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The Meaning of Sustainable Development

Introduction

At this unprecedented time in history the world community is faced with the threat of new fundamental challenges. These challenges impinge on all global activities, conflicts and objectives. The inescapable reality that resources are not unlimited and that the biosphere itself is showing unchallengeable signs of system 'shift'. The planet is indeed vulnerable to human activities and decision making at national and international levels of influence. The debate continues as to whether we are close to the 'tipping point' of environmental shift - where whatever remedial decisions are made the downward spiral has begun.

As with all aspects of human development there is inevitable environmental change. Inherent refinement is now needed to truly consider consequences of commercial, industrial and community development on the Earth. The meanings of terms often change with the unfolding of time and usage, not least in the fast changing world of accelerating science and technology. Some words disappear from general usage where new words emerge. Before key terms relating human global development are used and normalised it is helpful to consider with critical appraisal the way specific terms are used and their meaning.

The terms 'sustainable development' and 'sustainability' are considered in four separate documents – that is their definition and how they are used. These will be compared with a view to defend and substantiate adopted definitions of both terms.

Recognised origins – an accepted comparator

In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published a document entitled Our Common Future – which is also called the Brundtland Report (Brundtland Report 1987). From this document came a definition of sustainable development which is generally adopted in the world community ie. *Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*).

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development(UNCED) also known as 'the Earth Summit' hosted in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 produced the Agenda 21 document, which describes sustainable development as the integration of the 'three sustainabilities: social, ecological and economic. These components intersect diagrammatically as a triad Venn diagram of equally overlapping circles.

Comparing the Four Documents

Business Case for Sustainable Development

In 2002 the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) produced a document entitled the Business Case for Sustainable Development (Timberlake, 2002) to promote positive debate both inside and outside the business community. There is a call for those in business, civil society and international governments to work together towards the goal of ensuring a sustainable global society. The WBCSD is made up of 160 international companies that believe that the pursuit of sustainable development is good for commercial and non-commercial global growth. They define sustainable development as forms of progress that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (2002, pg 2).

Being a business council, they emphasise the business case with a financial baseline considered. The council however doesn't base its rationale merely on financial returns. Business growth brings employment and resources into communities which enable sustainability. They emphasise that enterprises offer investment opportunities, training and pensions which inherently secure financial sustainability (2002, pg 3). The WBCSD reinforces that the greater financial freedom the greater the degree of human development. Their definition of sustainable development is almost identical to that defined by the Brundtland report in 1987 except the phrase 'forms of progress' replaces the word 'development'. This may raise the question 'What is progress?' Is progress truly progress if it damages the environment upon which the same communities depend? Is it possible to develop industry for instance without influencing or changing the environment? The answer to these questions is obvious in that any human activity has an influence. The principle of 'cause and effect' is only demonstrated more obviously through business activity and growth. The WBCSD definition perhaps does not define clearly the need to preserve the environment and conserve its resources upon which it relies. It's interesting that the WBCSD triple bottom line: financial, social and environmental performance is considered in this document reflecting the 'three sustainabilities' which illustrates an integrated view.

Industrial nations admit (2002, pg12) that they have certainly not proved as role models for the developing world. What model can we offer the developing nations for sustainable business enterprise? There is a need to combine innovation, enterprise and environmental awareness. The concept of using Carbon Credits and Carbon Trading between the developed and developing nations is an emerging but complex way of encouraging environmental consideration. This process enables sharing of responsibility for commercial development in relation to carbon footprints and improving energy efficiency, but also brings resources to needy world communities and their projects. This relates to both commercial and non-commercial developments such as manufacturing, education, government and health services.

The WBCSD definition of sustainable development is adequate from the perspective of human business and enterprise but lacks the clarity needed to universally protect

the environment both locally and globally. Although much reference is made to sustainable development being about improving quality of life for present and future generations in the document, the question is raised as to who determines what is meant by the term 'quality of life'. The scarring of global landscapes has less obvious influences on human societies in terms of sustainability, namely the influence on the sense of human well being by the removal of tree and other indigenous plant life - with startling diminishing wildlife populations, needs to be considered as an important parameter in the 'equation'. The industrial view and concept of wealth is not universal. The North American Indian quote which ends '..we cannot eat money' highlights the contrast in values between the industrialised world and many traditional communities in developing nations. The peace and tranquillity of a simple uncluttered life is considered by many even in the wealthy nations as very desirable. Again it's interesting that as populations age their perspective of requirements for priorities of sustainability will change. The acquisition of increasingly demanding technical domestic goods manufactured by the industrial world is considered a predominant parameter as a component of wealth . Such freedom to acquire what is desirable is not desirable to all. For example, to nomadic shepherds their interpretation of progress and wealth will more relate to growth in their herds of livestock perhaps or the growth of a healthy and happy family.

