.2 Supporting Community Organisations and Activities

The endorsement and bolstering of community-based organisations, such as community association or resident boards, represent a pivotal aspect of fostering social sustainability (Abed et al., 2022; Langergaard, 2019). These organisations engage in a myriad of activities, spanning gardening, festivals, artistic endeavours, and cultural celebrations, among others (Carnemolla et al., 2021; Stevenson, 2021). Their multifaceted contributions are instrumental in cultivating a vibrant and interconnected community fabric.

Local governing bodies have a substantial role to play in this regard, as they can either directly organise such activities or allocate resources to empower community organisations to take the lead (Chan et al., 2019). This proactive involvement not only enhances the social cohesion of the locality but also engenders a sense of ownership and participation among residents, thereby fortifying the community's social capital and resilience. Furthermore, by strategically investing in these initiatives, local authorities can catalyse economic growth, promote cultural diversity, and elevate the overall quality of life within the community.

4.2.3 Promoting Information Disclosure and Public Participation

Non-profit organisations, public sector and grassroots movements need to work together to provide platforms such as community parliaments, forums, and websites. These are crucial for information disclosure, ongoing interaction, and open discussion within the community (Calvo & De Rosa, 2017; Hemani & Das, 2016). Besides, public participation should transcend age boundaries (Chan et al., 2019; Ziaesaeidi & Cushing, 2019), affording both the younger and older generations the opportunity to engage actively in the decision-making processes governing the planning, design, development, and rejuvenation of their communities (Shekfa & Galal Ahmed, 2022).

The advent of emerging digital technologies holds the potential to augment the level of participation further (Bouzguenda et al., 2022). By harnessing digital platforms and tools, communities can transcend geographical constraints, enabling broader and more accessible engagement. Leveraging these technological advancements can foster greater transparency, enhance communication, and democratise decision-making processes, ultimately fortifying the foundation of social sustainability within communities.

4.2.4 Strengthening Community Safety and Security

Several measures can be taken to ensure the safety and security of a community, encompassing various aspects of urban planning and governance. For instance, the establishment of regular police patrols has been advocated as a crucial step in enhancing community safety (Chan et al., 2019; Yıldız et al., 2020). Additionally, the augmentation of illumination in public areas during night-time hours serves as an effective strategy to deter criminal activities and bolster a sense of security among residents. Furthermore, the adoption of a natural surveillance approach, facilitated by mixed land use policies, can be instrumental in fostering a vigilant community atmosphere (Shirazi et al., 2022).

The meta-analysis of the four strategies above reveals that improving the quality of community spaces and infrastructure is the primary focus, followed by enhancing social quality. Please refer to Table 1 for details.

Table 1 The four strategies achieving community social sustainability

Dimensions	Indicators	Strategies	Sources
Physical	Spaces and infrastructure	Planning and designing community spaces and infrastructure properly	(Akcali & Ispalar Cahantimur, 2023; Alipour & Galal Ahmed, 2021; Farrer, 2023; Hu, 2023; Itma & Monna, 2022; Janssen & Basta, 2022; Langergaard, 2019; Salih et al., 2021; Shekfa & Galal Ahmed, 2022; Stupar et al., 2020; Swapan et al., 2019; Yıldız et al., 2020)
Social	Social equity Participation Social inclusion Social interaction Sense of place Safety and security Community satisfaction	Supporting community organisations and activities	(Abed et al., 2022; Carnemolla et al., 2021; Langergaard, 2019; Shirazi et al., 2022; Stevenson, 2021)
		Promoting information disclosure and public participation	(Calvo & De Rosa, 2017; Chan et al., 2019; Hemani & Das, 2016; Shekfa & Galal Ahmed, 2022; Ziaesaeidi & Cushing, 2019)
		Strengthening community safety and security	(Chan et al., 2019; Shirazi et al., 2022; Yıldız et al., 2020)

Parallelly, several measures pertaining primarily to the responsibilities of local authorities have been sporadically suggested. Firstly, it is imperative for governments to provide skill training and employment opportunities, particularly targeting disadvantaged residents, thereby ameliorating their socio-economic circumstances (Chan et al., 2019). Secondly, the enhancement of the capacity of local authority officers through professional development initiatives is paramount for effective governance (Johnstone et al., 2013). Moreover, in the selection of community developers or operators, local authorities should prioritise those with a demonstrated track record of success in advancing social sustainability goals (Darchen & Poitras,

2020).

