

JEDER MENSCH BRAUCHT
FREIHEIT, UM SEINE
ANLAGEN UND FÄHIGKEITEN
ENTFALTEN UND
VERWIRKLICHEN ZU KÖNNEN.
DIE WIRTSCHAFT ERBLÜHT,
VERFÄLLEN KULTUR UND
WISSENSCHAFTEN, STAGNIERT
DIE WIRTSCHAFT.
GEISTIGES LEBEN BRAUCHT
FREIHEIT GENAUSO, WIE DER
KÖRPER DIE LUFT ZUM ATMEN.

Liberales Institut

Richard D North

Sustainable Development: A Concept with a Future?



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Introduction

„Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.“ Sustainable Development as defined by „Our Common Future“, The World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987¹

Sustainable Development (SD) has been a huge success in the talking shops of the world. In think-tanks, universities, PR agencies and the UN, it has been a triumph.² It is also influential: it is a staple ingredient of treaties and laws. But we have no idea whether anyone very much really cares about SD when it comes to how they vote or spend their money. And we have very little idea whether, on the ground, Sustainable Development is at all possible. This paper will answer two questions which arise. Is SD difficult to implement because the concept is empty, or because what it demands is difficult to achieve? And if the latter, are the obstacles to achievement primarily technical or political?

My answers are that the term Sustainable Development is not empty but is badly abused, and that it would be difficult to aim for the real thing, even if we wanted to, which very few of us do. To put it bluntly: because people insist that SD legitimises either economic development or green romanticism – or that it can reconcile them – its whole value is thrown away. Its real value is that it frames debate. And we should also see that it is hopeless to burden the concept with social issues it cannot manage.

These difficulties have not stopped this pair of words becoming a mantra which is offered as the golden mean by which all human life should be measured. They are at the heart of dozens of policies, laws and treaties – national and international – and thus they might be supposed to govern the way we live, from the way waste is handled and housing planned to how we discuss the future of energy generation and transport. They have become central to a discussion about how we should conceive of human happiness and the idea of economic growth. They are not ringing, declaratory words, and the public mostly yawns when it hears

1 Our Common Future: The report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (The Brundtland Commission), 1987.

2 There are few sceptical accounts of the concept of Sustainable Development, but an extended one is to be found in *The Fading of the Greens: The decline of environment politics in the West*, Bramwell, Anna, Yale University Press, 1994.

them.³ But politicians, academics and policy specialists know they are immensely important: policies can be sold and can be scuppered by their canny use.

To its severest critics, Sustainable Development is an absurd oxymoron, „non-sense on stilts“, in Jeremy Bentham’s phrase. Even a much milder critic may wonder whether the concept has much meaning. A political analyst – or a Post Modernist – will wonder who mostly „owns“ the idea, and how different forces inside and outside government use it. After all, ideas – like technologies – are blameless: it is the uses to which they are put which do harm or good.

It is too little realised that Sustainable Development was devised not merely to reconcile two opposites. At its core is the idea that for most of the world’s people, their poverty – their lack of development – is an environmental blight which may make poverty as unsustainable as industrial development can more obviously be thought to be. The „Brundtland Report“ noted that „poverty reduces people’s capacity to use resources in a sustainable manner; it intensifies pressure on the environment“.⁴

This essay aims to unpick the idea of Sustainable Development. It is written by an agnostic. That’s to say: I think SD might sometimes be quite a useful idea, but that in practice it hardly ever is. It is wilfully abused by almost everyone who uses it. It is bent to the public relations purposes of its false friends. It is paid most honest respect by those who dislike and complain about it the most. These are, on one hand, those full-on capitalists and admirers of industrial progress who believe „sustainability“ is another name for backward-looking luddism.⁵ Some „progressives“ of the left also marshal arguments against environmental timidity.⁶ And, on the other, the romantic radical greens believe it is used as a cover for much of the „development“ they disapprove of. For a writer in the radical UK-based Ecologist

magazine, the new principle, „No development without sustainability; no sustainability without development‘ is the formula which establishes the newly-formed bond. ‚Development‘ emerges rejuvenated from this liaison, the ailing concept gaining another lease of life“. ⁷ As purists, these three parties hate SD’s inherent compromises – or fudges and obfuscations as they think them. The term concerned IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources), one of the groups which might be thought to be one of its pro-genitors, on the grounds that it is too readily confused with „sustainable growth“ (judged a logical absurdity by this group), and with „sustainable use“ which applied only to living resources (but was approved of by them).⁸

Still, all is not lost: many old-fashioned greens of influence have now substantially moderated their views and use the idea of Sustainable Development in ways which are not awful, even if they are perhaps to be resisted. The concept has helped tame some important hotheads, and it has provided the cover under which they can cease to conduct ideological war on the mainstream world, and instead conduct an uneasy debate with it. For Jonathon Porritt, „The concept of ‚sustainable growth‘ is in fact a contradiction in terms: exponential growth ... *cannot* be sustained indefinitely on a finite resource base ... But sustainable development is possible ... When one looks at it more carefully, what we’re really talking about is putting the earth’s economy on to a less unsustainable path than it’s on currently ...“.⁹ This surely rather confused endorsement comes from a writer and activist whose career trajectory has seen an arc from the radical view that Western economies and political systems are unreformably unecological, to his present chairmanship of the UK government’s official advisory body on Sustainable Development. This quotation, from 1990, sees him about half way through his progression.¹⁰

3 The UK’s Department for International Development sponsored The Rough Guide to a Better World And How You Can Make a Difference, Wroe, Martin and Doney, Malcolm, 2004 as a freely-available outreach device. It makes one passing reference to sustainability. <http://www.roughguide-betterworld.com/>

4 This line of argument is stressed by the deeper sorts of green, see Bramwell, above, and Porritt, below

5 One of the few accounts of how our concept works, and fails to work, in practice is Sustainable Development: Promoting progress or perpetuating poverty?, edited by Julian Morris, Profile Books, 2002. Mr Morris runs the International Policy Network (www.policynetwork.net), which promotes discussion especially amongst free-market think-tanks around the world.