The Natural Step – A Vision for Sustainable Societies

Karl- Henrick Robèrt was a cancer scientist who initiated making his native Sweden a model of 'sustainable development'. He defines 'sustainable' with an emphasis on the Natural Step Institute (TNS) approach. The TNS is established in 12 countries; it helps many corporate and public institutions *develop strategies to preserve the integrity and health of the world community and its environment* (Mack, pg 9 -10). Robèrt defines sustainability as rethinking our approaches to ensure the durability of our societies. Sustainability involves reflecting on implications and decision making to reduce 'funneling' consequences.(pg 9)

Robèrt defines a process involving four basic principles for sustainable societies: Not reducing raw materials, not producing toxic waste at a rate faster than the environment can remove and not increasing threats to human welfare and provision (pg 11). This description of sustainability is comprehensive but intricate. A more concise statement is needed that encapsulates the intended meaning with an emphasis on the positives model for sustainability. For the specialist community however the TNS approach would certainly provide helpful framework for sustainable strategies

Sustainable Development and Urban Form

In the summary article Sustainable Development and Urban reform by M J Breheny and PWJ Batey (Breheny 1992, pg 1-2) there is a concise summary of sustainable development indexed by energy efficiency. The environment is almost at the top of the political agenda in many international communities. It is mainly viewed that progress towards sustainable development is essential but this feature admits that there is considerable debate in terms of what sustainable development means. Energy consumption by cities is seen as the major focus for sustainability and the reality that cities predominate as pollution sources. Increased energy efficiency of our cities is seen as paramount for future sustainability. Reference is made to the editor's book

that the editorial relates, which reinforces the need for energy efficient cities. This is considered in relation to political constraints, changes to transport systems and urban form, to reduce energy consumption.

The reader is left with the feeling that this consideration of meaning of sustainable development is relevant but not broad enough. Energy efficiency and pollution is only a part of the issue when populations and communities develop and grow.

The Sustainability Report

The Sustainability Report (www.susteport.org/background/definitions.html) recognises that sustainability can be defined viewing human activities as depending on the environment and the natural world. The human ecosystem is seen as a subset of the Earth ecosystem. Sustainability is defined as meeting basic human needs and wants. Sustainable development involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality and societal equity. Companies aiming for sustainability need to operate not against a single financial 'bottom line' but against the triple bottom line – integration of ecological, economic and social factors

Summary and Conclusion

Comparing definitions and interpretations of the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' from these different sources brings some contrast in terms of prime focus rather than ignoring the broader issues. *The WBCSD define that 'Sustainable development' is forms of progress that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.* This is adequate from the perspective of human interest and enterprise but lacks the clarity of the TNS approach of Robèrt, which fully integrates the broader human and environmental implications of industrial and commercial development.

The view offered by Batey in Sustainable Development and Urban Reform is a concise summary of sustainable development indexed by energy efficiency and pollution. Clearly there is a significant value in considering these parameters but urban form and infrastructure is only part of the sustainability issue.

Finally the Sustainability Report defines sustainability as meeting basic human needs and wants. This may well be considered simplistic and inadequate.

The conclusion that can be drawn from predominantly comparing these four documents is that the interpretation or focus of the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' remain at variance depending very much on the source.

'Sustainability' could be defined as considering the three sustainabilities, of ecology, economy and society from the perspective of maintenance. 'Sustainable development' could be defined as human progress allowing commercial and industrial growth, human equity and preservation of the global environment and indigenous species.

The issues are complex and adequate definitions remain a challenge. World governments are beginning to make decisions which support general objectives that relate these key terms – in this unprecedented ‘sustainability’ age.

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