Meanwhile, existing studies indicated that private developers are also actively engaged in endeavours aimed at achieving social sustainability within their development projects. Their efforts extend beyond the mere construction of physical structures, encompassing the creation of a novel community lifestyle. This holistic approach not only augments the built environment but also enriches the quality of life for residents (Darchen & Poitras, 2020). Ultimately, such initiatives are underpinned by a strategic objective to enhance corporate reputation and secure long-term success within the evolving socio-economic landscape (Suchowerska, 2021).

5 Discussion

The results of the content analysis and meta-analysis in Section 4 comprehensively showcase the unique conceptual frameworks of community social sustainability, the diverse indicators supporting the frameworks, and the improving strategies. These results serve as guiding beacons, leading our SLR towards a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the two research questions. The subsequent paragraphs present a detailed examination and discussion of the findings, illuminating the insights derived from the review endeavour.

5.1 The Conceptualisation of Community Social Sustainability

Our review found that there is no agreed definition of community social sustainability. Scholars have only begun to define this concept in the past few years, and they often build their own conceptual frameworks based on different research perspectives. As Colantonio (2016) points out, the existing literature shows wide heterogeneity in the definition of urban social sustainability. This phenomenon illustrates the complexity of community social sustainability itself.

Answering RQ1, eight frequently occurring indicators have been identified. They underpin the community social sustainability conceptual framework. The identification process proved challenging, as these indicators have not received substantial attention in the existing literature (Afshari et al., 2022) and lack a consensus (Popovic et al., 2018). Fortunately, two points find agreement among scholars. Firstly, community social sustainability encompasses both physical and social quality, a notion validated in community well-being research (Holden, 2018). Additionally, as Shirazi and Keivani (2017) argue, the non-physical aspects have become more prominent than ever before. Secondly, social sustainability encompasses the community experience of residents, presenting a common challenge in measuring community sustainability - whether indicators gauge objective conditions or subjective feelings of community members (Magee et al., 2012). Presently, it is acknowledged that social sustainability primarily resides as an inner-subjective construct within the minds of inhabitants (Shirazi & Keivani, 2019). As Manzi et al. (2010) aptly articulate, “Different people mean different things when they discuss social sustainability”.

5.1.1 Physical Quality

The physical quality of a community is measured by the indicator "Spaces and Infrastructure". It includes the provision of flexible open spaces, green areas, and places for daily operations, as well as the configuration of transport infrastructure and social infrastructure. Spaces and infrastructure are open to a range of users and uses across a wide range of time, space and people configurations, constituting the key to a community's quality of life (Holden, 2018; Holden et al., 2021). This indicator is also critical for the whole city. The *New Urban Agenda* emphasises that high-quality public space is one of the most valuable urban characteristics (United Nations, 2017). Well-designed "Spaces and Infrastructure" provide opportunities for social interaction and social inclusion, reduce crime rates, and enhance the sense of place and satisfaction (Yang et al., 2023).

Our review found that residents are not satisfied with this indicator. The same conclusion has been found in studies of the social sustainability of cities. For example, Eizenberg and Jabareen (2017) and Abed (2017) pointed out that the design of urban form ignores the consideration of social life. The spatial and physical features of urban areas are not carefully designed and no longer promote a sense of place and safety. In addition, the government's investment in infrastructure mainly focuses on hard infrastructure, ignoring the investment in soft infrastructure, such as health, education, activity centres, etc. (Cuthill, 2010).

5.1.2 Social Quality

The social quality of a community is measured by the remaining seven indicators. Among them, the sense of place, safety and security, and community satisfaction focus on the experience of residents.

Social equity is the core of the social sustainability. Its goal is to provide equal opportunities for everyone to participate in and access public resources, services and information (Rashidfarokhi et al., 2018). Social equity is conducive to promoting the active participation of social members in collective action and lays the foundation for realising social inclusion. Our review found that the social equity of the community needs to be improved. This challenge arises in built environments at all scales, including buildings, cities, and societies. For example, a study by Du and Zhang (2020) on urban green space in New York found that different groups face unequal access. In both developed and developing countries, inequality has been widely analysed (Cheng et al., 2022; Pitarch-Garrido, 2018).

