

A World Scientific Encyclopedia of Business Storytelling Set 2 (A 5-Volume Set)

# Methodologies and Big Data Analysis of Business Storytelling

Volume 1:

## Business True Storytelling



Editor-in-Chief  
**David M Boje**

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**David M Boje**

*Aalborg University, Denmark & New Mexico State University, USA*

Volume Editor

**Jens Larsen**

*True Storytelling Institute, Denmark*

 **World Scientific**

NEW JERSEY • LONDON • SINGAPORE • BEIJING • SHANGHAI • HONG KONG • TAIPEI • CHENNAI • TOKYO



*Published by*

World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.

5 Toh Tuck Link, Singapore 596224

USA office: 27 Warren Street, Suite 401-402, Hackensack, NJ 07601

UK office: 57 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9HE

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023041009

**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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**Set 2: Methodologies and Big Data Analysis of Business Storytelling**

**(A 5-Volume Set)**

**Volume 1: Business True Storytelling**

**Volume 2: Business Storytelling and Sustainability**

**Volume 3: Business Storytelling Communication**

**Volume 4: Business Storytelling, Science and Statistics**

**Volume 5: Business Storytelling and Grounding Methodology**

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ISBN 978-981-128-993-4 (set\_hardcover)

ISBN 978-981-128-994-1 (set\_ebook for institutions)

ISBN 978-981-128-995-8 (set\_ebook for individuals)

ISBN 978-981-128-087-0 (vol. 1\_hardcover)

ISBN 978-981-128-088-7 (vol. 1\_ebook for institutions)

ISBN 978-981-128-089-4 (vol. 2\_hardcover)

ISBN 978-981-128-090-0 (vol. 2\_ebook for institutions)

ISBN 978-981-128-091-7 (vol. 3\_hardcover)

ISBN 978-981-128-092-4 (vol. 3\_ebook for institutions)

ISBN 978-981-128-093-1 (vol. 4\_hardcover)

ISBN 978-981-128-094-8 (vol. 4\_ebook for institutions)

ISBN 978-981-128-095-5 (vol. 5\_hardcover)

ISBN 978-981-128-096-2 (vol. 5\_ebook for institutions)

For any available supplementary material, please visit

<https://www.worldscientific.com/worldscibooks/10.1142/13531#t=suppl>

Desk Editors: Nimal Koliyat/Geysilla Jean

Typeset by Stallion Press

Email: [enquiries@stallionpress.com](mailto:enquiries@stallionpress.com)

Printed in Singapore



## Chapter 11

# From Thoughts on the UN Sustainable Development Goals to a Sustainable Platform for “True Storytelling” about Cooperative Opportunities

Mogens Sparre

*Department of Culture and Learning, The Faculty of Social Sciences  
and Humanities, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark  
sparre@IKL.aau.dk*

### Abstract

**Problem and background:** This chapter is written based on a study that has taken place over the last four years and it revolves around the difficulty in creating a framework to come around all aspects about the wish to be sustainable and understand the nature of the UN sustainable goals and these problems as well.

**Question:** The chapter’s problem statement is as follows: How can we, through an action research process, influence the very complex processes in being sustainable and create stories about that, which shows that our process is sustainable in all 17 goals?

**Methods:** In these two case studies, we are positioned in the paradigm of hermeneutical phenomenology. We have constructed our methodology based on a plethora of qualitative methods, fieldnotes and several workshops based on the methods of Appreciative Inquiry and future workshop.

**Findings:** Through our case studies, we have worked together with several co-researchers in workshops and conferences, and based on our interpretations, we

# From thoughts on the UN Sustainable Development Goals to a sustainable platform for 'true storytelling' about co-operative opportunities

By Associate Professor Mogens Sparre, Aalborg University

## INTRO

When we humans work together to solve essential societal issues, we are destined to learn (Illeris, 2007), and we become aware of this learning through language exchange. The linguistic process is our communication of stories – stories of awareness and visions of the future. Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013) points out that our language entails our perception of the world and our being in that world. Our language contains all our experiences and symbols our awareness of the world, but language is nothing in itself. Language exists only in dialogue, either with ourselves or with others. Our formation of opinions and consciousness depends on the subject and cannot be detached as an independent phenomenon. Language is part of our awareness of the world, not the world in an objective sense. Our realization of the world is a linguistically distant horizon that we cannot determine objectively.