6 www.spiked-online.com, a project run by a group of UK socialists of a very untraditional frame of mind, hosts a wide range of discussion on progress and progressiveness.

7 Environment and Development: The story of a dangerous liaison, Sachs, W, The Ecologist 21 (6), 1991: 253-257, quoted in Key Issues In Sustainable Development and Learning: A critical review edited by Scott, William, and Gough, Stephen, RoutledgeFalmer, 2004.

8 From Care To Action: Making a sustainable world, Holdgate, Martin, Earthscan, 1996. This is an account of the work of IUCN (see fuller references elsewhere in this text) from an erstwhile British civil servant who became its director-general for a time.

9 Where On Earth Are We Going, Jonathon Porritt, BBC, 1990.

10 RDN discusses JP in a little more depth in Life On a Modern Planet: A manifesto for progress, Manchester University Press, 1995. The book is available as a free download at www.richardd-north.com. JP’s Seeing Green, Blackwell, 1980 is a very good account of „intellectual“ greenery, as well as of JP’s thinking then.

Unpicking the two parts of Sustainable Development

The problem with „Sustainable“

„Sustainability“ is a word with a simple basic meaning. It is closely synonymous with „durable“ – that is: something is sustainable if it is workable in the sense of being lasting. But durability is not an ideal measure of merit. Some things are environmentally durable but socially intolerable. African poverty for millennia was wholly „sustainable“: primitive people lived close to nature and close to starvation for thousands of years. They were much more the victim of their environment than its conquerors.

Some socially desirable things are not environmentally durable. Many developments which seem or even are „unsustainable“ are well worth undertaking provided they are short-lived, or their unsustainability is short-lived or doesn't much matter. Not every environmentally undesirable project is so damaging that it should not be undertaken. And then of course there is the immense problem of assessing how well we can know or predict the „unsustainability“ of a development.

The problem with „Development“

Meanwhile, „development“ is a word whose meaning we used to understand, but which is losing its anchorage by being bound in with „sustainability“. It used to mean the economic progress which took people out of poverty. It meant the process by which Third World societies would modernise. People whose existence bears comparison with the Stone Age would be lifted into the Satellite Age. We understood that there was a cruel paradox in calling poor countries „Developing Countries“, because actually many of them were not developing at all.

Used in this sensible way, the „development“ was something the West had done historically, and the Third World aspired to now. Yet Sustainable Development was supposed to be something equally needed in rich as in poor countries.

„Development“ is not the same thing as economic growth, and yet if Sustainable Development is to bind the West into its maw (rather than condemn it out of hand), the distinction has to be blurred.

Putting the problems with Sustainable Development together

Sustainable Development may fail as a concept because it does too little real work, or because it demands too much. It is a tautology: it is a statement of the all-too-obvious – that a development which can't last, won't last. But it is clear that a de-

velopment may impose undesirable environmental damage year after year and yet survive and thrive. This failure might be the concept's: environmental virtue may well not be necessary to durability, except in extremes which are hardly common.

But we may be failing the concept. The public may be too lazy to bother with it. The idea certainly has not much caught the popular imagination in its first decade or so of life. More seriously, it may fail to acquire serious support if it is found that SD merely reminds us how large are the sacrifices that would be needed if we were to worry much about our children and grandchildren.

But the concept may fail also because it reminds us that the future is necessarily unknown. That was the burden of a witty little book, *Small Is Stupid*, by Wilfred Beckerman in which he argued (as he put it in a conference contribution later): „Future generations cannot have rights. The basic reason for this is that future generations cannot have – in the present tense – anything. They cannot have long hair or a taste for Mozart.“ Besides, he adds, we cannot know what we will know in the future, though we can be sure that it is more than we know now.¹¹ Rich countries may persist in progress which is currently „unsustainable“ because they have faith that their ingenuity and wealth make them capable of surviving most eventualities.

All in all, we may believe that we are not clever enough to know what the future holds, or to manage it, but we believe we will be clever enough to solve problems we do not have solutions to now. And, we may note, we are simply not virtuous enough to forego present pleasure in order to earn the thanks of the unborn, who may in any case look back on what we think is foresight and note it to have been unwarranted anxiety.

So our problem is that we do vaguely understand that sustainability matters, but we would have to be very sure of the awfulness of some consequence of our present actions to forego them. And even if we cared, we would have to be convinced that the future could not somehow manage those consequences.

Can we predict and manage?

SD invites us to plan; that is, to look ahead, and to manage the future. This requires an enormous leap of faith: have we ever successfully planned anything? We have

11 <http://www.earthinstitute.columbia.edu> Search: „Beckerman“.

tried to plan economies, wars, and education, health and welfare, and recently it has become much more accepted that we have very patchy records in doing so.

Perhaps environmental sustainability is different to these other enterprises. Of course, mankind attempts to understand his planet and understands that he must keep within its limits, and of course he attempts to predict the future. But these approaches have always appealed to mankind, and he has always devoted some attention to them. Foresters, farmers and industrial chemists have attempted to manage their concerns with varying degrees of attention to, and success in, making sure they do not damage the environment. Modern waste management – whether of domestic or nuclear waste – tries to understand whether it is storing up serious problems for the future. Landfills and underground storage of fissile material are both discussed in these terms. The point is: Sustainable Development brings nothing to the discussions that a Victorian would not have understood. We could as easily say: „Clear up after yourself“. Or: „Don't foul your nest“. Or (in a coining of my own): „Aim to clear up your mess in your own locality and lifetime“. (I state it as an unachievable aspiration.)