Participation is a prerequisite for achieving social sustainability (Olakitan Atanda, 2019). A study on community sustainable development project found that participation helps to reduce project costs and increase its value and originality (Parkinson & Roseland, 2002). Other benefits include gaining local support and resolving conflicts (Markey et al., 2010). It has been proved that effective participation helps to promote social interaction and social inclusion among people (Bramley et al., 2009) and enhances the sense of place and neighbourhood satisfaction (Chan & Lee, 2008). Studies of community social sustainability found that the level of community participation was very low. This is a global challenge. For example, Yiftachel and Hedgcock (1993) pointed out that the social needs of local communities were rarely responded to in Perth Australia. Sierra et al. (2018) came to a similar

conclusion in a study on the social sustainability of transport infrastructure. Many factors, such as lack of trust and motivation and poorly designed participation processes, can explain this phenomenon (Fung, 2015).

Social inclusion means understanding and respecting people with different backgrounds (Rashidfarokhi et al., 2018) and improving the terms of participation in society for social groups that experience disadvantage (United Nations, 2016). Promoting social inclusion helps build relationships (Hämel & Röhnsch, 2020) and ensure equity and safety (Tanrıkul, 2023). The social inclusion of communities is unsatisfactory in our review. Extensive research shows that vulnerable groups in the community are facing social exclusion (Hung et al., 2021). Studies of mixed-income development projects in the United States found that they fall short of their goals of generating social inclusion. Moreover, when low-income residents move into mixed-income communities, their feelings of social isolation and exclusion increase (Bulger et al., 2023).

Social interaction is widely regarded as the adhesive that binds societies together, fostering civic engagement and participation (Shirazi & Keivani, 2017). However, our review unearthed disconcertingly low levels of social interaction within communities, a phenomenon prevalent across the globe. Even in diverse societies, the phenomenon of 'parallel living' is observed, where social interactions and networks are confined to individuals of the same ethnic, racial, or social class (Camina & Wood, 2009). Alternatively, interactions may be superficial, characterised by mere politeness devoid of substantial personal engagement (Stevenson, 2021). In these cases, as described by Bramley et al. (2009), community residents find themselves leading disconnected lives, lacking a sense of pride or attachment to their community. This detachment underscores the pressing need to reinvigorate and strengthen social bonds within communities, acknowledging the pivotal role that robust social interactions play in nurturing vibrant and cohesive societies.

Sense of place is “an integral component of people’s enjoyment of their built environment” (Hemani et al., 2017). It plays a pivotal role in enhancing social interaction and reducing the fear of crime (Dinnie et al., 2013). However, the absence of a sense of place is a common issue. For instance, research conducted by Zhang and Wang (2022) on elderly Chinese immigrants indicates that they often experience a diminished sense of community upon resettlement. Similarly, a study conducted in the slums of Ghana found that a substantial number of elderly individuals lack a sense of place (Bandauko et al., 2023). These findings underscore the significance of cultivating a sense of place, particularly among marginalized or displaced populations, to foster social cohesion and improve overall well-being within communities.

Safety and security, as social constructs, are the outcomes of numerous variables and circumstances. They are universally recognised as fundamental prerequisites for facilitating positive social activities within a community (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). The feeling of safety not only encourages increased social interaction but also cultivates a stronger sense of place (Dempsey et al., 2011). However, our review reveals a pervasive dissatisfaction among residents regarding the safety of their communities, aligning with findings from urban social sustainability studies. Eizenberg and Jabareen (2017) contend that the sense of safety in urban areas is

diminishing, while Du and Zhang (2020) posit that residents' perception of safety varies across different areas within a city. Factors such as increased car traffic and the presence of parking lots tend to diminish the sense of safety within a community (Hemani et al., 2017).

Community satisfaction represents residents' holistic evaluation of their community environment. It hinges on the assessment of various environmental attributes that cater to their needs. The physical quality of the environment, including aspects like maintenance, architectural aesthetics, landscaping, cleanliness, and quietness, significantly influences residents' perceptions (Lee et al., 2017). Overall, our review underscores a prevalent dissatisfaction among residents with the state of their communities, a conclusion consonant with Ibem et al. (2017) findings in their study of public housing communities. This collective discontent highlights the pressing need to address the factors contributing to community dissatisfaction and work toward creating more liveable and satisfying community environments.