*The question is not what we do, not what to do, but what happens to us beyond what we consciously want and do (Gadamer, 2013, p. 474).*

As we try to create stories about life through language, we create it in dialogues with others via common images of horizons of consciousness, and through the dialogue, we use to create images of a shared horizon of realizations. Storytelling is a productive tool for both conscious and unconscious change of behavior (Sparre & Boje, 2020). The notion that storytelling should also be true refers to the ethical and sustainable behavior that our horizons give us (Boje, Larsen & Brunn, 2020). Storytelling can also help organizations to help its members look for new truths and thus move closer to a more ethical and sustainable form of organization and ownership of the means of production. Hartmut Rosa wants us to grasp the contours of a Post-Growth Society (2020, p.434):

can we imagine a society where it is no longer just growth that drives us forward? Can we/dare we believe that our future leaders in Business Schools will learn that good business operations are not blindly fixed on growth? Can we fulfill the demand for food, put an end to hunger and still shape the contours of a Post-Growth Society?

When it comes to Storytelling about our common global climate challenge, we must recognize that we as humans cannot create objective truths or consciousness about objective real behavior. We must recognize that we only create linguistic horizons that we can exchange with others through dialogue or concrete initiatives to create new narratives. Relationships to the world are at the same time a precondition and basis for establishing and realizing a sociocultural formation, and the result of this formation is secured through reification and naturalization (Rosa, 2020, p 403). Rosa talks about how we as humans can create resonance with each other and the planet we live on.

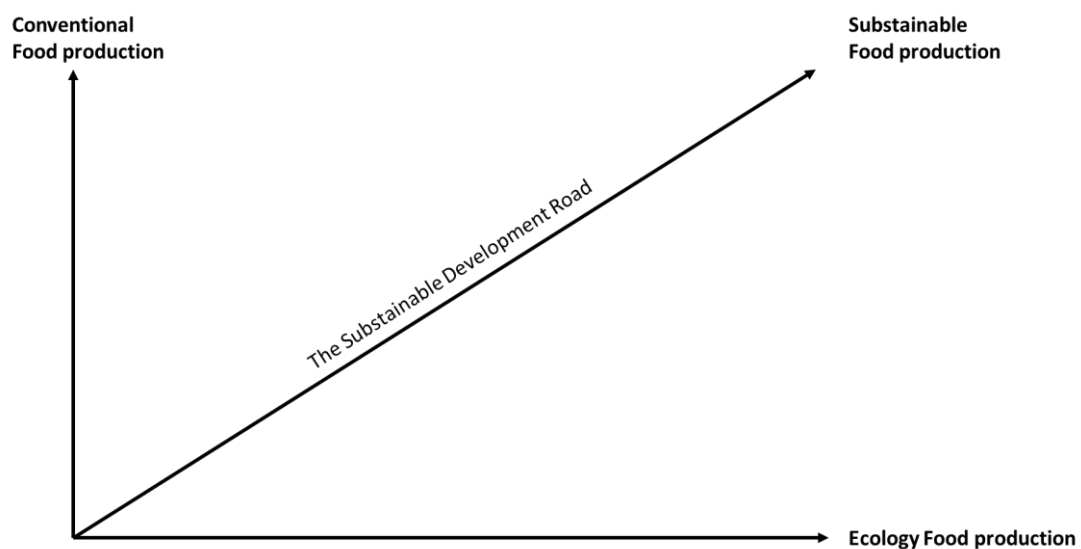
The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals make up a linguistic tale of a hugely complex challenge that it is not possible to have a fixed awareness of. In addition, the many objectives are highly complex and sometimes contradictory. A concept such as true sustainability is created in order to balance our behavior with the many specific challenges. It is therefore not enough to focus on one or more of these objectives, since we cannot have an objective awareness of how they are interlinked. Many people have gone with the linguistic awareness and story that pure organic food production is a sustainable way of producing food. But is organic production always equal to good animal welfare, and what does it mean for poverty and hunger? It is not a secret that organic food production is not able to exploit Earth's resources as well as more conventional production. Nor is it a secret that the mortality rate of both chickens and pigs is higher in organic production than in conventional production (Sørensen & Pedersen, 2013).