Sustainability may tidy up some of this thinking, and may help us focus on it. But it is surprising how little new analytical bite it has brought to the human enterprise. This failure arises, probably, because the concept is used as though it were a rule book, a dogma, which it is too conflicted to be. Besides its great usefulness so far has been as a public relations device of the worst sort: it is used to smother truthfulness, not discover it.

The history of Sustainable Development

Its history tells one a lot about the idea. We need to see that the broad concept was around long before it was called Sustainable Development. But even more interesting, we need to see that it was designed to force romantic environmentalists and the „world development movement“ in the West to see that the Third World as much needed good old-fashioned economic development as it needed their radicalism, however well-meaning.

The green radicals

In the West, governments had been passing environmental legislation since the 15th Century in a very haphazard way, and since the late 19th Century in a quite systematic way. Many gross forms of pollution had been tackled, and more subtle and complex problems were being addressed. Still, at the end of the 1960s and

the beginning of the 1970s a new movement was born.¹² Young radicals seeking a field of protest, campaigning and activism found themselves drawn to the problems facing the planet's natural systems as man's industrial power and impact grew. This new group – the „greens“ – drew their intellectual inspiration from a particular reading of the lessons of the relatively new science of ecology. Their reading of the science was eccentric and even perverse, but it was powerfully attractive. Broadly speaking, it stressed that natural systems were – are – in essence stable, fragile and co-operative.¹³ If this was true of our habitat's systems, should it not also be true of our economic systems? After all, surely man's industry could not escape the laws of physics and nature? Its raw materials are those resources which nature provides, and its wastes are emitted into the earth's biological fluxes. Indeed, nature thrives because it has no wastes, only cycles. Our industrial wastes are, in the view, unnatural and deathly. So as we exploit the resources of our planet – whether they are growing or inert – we are denuding it, and as we exhale pollution, we are poisoning it as well.

At first, this new world view swept all before it. It was an idea as powerful and challenging as socialism. Socialist promoted the view that capitalist society was unjust, and that ultimately it was inefficient. It could be transformed gradually or in revolutions: elites could listen and respond to argument, or the masses' rage would do the work of argument for them. The green thought was very similar: man was inflicting injustice on his planet. This was not an efficient way to live, and we could either mend our ways or the planet would rebel against us by force. Interestingly, of course, the advocates of ecological justice were the same sort of people as the advocates of social justice had been, and they argued against the same sorts of people. Industrialists, politicians, and – much more ambivalently – the middle classes were the enemy. The middle classes were a complication: they were exploiters and polluters, of course. But just as the middle class had provided much of the support for socialism, so now they were the bedrock of support for ecologism.

12 There is a convenient timeline of developments in US environmental policy and thinking at <http://www.ecotopia.org/>. Green Political Thought, Andrew Dobson, Routledge, 2000 (a new edition is imminent) is a useful guide. Something New Under the Sun: An environmental history of the Twentieth Century, John McNeill, Allen Lane/Penguin, 2000 is one of the few accounts of „green history“ that does not take an anti-development view.

13 Discordant Harmonies: A new ecology for the Twenty-first Century, Botkin, Daniel, B, Oxford University Press, 1990 is an important account both of the „romantic“ view of ecology, and of a more realistic one.

From the start, „ecologism“ (by which I mean ecology as a movement rather than a science) had global pretensions. It was largely inspired by the very modern thought that the planet could be seen and thought of as a whole. It was home to many complex systems, but seen from space, these were clearly in some sense one large system. Quite what that sense might be was open for debate. James Lovelock, a brilliant scientific inventor, proposed that it might be some sort of organism.¹⁴ Actually, he left it rather unclear whether he meant that the planet literally had a life of its own, or whether its systems were so entwined that one might as well think of it as though it had. In any case, from the start he was at pains to draw very different lessons from his idea than many of his fans supposed he did. He has been a long-time proponent of the nuclear industry, and all the more so now that he believes global warming is a severe threat.

As ecologism swept north America and Europe, it became a powerful media cliché that man was damaging his fragile „Spaceship Earth“¹⁵. A new line of argument was produced. The planet was finite, and its biosphere was fragile: there were „limits to growth“, and there were signs that they were being exceeded. What was needed was an economy which could live within its means. This would require a reversal of an obsession with economic growth to a „No Growth“ economy.¹⁶

The development radicals

But elsewhere, the need for economic growth was becoming much more clear, and it attracted its own radicals. Television brought images of worldwide suffering into every front room in the rich world. The „world development movement“ as it would come to be called was older than the green movement. Disaster relief in its modern form – large charities working with governments in what was a new profession – had begun in the early 1940s, often alongside the burgeoning UN effort to deal with suffering caused by weather extremes, earthquakes, or wars.¹⁷ It shocked an increasingly affluent Western world that famines still occurred, that refugee camps

could be places where people suffered humiliating shortages, and that there were farmers living Stone Age lives. The public was drawn to the appeals of the new movement. They did not notice that this new movement was rather more political than it liked to be thought. Nonetheless, as the movement's aspirations grew – from disaster relief to tackling poverty in a systematic way – it had its prejudices, and they mattered. Groups like Oxfam were of a soft-left liberal tendency: they were inclined to see economic development as primarily a communitarian, medium- or low-technology affair. In the 1960s („the Decade of Development“) they fell for Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa (or „villagisation“) policies, which came to be known as „African Socialism“.¹⁸ They tended to see industrialisation and trade as the kinds of economic development which the European colonialists had imposed and which had left a legacy of under-development. They argued that „cash crops“ (using farmland to produce food for sale, and especially for export) were dangerous when subsistence was what the rural poor most needed, and national self-sufficiency in food the most sensible agricultural policy for their nations. In short, they were players in a very tense argument about the nature of development. At its heart, the argument was a re-run of the economic argument which had surrounded poverty relief in the West a hundred years earlier: Did the poor most need government help, or charity, or access to the market?