5.2 The Improvement of Community Social Sustainability

In the previous section, the poor realisation status of the indicators is discussed when we conceptualise community social sustainability. As Spiliotopoulou and Roseland (2020) described, in the pursuit of well-being, communities face challenges such as addressing multiple objectives and engaging residents meaningfully.

Our review has identified a range of measures aimed at enhancing the social sustainability of communities, which address the RQ2. In the traditional community development context, meeting social needs and improving social sustainability issues are largely assumed as the responsibility of local authorities. The support, leadership, vision and commitment of local government council members are seen as critical (Parkinson & Roseland, 2002). As shown in Section 4.2, many of the measures are supposed to be implemented by the public sector. However, the external environment is changing. For example, austerity measures imposed by the public sector due to the economic crisis, increasing pressure from NGOs and clients, and the release of a series of international assessment systems (e.g., *Guidelines for Social Life Cycle Assessment of Products* (United Nations Environment Programme & Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry, 2009), *ISO26000* (International Organization for Standardization, 2010), and *Sustainability Reporting Guidelines* (Global Reporting Initiative, 2013)). Many cities around the world have started to create new forms of low-public subsidy open space movements, beyond national subsidies, to build and maintain community public spaces (Holden, 2018). In this case, it imperative for the private sector to address the social impacts associated with its activities and products (Weingaertner & Moberg, 2014). Studies have shown that the private sector, such as property developers, has implemented social sustainability initiatives in their community renewal and revitalisation projects, including the introduction of inclusive design (Evans, 2018), the provision of high-quality public amenities (Holden et al., 2021), and the establishment of residents' associations and hosting social events (Suchowerska, 2021). These initiatives improve the economic benefits and reputation of an organisation (Marzouk & Sabbah, 2021), enhance customer and employee satisfaction, and result in sustained competitive advantages (Mani et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a growing imperative for the private sector to collaborate with non-profit organizations and community residents, reevaluate

business models, and place a renewed focus on the well-being of people. Community residents' efforts are also indispensable. They should reflect on the ways in which they can contribute or provide support (Seifi et al., 2020).

However, it's important to acknowledge that the private sector often views social sustainability primarily as a means to achieve commercial objectives. This orientation may inadvertently sideline the representation and comprehensive consideration of residents' benefits and needs. Therefore, a joint effort by the public and private sectors to achieve community social sustainability is critical (Weingaertner & Moberg, 2014).

Figure 4 shows the conceptualisation and improvement of community social sustainability in a general context. Objective indicators can be measured directly and quantifiably without personal bias or interpretation, often through data or statistics. Subjective indicators, on the other hand, are based on personal opinions, feelings, or perceptions and are typically measured through surveys or interviews where personal experience and judgment play a crucial role.