- What would it mean for the total food production of the world if all production was organic?
- What would this mean for the global food production?
- What would this mean for poverty and hunger?
- What would this mean for inequality in society?

We must create new ways of living on Earth, and food production must secure that human beings are not starving, but at the same time we must reduce human climate pressure on our planet. We must not be afraid to raise these critical questions. How can we create stories that helps us to envisage a perspective for a sustainable future?

### **Can we create stories about sustainable food production?**

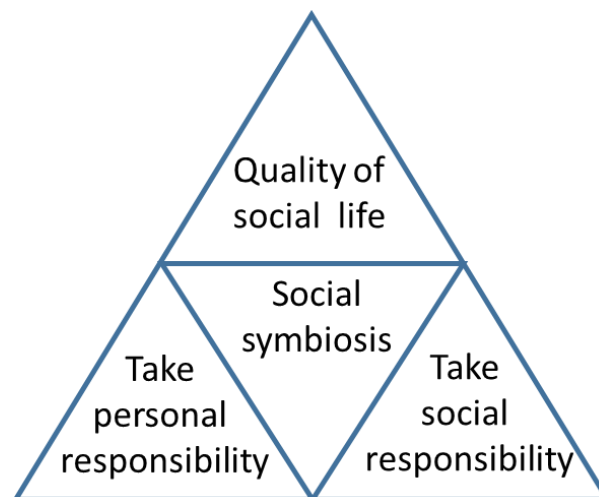
It is not realistic that we can create an ecological production that provides enough food for the people of planet Earth, while at the same time treating animals and humans properly. Nor can we continue to deplete the soil as we do today. We need to rethink the way we look at agriculture around the world. If the answer is not pure organic production, nor pure capitalist, optimized conventional production, then a third way must be found, namely sustainable production of food (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Sustainable food production (Sparre & Boje, 2020).*

For generations, we have seen an open war between those who produce food in the conventional way and then those who believe that the only responsible way is organic production. But are we really willing to let large parts of the world starve because we have to produce organically? Will that be a responsible direction to go in? What about animal welfare? There is proven greater lethality in organic pig and chicken production than traditional production. How can we together create new true stories about real knowledge regarding our being in the world? Participatory

actions research (Sparre, 2016) can be that process where we, the people, together with researchers, farmers, and consumers create completely new coherent stories that also generate new knowledge (Sparre & Boje, 2020). When agriculture transitioned from arable farming to animal husbandry in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many farmers chose to organize themselves in cooperative organizations in order to invest in larger common production facilities such as dairies and slaughterhouses. When society later faced a transformation from an agricultural community into an industrial society, new joint organizations based on the idea of cooperatives were once again created. The last pioneering period, i.e., after the emergence of industrial society, was followed by a quieter period without major societal innovations. The communally owned farm saw the light of day. We see examples of city dwellers buying shares in agriculture, and thus taking active co-responsibility for the food produced. The cooperative movement, together with action research, can be a very useful tool for new sustainable production processes.