Combining development with greenery

We can begin to see the political problem which the governments of the world, and the United Nations, faced. The erstwhile colonial powers were no longer in charge of development in the tropics. One could just about blame under-development on them, and many people did (and still do). The question was not so much, did the West now owe a debt of guilt to the Third World? (Most people thought it did.) The problem was: how should it be paid? Should the rich offer to trade with the Third World – to help the Third World globalise (as we would now say)? Or should they merely pay for the welfare services the global poor deserved, rather as the West's poor had?

Repeated famines in the South were not only agonising the West, they were exposing the underlying fragility of the economies of the ex-colonies. Meanwhile, a romantic attachment to the planet and its people was producing two powerful, mostly youthful, voices which required a new sort of economic growth which would

14 Gaia: A new look at life on earth, Lovelock, James, Oxford University Press, 1979 and many editions since.

15 This phrase is attributed to Kenneth Boulding, one of the last century's most famous popular economists, according to Ecology in the Twentieth Century, Bramwell, Anna, Yale University Press, 1989, an interesting (if rather biased) account.

16 „No Growth“ is not a popular movement now, though it lingers on. At <http://www.npg.org/> there is useful material based on the group's No Population Growth ideals.

17 At www.oxfam.org.uk there is a useful guide to the history of one of the most influential of these charities.

18 The Chari table Impulse: NGOs and development in East and North-east Africa, edited by Barrow, Ondine and Jennings, Michael, James Currey/Kumarian Press, 2001 is one of the very few critical accounts of development charity NGOs.

cause no environmental damage and somehow avoid capitalism's „brutalities“. The green movement and the world development movement were not identical in ideals and their memberships did not much overlap. But they posed similarly romantic and idealistic alternatives to problems which the mainstream world of conventional politics was also wrestling with. Something had to be done, and as usual it was an international conference.

UN Conference on the Human Environment, 1972

In Stockholm in 1972, the United Nations held the first international meeting at which the problems of the environment were considered – and at which it was realised that powerfully competitive forces were at work.¹⁹ They were, broadly, triangular. The greens wanted a radical alternative to industrialism, so that the planet's natural systems could stay natural. The world development movement, less heard early on but soon to become very important, wanted economic development and social justice for the planet's poor. These radicals did not support the classic capitalistic model of development. It was the Third World governments which made themselves felt at Stockholm: they wanted economic growth, and lots of it. They were not very interested in environmental scruple and were not – to be frank, which they seldom were – terribly interested in the idea that economic development should begin and end with thinking about the very poor. Broadly speaking, the Third World governments who dominate the UN (but not its Security Council) wanted the rich world to give them money, and they hoped that it could be given without the interference of the Western campaigning moralists the Western governments seemed so keen to appease. It is hardly ever said, but it seems plausible to suggest that most Western governments wanted a rhetoric under which they could spend a little money on Third World development, and were mildly indifferent to the outcome. Western politicians knew that famine relief periodically mattered to many of their constituents but that lifting the African and Asian masses out of poverty hardly registered, except to some vociferous campaigners. (Television has slightly changed that, along with the advocacy of people like Bono and Bob Geldof.) Governments were also conscious that Western „environmentalism“ posed a purely political problem: the general public wanted a gradually improving environment and was getting it. The „environmentalists“ wanted a degree of purity which could never be delivered. Somehow, they had to be marginalised.

19 The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD – not to be confused with IIED, see below) publishes an SD Timeline at www.iisd.org.

The concluding plenary debate of that first UN conference shows several of these tensions, politely disguised though they were.²⁰ It also shows an emerging political problem: „the environment“ and „development“ were intended to be global ideas, but these terms blurred huge regional differences. The greens claimed that the whole planet was in crisis, and mostly because of the rich world's demands at home and abroad. They said that industry was wrecking rich countries, and plundering poor ones. Spreading old-style economic growth would merely intensify the problem. But the spokesmen of poor countries were inclined to say that it was poverty which was causing environmental damage on their huge patches. They accused the No Growth tendency of condemning the poor to continued poverty and to continued over-use of soils, chopping down of trees for firewood and to contaminated water supplies.

Poor countries will not do Sustainable Development if it means respecting their rainforests: they will respect their rainforests when they have enough development to be rich enough to care about rainforest.²¹

The parents of Sustainable Development

Sustainable Development was the concept which was designed to square this circle. It did not know its own name at first. It is fair to say that Barbara Ward was extremely important to its origins. She worked on foreign affairs at The Economist magazine. Her little book, *The Rich Nations and the Poor Nations* (1962), is an historically- and economically-literate cry for Western action on aid (not least to outflank the seriousness of Soviet ambitions for the under-developed world). She went on to co-found the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).²² Her manifesto on combining development and environmental concern was co-written with René Dubos in their „*Only One Earth: the care and maintenance of a small planet*“ as a backgrounder for the Stockholm conference. In it, they defined humanity's fundamental task as „to devise patterns of collective behaviour compatible with the continued flowering of civilizations“.²³ But Dubos' green thinking was

20 <http://www.unep.org/Documents/Default.asp?DocumentID=97&ArticleID=1497>

21 The idea of sustainable forestry in the tropics is discussed in RDN's LOMP (see above). It has a long history, not least being a concern to British imperialists in the 19th Century, and now manifesting itself in the Forest Certification movement. The Natural Resources Defense Council's website is a good beginning point for accounts of these. JMI's Sustainable Development (see above) has a useful chapter on why „green“ approaches may be flawed.

22 The International Institute of Environment and Development (www.iied.org) posts material about Barbara Ward and her books.

