

SUSTAINABILITY

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Summary

Sustainability has become reified, as if one day society was unsustainable and the next day it becomes sustainable. In reality, sustainability is about a participatory process with a beginning and no end, a vision of the future, an ideal, a goal. It is a social construct that is unattainable by definition, because understanding of the goal and definition of the vision will change with time. Much of the discussion of sustainability has been focused on environmental or ecological sustainability with little attention to the human dimension. While it is true that the environment is the basis for all life and all production, in fact, in the absence of attention to issues of equity and justice, the environment cannot be sustained. Sustainability is about the interrelationships between the ecosystem and other subsystems—economic, cultural, political, social, and scientific, among others. Sustainability rests upon four pillars—social, economic, ecological, and cultural. All must be in place.

Barriers to creating a vision of sustainability and moving toward it are myriad. The explicit and implicit “rules of the game” that set the context for public decision-making

serve as powerful disincentives. Particularly problematic are the rules set by conventional economics. In addition, the belief that planetary management is possible is reinforced by administrative, organizational, and bureaucratic arrangements that focus attention on parts of a problem rather than the whole. This exacerbates the problem, along with a failure to demonstrate real commitment to democracy and public participation.

Other issues, including the singular force that multinational corporations exert in the world today, the absence of a sense of what development means, and confusion concerning population growth and consumption, add further complexity to any discussion of sustainability.

Significant changes in many facets of individual and institutional behavior are necessary to envision and move toward a sustainable future. Political will is a necessary component.

1. Introduction

The last decades of the twentieth century were in name if not in deed the decades of sustainability and sustainable development.

Discussions of the need for sustainability and assessments of society's unsustainability go back centuries, to the apocalyptic views of earlier times. However, it was in the early 1970s that the modern discussion emerged. The British journal *The Ecologist*, in its *A Blueprint for Survival*, observed, for example, "The principle defect of the industrial way of life with its ethos of expansion is that it is not sustainable." They continued:

The principle conditions of stable society—one that to all intents and purposes can be sustained indefinitely while giving satisfaction to its members—are (1) minimum disruption of ecological process; (2) maximum conservation of materials and energy—or an economy of stock rather than flow; (3) a population in which recruitment equals loss; and (4) a social system in which the individual can enjoy, rather than feel restricted by, the first three considerations.

It was, however, the 1987 Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, that gave prominence to the concept, providing what has become probably the most quoted definition of sustainability.

Our global future depends upon sustainable development. It depends upon our willingness and ability to dedicate our intelligence, ingenuity, and adaptability—our energy—to our common future. This is a choice we can make.

Sustainable development is ... development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

During the decade of the 1990s, sustainability became an important part of the vocabulary of UN Conferences that addressed environment and development (UNCED)

in 1992; population and development in 1994; and women and development, and a broad range of social issues, in 1995. The UN Commission on Sustainable Development, a product of the UNCED, continued meeting into the twenty-first century. National commissions were also encouraged, such as the President's Commission on Sustainable Development in the United States.

In the non-governmental sector, many organizations were formed at local, national, and international levels to address issues of sustainability. Conferences, books, and papers have been published. Web sites abound.

There is much talk. However, sustainability is an extremely complex problem, and there has been little resolution of the key, underlying issues. As the listing of conferences makes clear, the discussion of sustainability is still organized around discrete, though clearly interrelated issues—the environment, women, and population. Trying to deal with all of the parts of the problem of unsustainability together remains elusive, seemingly too complex and too chaotic to confront directly. Raising issues of the whole requires dealing with the systems in which the parts are imbedded. This, in turn, challenges too many beliefs and behaviors, raising questions about the use and abuse of power in the modern world. The political will necessary to reduce the dissonance between creed and deed, as Gandhi urged in the mid twentieth century, does not exist. Thus, for example, nations of the world are seemingly incapable of requiring multinational corporations to reduce their emissions of global warming gases, despite the importance of the issue for the public-at-large.

Einstein observed, “perfection of means and confusion of ends seems to characterize our age.” Mechanisms to address these questions as a whole are lacking. The focus is on details with no assurance that the details are the most important. Without a sense of the whole, there can be no understanding of the interrelationships of the parts. By focusing on the parts rather than the whole, it becomes convenient to avoid explicit attention to what are arguably the two most important and difficult interrelated issues for sustainability and development: the global economy, and the distribution of power among the peoples of the world. As the Swedish sociologist Johan Galtung observed:

If there is anything we can learn from the history of major, deep-rooted problems of exploitation and repression, then it is this: a change of system is needed, as otherwise the same phenomena of slavery, arms manufacture and armed conflict, drug consumption to the point of enfeebling whole populations and depletion/pollution to the point of biocide, killing whole regions, will be reproduced. The problems will be sustainable, not the development.