*Figure 2. We must create quality of life for people all over the world.*

### **Can we create true stories about social symbiosis?**

When we look at examples of good use of resources, we often see that symbioses are created between several actors. In our research, we have seen that such cases have one thing in common. In all the cases we have had access to, one or two top motivated, devoted, enthusiast have been identified, who in a unique way have put all their energy into creating human social symbiosis, so that everyone involved becomes part of one great sustainability symbiosis. We call them “fiery souls”. They are often difficult to control, and if you do so, you break their motivation. Instead,



create a framework and then give them room to create the innovations they are just so good at. They also motivate the surroundings to make the extra effort that is needed to make things happen. The elements of a social symbiosis, as shown in Figure 2, entail that quality of life, personal responsibility, and social responsibility must all converge in a social symbiosis with.

Like all other changes, it all starts with us; people's lives change, which always creates personally important stories that, in turn, can trigger new changes in human life. However, strong stories can also block for personal change and define what constitutes the opportunities for humans to change (Brown, Gabriel & Gherardi, 2009).

In a case from Sweden, it had been discovered in a local area that many of the city's eateries did not have much to do in the winter period, and at the same time there was a lack of chefs in the summer. In one of these restaurants that was normally closed all winter, an eatery was opened where immigrants throughout the winter were taught to cook by an experienced chef. All the workers from the surrounding factories came to eat there. After 7-8 months, the foundation had been created for the participants to get jobs all summer, which thus solved the issue of lacking chefs. Such ideas are generated by local enthusiasts. In Denmark over the last 5-8 years, several socio-economic cooperatives have been established by enthusiasts, with purposes that increasingly go beyond the aim of merely making money. The task is also to provide meaningful and valuable work for those who find it difficult to penetrate the normal job market. When we as humans can see meaning in our lives, and when we help others, we all create value for each other. Our awareness and recognition of a common purpose gives rise to accountability.

When we rediscover the value of doing something meaningful together with others, we can create new ways of sharing in cooperatives that give us maximum social life quality, at the same time as doing something good for the environment.

We can create true stories about social symbiosis when we together find new ways and patterns of managing our shared responsibility for living on the planet, Gaia, or Mother Earth (Jørgensen et. al. 2021)

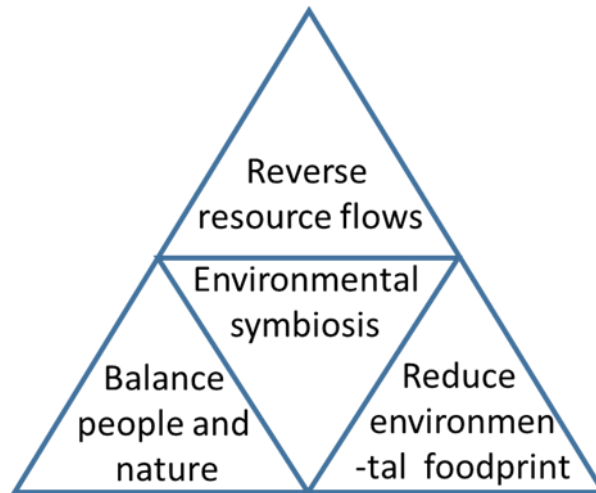


Figure 3. Our common planet must be in balance, or we will become extinct

### Can we create true stories about nature?

Clean air and water are not simple resources, they are living conditions for all life on Earth and must not be subjected to commercial exploitation. We must all have equal access to clean air and water, regardless of income (SNG no. 6). We must stop telling stories about water and clean air as if they were simple resources because they are not— they are living conditions and far too important to be treated as mere resources.

*What is the basis of our life? Concrete asphalt plastic? Vinyl glass metal? Manmade objects for whom we forget the originals? No – the basis is the soil, aerated by roots and earthworms; glowing and shining, soaked through by rain and shaken by wind – by the sun – by the water – by the air.*

*Thorkild Bjørnvig. Monkey Gods. Environmental Poems 1975 – 80*

When we make new realizations as humans, we often experience new contexts that can be valuable, but also the opposite. When we become aware of the limited resources of the planet and realize that we cannot continue to consume as before, we may experience that we begin to look at Earth's resources with renewed respect. When we as humans develop an awareness of the footprints we leave, we acquire a new language for our being in the world.

