



The Centre For Business Relationships,
Accountability, Sustainability and Society

Comment and Analysis

The Demise of Sustainable Development



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Sustainable Development: Is its time running out?

Lori Frater

In a matter of weeks, world leaders meet once again to negotiate the successor to the Kyoto Protocol. It has been a long and, most likely for some, weary road. Before the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (Copenhagen Conference) opens in December, it is already being predicted that the delegates will not produce a legally binding agreement. Another meeting at some point in 2010 is envisaged as necessary.

The Copenhagen Conference could turn out to be 'the perfect storm' that moment when all political, economic and environmental pressures collide. During the final session of the preparatory talks in Barcelona, rich and poor, developed and developing countries have reached what can only be described as a political impasse. This could of course all just be posturing before the actual conference in Copenhagen.

What has emerged during the preparatory talks is that developing countries are seeking financial compensation and developed countries want commitments from countries like China and India to reduce their carbon emissions.

Economics or rather money will be the key player at the Copenhagen conference.

In the lead up to the Copenhagen Conference, the Science Museum in London unveiled a single tonne of anthracite coal as part of a new exhibition on climate change. This was not an attempt by the Science Museum to enter the realms of modern art. For, this was not any tonne of coal: it will be, as close as can be estimated, the trillionth tonne of carbon to be released into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide since industrialisation began in the 18th Century.

The rationale by the Science Museum and the University of Oxford is to guard the coal until that point when the total carbon emissions from human activity reach one trillion tonnes. At that point in the future, museum staff will take the coal to a power station or whatever source of power that can use it and be used to meet the one trillion tonne of carbon emission.

In fact those involved in this project do not want that time to come. Their hope is that society will have begun to wean itself off of its addictive dependency on fossil fuel and that this tonne of coal is never used.

Estimates reveal that since 1750 just over half a trillion tonnes of carbon have been emitted. At just under 260 years that should mean that staff, at the museum, has a few generations to wait to finally dispose of their coal.

It is estimated that 500 billion tonnes of carbon equate to a 1C increase in temperature. Therefore another 500 billion tonnes will result in the 2C increase, which is widely regarded as the threshold for dangerous climate change, and the 'point of no return' that governments of G8 countries and other major economies pledged this year not to cross.

However, over the past few decades, carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels have risen by an average of 1.6% per year. At this continued rate of increase, the trillionth tonne of carbon emission should be released sometime in the 2040s, so for many of us during our lifetime.

Current climate change negotiations have shown that economics is still underlying State decisions on how they will approach any negotiations relating to carbon emissions.

Our society is still today based on conventional economics. In the current financial climate, a favoured mantra has been to buy more to help the economy. Buy more products, keep people in work, keep people in work and they can buy more products and so on.

Sustainable development as defined by Brundtland, focuses on three elements, economy, society and the environment. The full definition set down at the Brundtland Commission is:

"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Brundtland Commission 1987

Yet for many, sustainable development is about how we develop our economy whilst not causing too much damage to the environment or too much social injustice. The problem for sustainable development is that development is not a synonym for economy and development does not just mean growth it can mean improve or refine.

At some point for many, development began to mean economic development but not the improvement of the economy but the growth of the economy. In government policies and strategies, environmental activities are highlighted as means of expanding the economy and increasing job opportunities. For example, the Wales Waste Strategy 2002 sought to combine recycling opportunities through waste strategies with improving economic stability.

“We must realise the economic opportunity to use unavoidable wastes as a resource that can generate, on a local basis, wealth and employment opportunities for social enhancement and environmental benefit.” Wales Waste Strategy 2002

The global economy is almost five times the size it was half a century ago. If it continues to grow at the same rate the economy will be 80 times that size by the year 2100 (T. Jackson, 2009¹). This rate of growth is totally at odds with current scientific knowledge of the finite resource base and the fragile ecology on which we depend for survival. Already, this growth has been accompanied by the degradation of an estimated 60% of the world’s ecosystems.

For nearly a quarter of a century we have had the principle of sustainable development, yet emissions increase, ice caps melts and politicians still cannot agree on carbon emissions. Is the principle of sustainable development the correct basis for sustainability? To build a sufficient sustainability movement, do we require a much more truly scientific framework of economics, and a much more rigorous formulation of sustainable development?

Sustainable development is an ethereal and aspirational concept, nice idea but with no structure, no foundation and no framework. It has been open to abuse, misinterpretations, and ultimately a lack of comprehension of its original purpose – let us not grow at rate which undermines the ability of the planet to cope with our demands. There is nothing concrete; no 12 steps programme to guide us from our economic addiction.

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC), in its recent report ‘Prosperity without Growth’ delivered a hard-hitting message when it stated that our current system of growth economics is incompatible with the continued existence of the planet to support us.

¹ Sustainable Development Commission, Prosperity without Growth, 2009

The SDC stated that the current global recession should be the occasion to forge a new economic system equipped to avoid the shocks and negative impacts associated with our reliance on growth. The report called on political leaders to adopt a 12-step plan to make the transition to a fair, sustainable, low-carbon economy.

The time has now come for a new vision of sustainability to emerge. One that is not dependent on sustainable economic growth but more based on a sustainable economy, a sustainable society or more appropriately sustainable humanity. Our current demands on a planet, which does not have finite resources only means that humanity is unsustainable and maybe it is time we began to realise that sustainability is nothing to do with the planet but all about ensuring our continued place on it.

The problem is of course that the world is not yet at the point of critical mass. We still measure State, national, societal success on economic tangibles. As long as this is the case sustainable development is not the answer to changing our patterns of growth.