The notion of sustainable development appeared as critique of development models that resulted in the destruction of nature. Ecologists and conservationists were a driving force. They underlined what should have been obvious: the environment is the basis of all life and all production. However, they drew from the science of ecology, which particularly at the time devoted limited attention to the human species. There was recognition that “a state of equilibrium was needed representing the integration of man and planet.” However, “man” was the destroyer. Plants and animals then, and all too often, even now, appear to be of greater interest than do the humans who inhabit the

fragile ecosystems of concern to ecologists. Humans are increasingly acknowledged as having an important role to play in preserving biodiversity. However, the needs of people, and of the poor in particular, often engender less concern and commitment than do the animals and plants that make up the biosphere.

“Sustainability” became associated with “ecological sustainability.” A very impressionistic look at the literature of sustainability and sustainable development suggests that if all of these texts were on one computer that was instructed to find “sustainability” and replace it with “environment,” in a very large percentage of cases, the meaning would not change. The question thus arises: can there be ecological sustainability in the absence of social and economic justice, economic security, sustainable livelihoods, and popular participation in the conduct of affairs? The answer is no!

2. What is Sustainability?

2.1 Sustainability is a Social Construct

The idea that sustainability is a social construct goes against the notion, so central to our ways of thinking, that gives primacy to science and technology as the basis of the solutions of all human problems. Concern with the technical means of achieving sustainability cannot become a preoccupation. There are no formulae to define sustainability, neither are there equations to measure it. Einstein’s observation concerning mathematics applies equally to economics and to sustainability: “the laws ... as far as they refer to reality, are not certain, and as far as they are certain, do not refer to reality.”

2.2 Sustainability is a Vision of a Desired Future

A vision is a necessary component of problem solving.

A *vision* of a desired and desirable future in different time frames is necessary to effect change and provide a sense of direction. The problem then is to describe the alternative paths between the symptom—the present situation—and the vision—the desired future. This process will help to identify root causes.

A vision of a desired future permits comparison of an admittedly ideal state with the situation that will likely occur if present trends continue. It also serves to identify the changes that will be needed. By “back casting” from the vision to the present, it is possible to identify the needed changes in policy and individual and institutional behaviors, unencumbered by what may be perceived as present day realities. These “realities” are more often than not significant systemic constraints. Understanding these constraints is necessary if significant and lasting positive change is to occur. Forecasting and back casting are both part of the visioning process. Back casting can help to avoid becoming bogged down in the details before there is direction and a sense of the whole, looking backward in time for the sources of needed change.

Envisioning is a process for clarifying values, helping to create a deeper understanding of who “we” are, and, at the same time, what “we” want to be.

Envisioning encourages a pro-active rather than passive acceptance of the present situation. Understanding the root causes of unsustainability creates opportunities to plan a new course of action more effectively, rather than being victims of fate.

A description of what is just and needed, even though at any given point in time it seems unattainable, is an important requirement of the process. To seek only what appears to be an attainable goal can often be a limiting factor. Compare, for example, a goal of zero-toxins with the concept of “acceptable risk.” Zero-toxins is by definition equitable, and it preserves the environment, even though with current knowledge it would appear to be an unattainable goal. The idea of “acceptable risk” leaves open a number of questions: acceptable to whom, decided upon by whom, and with what consequences? “Acceptability” necessarily relies on external expertise and decision-making. Therefore, citizens are at the mercy of experts, diminishing their power to control their communities. Envisioning a zero-toxin society will require new approaches to change that are more systemic and structural.

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Biographical Sketch

Stephen Viederman is an activist, lecturer, writer and consultant to philanthropic and nongovernmental organizations, communities, and companies. His leadership on issues of mission-related investing has been recognized in the media. As a former vice-president of the International Society for Ecological Economics he focused attention on the necessity of including social and ethical dimensions in the definition of sustainability and to translate theory into policy and practice. Most recently he has argued that there are limits on corporate social responsibility imposed by the ways that we define what is economic that will block serious efforts toward sustainability. He works with low-income communities of color on efforts to develop culturally and environmentally sensitive forms of high-road economic development.

Mr. Viederman retired from the presidency of the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation (New York) in March 2000. During his tenure the foundation diversified its board and staff, focused attention on the intersection of environmental and economic justice, and on efforts to reduce the dissonance between the asset management of the foundation and its grantmaking. Prior to coming to the foundation he was an official at the United Nations Fund for Population Activities.

Mr. Viederman has published widely on issues of sustainability, corporate social responsibility, mission-related investing, agricultural biotechnology and population, and has lectured on these subjects in North America, Europe and Asia. He also serves on a number of nongovernmental and for profit boards.

Mr. Viederman lives with his spouse, a social worker, in New York City, where he was born. He has two grown children, three grandchildren, and two step grand children, who are a major driving force in his work. In addition, he cooks and is interested in the history of food and cooking, gardening, and is an active photographer.