We realize that we are here for a short time, and that we must leave the land to our descendants in a state that fertilizes the possibility for future generations to inhabit this planet. We borrow our planet from our grandchildren, and we must give it back in good condition.

When we begin to reduce our individual footprint and recycle Earth's resources, we create a symbiosis with the soil we inhabit (Figure 3). This symbiosis requires that we do not overuse scarce resources, at the same time as we must be able to strike a balance with the nature, we are a part of.

*Things or water*

*Plastic or water*

*Plastic or clean water.*

*Should thirsting and half-poisoned children one day look at piles of plastic toys, ships, houses, livestock and wild animals, cowboys, chauffeurs, soldiers of plastic?*

*Thorkild Bjørnvig Monkey Gods. Environmental Poems 1975 – 80*

In Denmark, enthusiasts have something they call "citizens' forests," which are cooperatives that join forces to plant forests for recreational purposes. Awareness is being raised about the protection of our groundwater, and consumer-owned water utilities, without commercial interests, provide citizens with clean and cheap drinking water. Waste is redirected to resources we have not yet learned to use. In doing so, language and narratives create new spaces for action.

*In fact, people themselves are responsible for making the status quo so resistant to change. We are trapped by our own behavior (Argyris & Schön, 1974).*

We can and must replace single loop and double loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974) with triple loop learning. We need to redefine our mindset, and we need to rethink and recreate many of the inventions we are so fond of today. The scarce resources we have can and must be shared more equally. Why should we all own one or several cars? Why do we not have shared ownership of a lot of goods? Why should we live in huge houses on many hundred square feet? Humanity burns fossil fuels in such large amounts that Earth's temperature is rising. When do we realize that it has to stop?

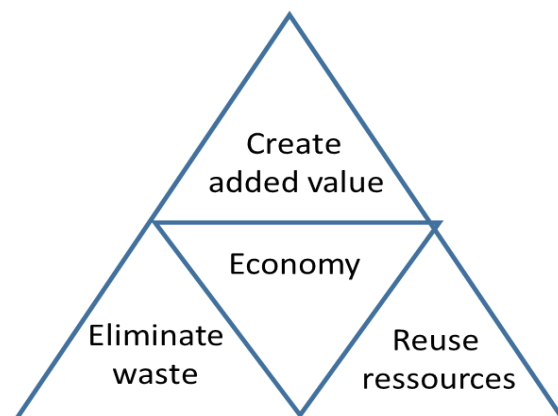




Figure 4. We must not only keep track of the financial economy; Earth's economy must also be monitored.

### Do we dare to create stories about sustainable economy and not only a finance economy?

The narrative of the UN Sustainable Development Goals must not become singular stories about the sanctimonious, those with the 'right' approach. How do we create most value for humanity, taking due account of minimum consumption of Earth's resources? How can we live on our planet in a non-harmful way while eliminating hunger? We must work toward a massively improved use of our resources. When we create value for humanity, there must be a balance in the exploitation of our resources.

How can we, in a post-growth economy, redefine how to evaluate whether a business is good or bad? Can we create new economic formulas and narratives that work with different bottom lines than the ones we know today? Is a dollar earned without burdening nature worth no more than one that has strained the planet's resources and with the use of child labor? Money doesn't smell, as they used to say in the old days, but is it still true? Isn't there such a thing as dirty money, and don't we have to condemn that kind of earnings? Can we measure a dollar's carbon footprint?