23 See From Care to Action, above.

anything but misanthropic: in his 1980 „The Wooing of the Earth: New perspectives on man's use of nature“ he was amongst the first (and very few) to argue that man's influence on the planet could be benign. Disparaging the modern myth that „nature knows best“, he says, „The interplay between humankind and the earth has often generated ecosystems that, from many points of view, are more interesting and more creative than those occurring in the state of wilderness“.²⁴

IIED was not alone: IUCN-The World Conservation Union²⁵ did some of the work. IUCN was and is an international body which brings together government, university and NGO conservationists to consider the practicalities of preserving wildlife. Its 1980 document „A World Conservation Strategy“ (co-published by the United Nations Environment Programme and WWF) was credited with formally introducing the idea of sustainability to policy-makers. Indeed, it was criticism of the document's supposed environmental purism which led to demands that development be factored into discussions. This, it is said, set the stage for the concept of Sustainable Development, with all its tensions, to be constructed.²⁶

It is convenient here to stress that IIED and IUCN were quite similar in not being remotely radical. When they started, they were inspired and run by middle-aged people of great passion and seriousness. Their founders were people who had influenced policy, and wanted to continue to do so. They looked at the same sort of problem – how to combine human activity with ecological responsibility – from quite different points of view. IIED sought from the first to consider how human social development could be advanced because of – rather than at the cost of – environmental well-being. It was unique in its thinking, and perhaps even more remarkable in its working on the ground to see what projects and approaches might work. IUCN was an overtly conservationist body – concerned with habitats and species – but from the start was aware that much wildlife was not only threatened by over-exploitation by poor people, but only survived at all because it provided a useful harvest to humans. IIED in a way always had human purposes at the front of its mind, but saw them as indistinguishable from environmental concerns. IUCN's mission was to put wildlife first, but saw that human development was part of its

24 The Wooing of the Earth: New perspectives on man's use of nature, Dubos, R, Athlone Press, 1980

25 Founded in 1948 as the International Union for the Protection of Nature (IUPN), the organization changed its name to International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) in 1956. In 1990 it was shortened to IUCN - The World Conservation Union.

26 See From Care to Action, above.

picture. Both courted but seldom received much media attention: their influence was in the corridors of power.

Many of the conservation experts in IUCN favoured the harvesting of wildlife – including some whale species, some elephant ivory and many other African savannah species. They described this as sustainable (the wild populations could thrive alongside it), but as something much more. Culling animals aided the sustainable enhancement of the economic life of poor people, whilst being probably the only mechanism whereby local people could be induced to preserve rather than annihilate their wildlife. But others were more of the „take nothing but pictures“ way of thinking. WWF²⁷, originally founded in the 1960s as the public face by which money could be raised for IUCN, was increasingly dominated by the romantic tendency that was profoundly out of love with what the Americans called Wise Use. Indeed, IUCN itself seemed increasingly ashamed of its interest in sustainable harvesting of wildlife, and promoted itself as a watchdog on species extinction. So even in the bastions of Sustainable Development, there were plenty of people who saw it as a Green, almost anti-development, ideal; whilst others – more pragmatist – thought that the concept's main purpose was to remind people of the moral imperative to lift people out of poverty alongside the obvious thought that the environment mattered.

SD emerges fully-fledged

These tensions demanded reconciliation, and the UN World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Prime Minister of Norway, was set up to do the job. It produced its report „Our Common Future“ in 1987. „The Brundtland Report“ (as it was more commonly called) put the idea of Sustainable Development centre stage, at least with policy-makers.²⁸ Two major UN conferences in Rio in 1992 and in Johannesburg 2002 embedded the idea in the global consciousness.

SD takes flight

We have dozens of definitions of SD, but the obvious one is that it is economic development which does not compromise the ability of future generations to enjoy economic development themselves. In other words, it gets to the heart of the problem of economic development even as a non-environmentalist might see it:

27 The World Wildlife Fund, in 1986 renamed the World Wide Fund for Nature except in the US and Canada. See www.panda.org.

28 <http://www.brundtlandnet.com>.

that it may destroy the earth's capacity to continue to give humans what they need – or want. (Just as it also ought to make „greens“ understand that without development, there will be environmental degradation.) This is a utilitarian and instrumentalist way of looking at the world: it defines the planet's health in terms of its ability to support man. Of course, this is a very narrow definition of Sustainable Development, and it was never one the greens enjoyed.²⁹ The environmentalist requires that economic development happen whilst not damaging the naturalness of the world around it. By this reading, naturalness has value in its own right, and we may perceive threats to it and worry about them, well short of fearing that they threaten our ability to get a living on the planet.

Challenging Sustainable Development

SD is an embattled concept, even amongst its green-minded fans. Defined bleakly, by a utilitarian, it sketches out what one might think is a minimum carefulness one might require of economic development: that it not destroy what it will shortly need. Defined richly, by a romantic, SD requires that economic development be careful to preserve the „rights“ of nature. The latter definition can be utilitarian, but does not like to be.³⁰

Sustainable Development seemed for a while to have the world at its feet. Pragmatic industrialists and governments saw it as a means of doing a little about the environment, but making a vast amount of noise as they did so. Pragmatic greens (a smaller group) believed they now had a stick with which to beat conventional growth. But there were others – more mature, one might think – who abandoned their previous commitments variously to unthinking mainstream pragmatism or to idealistic campaigning ideology, and thought that SD was a concept which really could chart decent middle-ground.

It may be that SD is indeed serving its initial purpose. It has exposed green extremists as being indifferent to human realities, and hard-nosed industrialists as obsessing on the short-term. And it has provided some solid middle ground from which former hotheads, dreamers and radicals can hone workable policy. It has also provided a rationale within which industrialists and others can analyse their businesses and find the language with which to sell reforms to their shareholders.

²⁹ Green Political Thought, Dobson, Andrew, Unwin Hyman, 1990 and later editions is an account of greenery which is perhaps over-friendly to the movement.

³⁰ RDN analyses these themes in some depth in a contribution to Key Issues In Sustainable Development and Learning: A critical review, edited by Scott, William, and Gough, Stephen, RoutledgeFalmer, 2004.

And yet its usefulness was weakened by the paucity of the challenge it faced. It could easily grow – but was not much improved or put to serious work. It was one of those politically-correct ideas – like multiculturalism – by which the soft left liberal mind manages to rob us of debate. Yet even in its simplest and most obvious form, in which environment and development are counterpoised, we can challenge SD, and there is value in doing so.