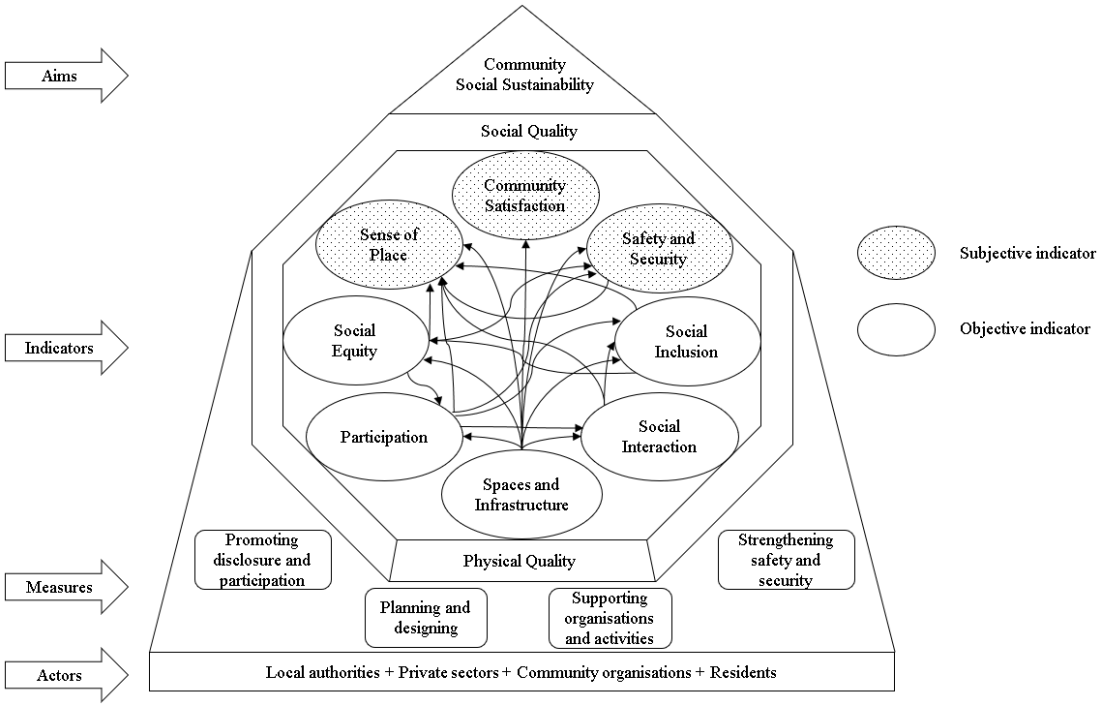


Figure 4 Conceptualisation and improvement of community social sustainability

6 Conclusions

This review has examined the conceptualisation and enhancement of community social sustainability. Focusing on the community scale, this study synthesises a broad spectrum of literature, offering a coherent overview that is instrumental for both future academic inquiries and practical applications.

The study identifies diverse yet interconnected indicators central to comprehending community social sustainability. These indicators, spanning social equity,

participation, inclusion, interaction, sense of place, safety, infrastructure, and community satisfaction, collectively shape our understanding of what constitutes a socially sustainable community. Importantly, the research underscores that social sustainability transcends physical infrastructure, deeply rooted in residents' experiences and perceptions.

In terms of enhancing community social sustainability, the review advocates for multifaceted strategies encompassing thoughtful planning, supportive community organisations, transparent information dissemination, public participation, and reinforced safety measures. These strategies highlight the imperative role of both public and private sectors in fostering socially sustainable communities. The study suggests that private sector initiatives, while commercially driven, can significantly contribute to social sustainability if aligned with broader community interests.

This research enhances the academic dialogue on community social sustainability, providing a solid foundation for further scholarly investigation. It fills a notable gap in the literature on social sustainability, especially within community studies. This study's insights advance knowledge and practice by clarifying the conceptualisation and enhancement of community social sustainability. Additionally, it sheds light on the impact of communities on resident well-being. A detailed analysis of the improvement strategies will aid local authorities, private developers, and operators in efficiently delivering community infrastructure and services.

This SLR presents two limitations. The primary limitation is to search the keyword combination only in article title in the WoS and Scopus databases. The restricted search scope may result in some work on this topic not being included. They did not contain the keyword combination in the title, not indexed by these databases or did not publish in journals. Due to time constraints, the need for efficient search methods, and the desire to reduce the noise level, these works were not considered. Nonetheless, their contributions to the field are substantial and worthy of acknowledgment. Secondly, the research methodology might appear overly mechanistic. The retrieval method may not fully capture the complexity and nuances of the topics reviewed, leading to inevitable omissions. Various significant aspects of social sustainability discussed in other scholarly works did not meet the specific search and selection criteria used.

The future debate should advance in three directions. First, the theory needs to be promoted. Few of the ninety-one articles selected for this review deal with theory. Scholars should conduct more theoretical research to consolidate the discourse. Second, research on the social quality of communities should be strengthened. Although the importance of social quality has been recognised, our meta-analysis indicates that both the relationships between indicators representing social quality and strategies for improving social quality require further research. Third, attention should be paid to vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and children. How vulnerable groups conceive of sustainable communities is important and contributes to our understanding of social sustainability. Existing research has not adequately considered the needs of this group. Practically, local authorities, private developers and operators should incorporate social sustainability into community development plans. More practical investigations should be performed to understand community concerns and develop more precise and local-specific plans and measures.

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Social Sustainability of Communities: A Systematic Literature Review

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