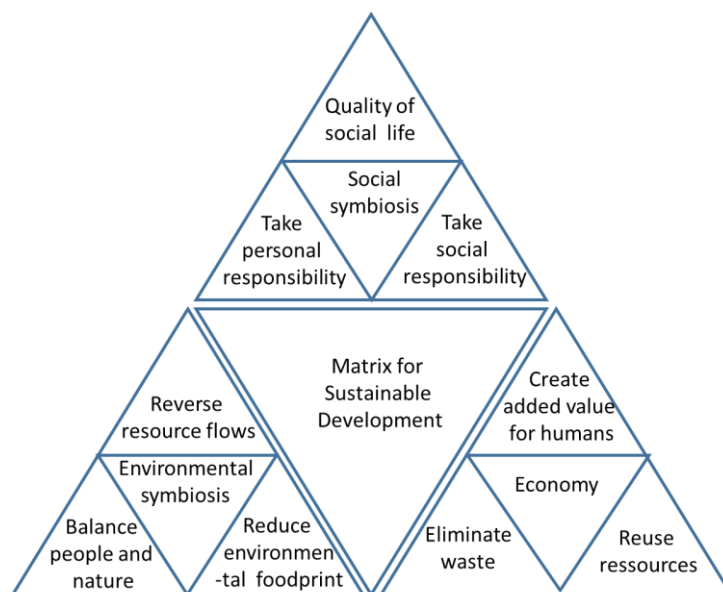


Figure 5. Suggestion for a true storytelling matrix of Sustainable Development

For decades, we have measured success and development according to a certain bottom line, namely the economic one. After some really ugly examples of short-term economic gains in the late 1980s, many began to recognize that the ultra-liberal approach of purely economic optimization was unsustainable. In 1987, the United States began to work with other bottom lines and perspectives. Led by Kaplan & Norton, this focus recognized that there could be different perspectives than purely economic ones. Kaplan & Norton introduced a process that had four perspectives: the financial perspective, the customer perspective, the process perspective, and the employee perspective (Kaplan & Norton, 2001).

In Figure 5, I have produced a suggestion for some sustainable perspectives on bottom lines. If we can promote a focus on creating social symbiosis and symbiosis with nature, we can create sustainable development. It is crucial that the economic structures we have in our society support the ambition that there is an economic advantage in behaving properly.

### **We need to realize that we can only create a sustainable future together**

In Denmark, we have an entrenched tradition, going back more than 150 years, of solving our challenges together. We may refer to this cooperative movement as the basic organization of our community. This form of organization has thus been used to improve the quality of life for people in the form of providing clean drinking water, sewerage systems, affordable healthy food, and many other social tasks. These consumer-owned organizations have proven sustainable and survived for generations.

When people want to tread new paths together, it can be valuable to create partnerships with actors who possess concrete knowledge. When we researchers work with other actors to create new insights, the approach is often action research.

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world.  
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has (Margaret Mead, in Lutkehaus, 2008, p. 261).*

### **Stories about the co-operative movement**

When Margaret Mead wrote that thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world, if they work together, she may have looked at all the structural changes created by the cooperative

movements. The idea of co-operation and the cooperative movement as an organizational form started in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when industrialization brutally pulled the rug out from under the old English farming and craft community. The movement was initiated by Robert Owen (1771-1858), a wealthy young commissioner who – before the age of 20 – had been appointed director of a cotton mill in Manchester. After a few years, he invested in another spinning mill in New Lanark, Scotland, where he developed new effective methods of running spinning mills. Owen's new ideas were based on the fact that the human character and behavior are formed primarily on the basis of the physical and cultural environment. Owen believed that by giving workers good wages and working conditions as well as training, they would become respectable and responsible citizens. Based on this new experience, Owen developed his own idea that the right environment could be translated into cooperative communities, which could then lift the working class out of poverty (Grelle, 2012, 14). The world's first official cooperative organization was established in 1844, and was British: the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers. It provided the typical and general characteristics that we now take to indicate an organization based on the cooperative idea. These characteristics are:

- Democracy – one membership, one vote
- Open membership
- Fixed and limited dividends on the subscribed capital
- Payment of dividends in relation to purchases
- Cash payment
- Genuine and unadulterated goods
- Education and information
- Political and religious neutrality

(Grelle, 2012, p. 19).