„Progressive“ (pro-development) critics of SD could simply watch the contradictions of the concept weaken its political power. But of course, the bold amongst them would rather stress bold development strategies. They would rather assert both that development is benign, and good for the environment, and that even where there is doubt about either of these propositions, risk-taking is good. It is especially good, they might say more kindly, granted how important development is.

Some of these arguments did indeed appeal to progressives on the right and left, as we have seen. But it is surprising how few committed enemies the very idea of Sustainable Development attracted. However, by the time of the second event UN Sustainable Development conference in 2002 in Johannesburg, there was at last a serious and systematic populist challenge from the pro-development camp. The International Policy Network – a UK-based free market think-tank which corrals free-market opinion in the Third World – was a hit with the media as for the first time reporters covering the conference saw that the green verities on SD could be challenged, and IPN provided the authentic, indigenous, Third World voices with which to do it.

Some of the challenges to Sustainable Development

1) Development, please

It was and remains unclear in many countries how to make development happen at all, let alone sustainably. Some countries, many of them in Africa, seem proof against all attempts at development. The most testing problem is to know whether much aid has done more harm than good. This makes it unclear not merely how to apply aid, but whether it makes sense to call for very much more of it. Question: surely one does not have SD where one does not have development at all?

2) Temporary unsustainability

It may be that in its initial stages, all development takes unsustainable forms. That's to say that economic development tends to begin with the exploitation of natural resources, and does so in ways that are relatively unrestrained. Only later

does industrial development begin, and make it possible to refine or reduce the exploitation of natural resources. Question: does sustainable development allow or forbid temporary unsustainability?

3) Let things take their course

The early stages of industrial development are nearly always unsustainable. They often use the advantage of unregulated environments and cheap labour to use, say, coal, in old-fashioned and polluting plant to produce old-fashioned and polluting goods. In time though, popular pressure combines with increased affluence to allow industry to clean up, as it did in the West. Question: does one need a concept of SD to attempt to pre-empt (or accelerate) these processes? Why not let economic and political life take its benign course?

4) Technological fixes

Sophisticated economies produce demands which may or may not be sustainable, depending on whether technology can keep up. Julian Simon and Herman Kahn did early work stressing that the green movement had always overstated the historic and present damage done by man, and always understated the innovative capacity of humans in dealing with such environmental problems as they had so far encountered or caused.³¹ This has been the message, too, for several years of Ronald Bailey³², and – more recently – the same case has been put by Bjorn Lomborg³³.

Nuclear power and genetic engineering may be able to produce energy and food alongside diminished use of fossil fuels and increases in natural habitat – or not. This is to say that we cannot know whether some development or other is sustainable because we cannot know what abilities we will develop. Question: does sustainability require that we cautiously not undertake any development unless we can be sure that it will turn out to be sustainable?

5) No future in futurology

As Wilfred Beckerman (who was taking the environment seriously when many of the present proponents of Sustainable Development were in nappies) trenchantly noted, we cannot plan for the needs of future generations because we don't know

31 The Resourceful Earth, edited by Kahn, Herman and Simon, Julian, Blackwell, 1984.

32 Earth report 2000: Revisiting the true state of the planet, edited by Ronald Bailey, McGraw-Hill, 2000.

33 The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the real state of the world, Bjorn Lomborg, 2001.

what their needs will be. Peter Bauer – one of the first writers on the conservation of resources and Third World development – noted decades ago that we find it very hard to predict what will matter to future generations, and our predictions have often proved misguided.³⁴

Disease may mean there is a small human population. Global Warming (itself perhaps a result of unsustainable development) may redefine what people need (massive energy demands for air conditioning, for instance). Question: Doesn't this mean that even if we decided to act sustainably we stand a rather high chance of finding we misdefined it?

6) No-one cares

For different reasons, both rich and poor people refuse to take sustainability seriously. The rich have yet to be persuaded that what they do is unsustainable (or that they can be bothered to do much about it) and the poor have yet to be convinced it matters (or that it is they who should pay for it). Question: Who cares about SD, really?

7) The campaigners don't like development

SD is a cover for disliking economic growth of the capitalistic kind. Many campaigners have found that discussing the environment plays better for them than disparaging capitalistic growth. This may be because their „market“ – the Western audience – likes capitalistic growth and can readily accept that poor countries need it. When they discuss environmental concerns, the campaigners are assumed to be on territory they understand (and about which their Western audience already feels guilty).

34 A Tribute To Peter Bauer, Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 2002 is very brief and to the point. There is a very useful guide to Bauer at <http://www.the-rathouse.com/Revivalist4/Peter-Bauer.html>. A good introduction to his thought is The Economics of Under-developed Countries, Bauer, P T and Yamey, B S, Cambridge University Press, 1957.

Sustainable Development is freighted with all virtues

Sustainability was from the start a word which could be applied to nearly anything, and could be over-worked. Communities, housing, vehicles, national budgets – all could be discussed in terms of their being more or less sustainable. But a quite different process was also taking place: the concept was freighted with social as well as environmental concerns. This was bizarre. It was, after all, possible to say that developments which were environmentally unviable were genuinely unsustainable: that's to say, they could not last. But a development might be socially inequitable, or socially divisive, and yet be entirely sustainable. Community and equity are not necessary to either sustainability or development. They may be nice – or useless, or bad – but they have nothing to do with our already over-worked concept.

SD, community, justice, prosperity, and well-being

Anything anyone wants tends to be bundled up with „sustainability“. Long before we have proved that environmental virtue is necessary to durability, we have freighted the idea with notions about society and equity, which are even less obviously necessary to durability. Bodies from the International Chamber of Commerce³⁵ to the Catholic Church³⁶ – let alone governments, industry, campaigners and consultants – cheerfully put their commitment to community, social justice, as well as the environment, under the heading of „sustainability“.