As a general rule, it is also a characteristic that a cooperative organization strives to have the same interests as the society of which it is part (Bjørn, 1988).



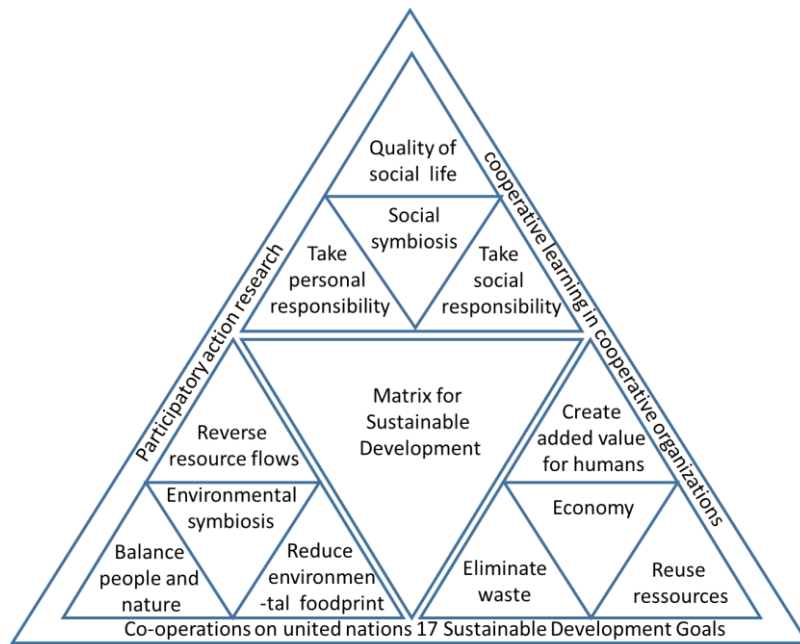


Figure 6. A new story generator for sustainable development

Historically, the cooperative movement has proved useful when the surrounding community needed structural change. Society is on the threshold of a new, major social change. The UN's 17 SDGs and the global environmental threat are pushing for more sustainable forms of production and new ways of life to preserve our planet. The increasing mobilization of the people to see and recognize new sustainable solutions requires new forms of organization that are not based solely on a dominant approach to the growth and consumption of the planet's resources. In particular, participant-involved action research has shown that, for example, groups' perceptions of sustainability can be changed, thus creating completely new scopes for action (Sparre & Boje, 2020). It is my argument that participatory action research, just like co-creation, shares similarities with cooperatives.

*Storytelling is perfectly designed in the media and education to produce the results of unsustainable thoughts, actions, habits, character and destiny of the downward sustainability spiral we are getting here and now. To change our destiny, we need a better quantum storytelling by people in all kinds of organizations that organize to stop fooling us with grand narratives of so-called sustainable results. Instead, we actually need to put sustainable thoughts into sustainable actions, make them habits, so that our character is answerable to the 'reality' of material ecological conditions that we are producing by our habits of food, housing, transport, and energy. Only then will we change to a sustainable destiny David Boje, 2021*

It is when humanity joins forces to create sustainable narratives that together we can bring about change. It is when humanity realizes that the one-sided focus on economic profit is the beginning to the end of the world that we can begin to create new, truly sustainable narratives in which social symbiosis and human values are redeemed without destroying our shared planet.

When we create new stories about how we will meet the SDGs, in committed communities and with cooperative learning in cooperative organizations in mind, we can generate sustainable use of our land, which will provide maximum social value for the people of this planet.

*Improvements to the pump do not increase the level of the well, it is dried out.*

*Deeper drilling does not increase groundwater, it sinks.*

*Radar and electric harpoons do not increase the number of whales, it is dwindling.*

*Improving technology for extracting the world's resources alone, no matter which ones,  
does not increase them.*

*Is it any wonder? Do you want it to continue?*

*Excerpt from a poem by Thorkild Bjørnvig, 1981*

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