Much economic development in the Third World – and economic progress anywhere reduces poverty but damages local communities and increases inequality.³⁷ This does not make it bad by any means. Whilst sustainability might make people think about the future environmental impacts of a project, insisting that progress create no social change right now is an impossible impediment.

In recent years, the kind of radicals and „liberals“ who were anxious about social justice and the environment have widened their concern to include psychological and spiritual matters amongst the rich of the world. Thus we find discussion of „Risk Society“ which amplifies anxieties about a „runaway world“ which first surfaced

in the 1960s.³⁸ And there is concern about „Status Anxiety“, in which endless consumption damages the consumer because it fuels a consumption pecking order in which individuals are bound to feel inferior³⁹. This sort of concern is now bundled in with „sustainability“ to further burden (or enlighten and enrich, if you prefer) the idea of development or economic growth. This line of thought does suppose that present consumption is unsustainable, but seeks to wean consumers off it, not by pointing out environmental responsibilities, but by stressing that consuming things makes even the consumer unhappy. As one of the UK's Sustainable Development Commission documents has it: „Why, if consumerism fails to satisfy, do we continue to consume?“⁴⁰

SD, „needs“ and „wants“

The Brundtland definition of SD discusses „needs“ as being what the present is allowed to satisfy. Certainly, the Third World has needs. But the rich world, arguably, only has wants.

One of the most interesting difficulties with SD is that it attempts to bind the rich and poor countries into one concept as though they faced similar problems. But actually, poor people have a greater right both to unsustainability and to development than rich people. Indeed, it is arguable that only people who seek „development“ (that is, are being lifted out of poverty) have any right to damage the environment as they become better off. After all, SD aims to reconcile human economic needs with the planet's. It has much less to say about the rights of those whose „development“ phase is long gone, and who are enjoying affluence. But affluence is not something we should seek to denigrate, still less to outlaw. Affluence is the product of human ingenuity combined with the human spirit, and it alone produces many of the benefits which distinguish civilisation.⁴¹

SD hopes to unite rich and poor economies as they address the environment. But actually, the circumstances of each are so different that though they may both take some interest in sustainability, they will widely diverge as to what it might

35 ICC: <http://www.iccwbo.org/>

36 <http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/CN/02/020711.htm>

37 Freedom, Prosperity and the Struggle for Democracy, Melnik, Stefan, Liberales Institut, 2004 and The Role of Business in the Modern World, Henderson, David, IEA, London, 2004 both discuss these issues as does RDN's Rich Is Beautiful, Social Affairs Unit, 2005 (March).

38 The Politics of Risk Society, edited by Franklin, Jane, Polity, 1998 and A Runaway World: The Reith lectures, 1967, Leach, Edmund, BBC, 1968.

39 There is a wide literature, but The Progress Paradox, Easterbrook, Gregg, Random House, 2004 is perhaps the most interesting.

40 Policies for Sustainable Consumption, Sustainable Development Commission, September 2003 at www.sd-commission.org.uk.

41 RDN's Rich Is Beautiful, Social Affairs Unit, 2005 (March) addresses this theme.

mean in practice. Thus, rich countries seek to work out how they can maintain their present level of economic life whilst satisfying green demands. Poor countries are inclined to assert that they have a right to get on with any development which suits them economically, and if the rich world doesn't like it – then the rich world will have to pay for the additional expense of satisfying green scruple.

The dilemma is not merely a matter of moral equivalence. The environments of the rich world are in remarkably good shape: regionally and locally, they are nice places to live. This is mostly because they are rich. It is possible that globally, they are threatening massive climate change, because of their emission of greenhouse gases. The environments of the Third World, by contrast, can be very unpleasant at regional and local level (mostly because they are poor), but at least for now they are not much threatening the world's climate system.

This picture suggests that the poor world needs to get richer, so it can sort out its local and regional environments. The rich world has few local and regional environmental problems, but may need to address the global impact of its greenhouse gases – and help the Third World address theirs.

Still, we can usefully note that the Third World needs development most greens would disparage, and the rich world arguably needs changes to its environmental practices which they equally hate (as we see in green opposition to nuclear power).

Sustainability and „carrying capacity“

One of the oldest ideas which ecology promoted was that of „carrying capacity“⁴². This discusses the ability of a habitat to support biomass. It seems a simple enough matter to develop the idea to take account of human beings and their relationship with their planet. This is the sort of problem which Malthus discussed, and it has resonated ever since. It fits well with ideas of man being a blight on his planet: ideas of his being a „tide“, a „plague“ and even a „cancer“ (as the late Susan Sontag characterised mankind and especially white mankind).⁴³

Some modern discussion of ecological insights has helped provide a framework for thinking that to a considerable extent, nature's ways are more like those of the

42 WWF is keen on „carrying capacity“ and ecological „footprint“: <http://www.panda.org/>. The theme is very important to Botkin, see above, and to Holdgate, see above.

43 See obituary published both in the Los Angeles Times and the Financial Times, 30 December, 2004.

market than those of a socialist community. That is to say, within limits, habitats are surprisingly robust, dynamic and opportunistic. Habitats can thrive alongside diminished biodiversity, and biodiversity can flourish in shrinking habitats. This is not to say that industrial man has carte blanche, rather that finding the planet's carrying capacity depends on understandings and explorations which require imagination and risk-taking as well as caution.⁴⁴

Most recently, „carrying capacity“ has been re-described as „footprint“ – perhaps from the idea that one shouldn't leave such things (but only take photographs, in the T-shirt mantra), but actually leaves a rather heavy one. In the past decade or so, there have been attempts to describe how many Earths would be required if the Western way of life were to be sustainable.⁴⁵

These models seem excessively gloomy. There is evidence that the planet can produce huge amounts of food, if only its soils are treated with care and the right chemicals. Fresh water is indeed a scarce resource in many places: but it is wasted on a huge scale, and can be manufactured from salt water. There is no evidence of shortage of minerals, whose work can be done by „man-made“ materials (something of a misnomer anyway). Fish stocks are typical of some other wild resources (tropical forests being another) which are squandered by modern man: but they are capable of sustainable exploitation on a large scale, given care.

SD and the family of environmental principles

SD takes its place amongst many other modern „green“ axioms. Indeed, it has become the umbrella concept which is taken to contain and inform the others. The Precautionary Principle appears to put sustainability first when considering the risks and benefits of any proposed development.⁴⁶ The Polluter Pays Principle aims to discover the real culprits in unsustainable behaviour and charge them for it. The modern celebration of biodiversity assumes that maximising species numbers is the best guarantor to sustainability. Corporate Social Responsibility is the quest to ensure that firms act sustainably.⁴⁷

44 RDN's Risk: The human choice, ESEF, 2000 is an account of these issues.

45 <http://www.earthday.net/footprint/index.asp>

46 RDN's Risk: The human choice, ESEF, 2000 is an account of these issues.

47 Misguided Virtue: False notions of Corporate Social Responsibility, Henderson, David, IEA, London, 2001 is very good on this.

The Precautionary Principle has always been an idea with an almost infinitely elastic range of definitions. As used by many green-minded people, it is chronically risk averse. This definition tends to run: Developments should only be allowed if the proposer can prove that it is risk-free. That sounds plausible and worthwhile until one recalls that it is impossible for anyone to prove that anything is risk-free. The injunction to avoid all risk would itself fail the demand that it demonstrate that it will produce no risk. A more reasonable definition appeals to governments: „One need not wait for conclusive proof that a development poses great risk before acting to avert that risk“. This allows that it will sometimes be worth acting to avert great risk even in advance of positive proof of the danger. Sometimes, but not always. Some developments promise very great benefits which outweigh the uncertain risk which also attend them.

Misuses of Sustainable Development

The Greens

The „green“ ownership of the „sustainability“ tends to mean that the word is attached to various „green“ objectives. Recycling, wind turbines, organic farming and public transport all get the label. Nuclear power, waste incineration, the chemicals industry and genetically modified plants are all denied it. Yet it is entirely arguable that the first group of activities contribute little – or nothing – to sustainability and the latter group may well contribute a great deal to it.

Governments

Governments tend to parade as sustainable any policy which is marginally less unsustainable than whatever it replaces. This process means that anything which can be made to wear an „environmental“ label, will also be made to wear a „sustainability“ label.

Industry

Firms have been quick to exploit SD since they can fairly readily describe what they primarily do as „development“ (that is, they build new houses, roads, or generally contribute to the economy) and can often do something mildly environmental so as to be able claim „sustainability“ too. The newness of the concept helps them too: they are free to „discover“ SD as a new mission. It becomes part of their attempt to persuade the public that they believe they once behaved in an ignorant way, but have been taught by the greens, the young and the wider world that there is a new approach they can embrace.

It would truer and bolder to say that industry has been stretched for many years to keep up with environmental regulation and that the concept of sustainability is no more useful to them than is a good understanding of how environmental policy may evolve. The truth is that industry quite rightly responds to society's demands, but lofty concepts are best left in the political arena. Industry likes SD mostly because it marginalises their green opponents, whilst providing an arena within which industry and the greens can negotiate as equals. This is not necessarily a bad process, but it is hardly heroic either.

Still, it is easier for firms to take an interest in SD than it is for them to be claim to be „green“. Firms can no more be „green“ than they can be socialist: both creeds are too open-ended and other-worldly in their demands. SD does at least keep economic reality somewhere in the picture.

Green consultants

There are several foundations and many more commercial consultants who help firms understand and accommodate SD. A mild cynic can say that this is largely a PR operation on the part of firms. They are outsourcing the management of environmentalism, community relations and Third World development issues to useful stooges. The „sustainability“ consultant is usually an ex-green who prefers to achieve something, rather than protest. That is laudable, but it produces the effect that a few environmental and social initiatives which the firm might well have undertaken anyway are dressed up as Sustainable Development initiatives. In exchange for exerting some influence on the firm, the SD consultant must deliver a large quotient of PR respectability for its managers: the consultant's green credentials must be put to profitable work.

This is not to say that firms are not working for genuine improvement, nor that the consultants are wholly ineffective. But we need to see that the dedicated SD consultant is most useful to firms for the PR effect he or she can deliver. This is often called Greenwash by its opponents amongst green purists⁴⁸. One might more accurately say that green campaigners steal a firm's reputation, and SD consultants sell it back to them. This might be called a process of Greenmail.

48 Greenwash: The reality behind corporate environmentalism, Greer, Jed and Bruno, Kenny, Third World Network and Apex Press, 1996

Conclusion

Sustainable Development aspires to be a globally applicable concept, but actually reminds the rich and poor worlds that their circumstances are very different. The idea of Sustainable Development is supposed to be able to help Third World countries consider the long as well as the short term. But it wasn't around when the rich world made its successful transitions, not least toward healthy environments. Sustainable Development has even less to say to rich countries, whose problem – if any – is Sustainable Prosperity.

It is worse than useless to freight the term with every virtue the soft-left liberal mind can think of. It makes no sense logically, and it weakens the ability of the idea to do any work for us.

It is a pity that the mainstream world has adopted SD as useful „greenwash“: but then, it is a pity that the mainstream world has adopted all sorts of green fudges rather than stand up for its own real merits.

Sustainable Development does have some merit precisely because it is an oxymoron. It fails as a guiding principle in that it does not point us toward a single policy which is desirable, let alone possible. But it can help us lay out the parameters of a battleground over which competing ideas, ideals and interests can range and rage. It gives us no answers, but helps us debate. All this implies that Sustainable Development is not something which can be delivered, but it can usefully be discussed.



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