

## Briefing: Sustainable development: a 'monument for eternity'?

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**This paper discusses and illustrates the impermanence, chimerical nature, and inherent subjectivity of the term *sustainable development*. Doubt is cast on the criteria for its present use and the future of the term *sustainable development*, together with the present public unquestioning acceptance of its continuance. This paper examines a number of commonly held assumptions about sustainable development. For those who believe sustainable development can provide a framework for policy, a basis for international or temporal comparison, or a benchmark for industry against which environmental progress will be measured, this paper is intended as an encouragement to review and reconsider its application.**

### 1. THE EPHEMERAL NATURE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The phrase sustainable development has a short history; it was proposed only 16 years ago when in 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development defined sustainable development as development that 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in the 1999 *UK Sustainable Development Strategy*,<sup>2</sup> sustainable development is defined as 'ensuring a better quality of life for now and for generations to come'. According to Parkin *et al.*,<sup>3</sup> there are over 200 definitions of sustainable development, and the natural consequential question is, how can they be consistent the one with the other?

It is commonly accepted that sustainable development has three dimensions: economic, social and environmental. This concept can be visualised as the triangle formed at the centre of three partially overlapping circles (economic, social and environmental) on a Venn diagram.<sup>3</sup> There are a number of cases today when only two dimensions are considered, with the economic dimension overshadowed by augmented environmental and social concerns. One example of this is given later in a draft review by two senior respected figures in the Environment Agency discussing the application of the Framework Directive on Water and its translation into the 2003 Water Bill.

So what does sustainable development actually mean? Such phrases remain meaningless and can be a deceptive substitute for a critical analysis, such as that achieved thorough environmental audit, until they mature into effective actions followed by a measured and significant outcome. The word *sustainable*,

for example, suggests actions such as conserving, maintaining, recycling and perhaps enhancing. But how can one measure the outcome of the actions, and what is the benchmark by which to gauge the achievement of sustainable development, and thus give it greater effect than would be achieved by the repetition of a meaningless mantra?

*Sustainable* simply means that the activity could continue indefinitely—that is, there is a closed-loop system. Even a sustainable closed-loop system does not imply consistently favourable conditions for one group, species, nation or agenda. For example, the cyclic function that describes the interchanging survival numbers for the snowshoe hare and lynx show a self-regulating continuous 9–10-year cycle of constantly changing conditions in favour of one species and its dependent predator.<sup>4</sup> On a short time-scale, the population of the hare may appear unsustainable, but over a 50-year time-scale it is sustainable.

*Development*, for its part, implies progress, the further establishment of civilisation, and the improvement of standard of living (e.g. the actual improvement of shelter, water supply, and waste management, not a metaphorical barometer). So by implication, the achievement of development is subjective, depending on one's geographical situation, economic standing in the world arena, place and time in history, politics and religion, professional experience or necessity for short-, medium- or long-term planning, as will be illustrated below.

### 2. HISTORICAL AMBIVALENCES

As Richard Hawkins suggests in his recent Viewpoint article 'The wood from the trees',<sup>5</sup> was it sustainable development for the English to fell Hampshire's oak forests in order to build the ships needed to defend England from a Spanish invasion? Clearly the felling of ancient trees in such large quantities (approximately 60 acres of New Forest woodland was needed to build *The Victory*) was unsustainable, but without this action, Reformation England would not have had a future in which to develop. Post-Reformation Catholics residing in England, with allegiance to Rome and Philip of Spain, would have disagreed. They might even have thought to torch the forests closest to the Portsmouth logging trail in order to prevent the fleet that defeated the Armada from being built. The Catholics would have conceived this sustainable development, if only because, sadly, many of them went to their personal London pyres.

Likewise, 250 years later, on the other side of the world the felling of Kauri timber from the native forest that once covered two-thirds of New Zealand's North Island, may or may not be considered as sustainable development. Kauri trees are slow growing and may live for up to 2000 years. But after all, the Kauri logging and timber processing industry established by the predominantly European settlers in New Zealand funded and shaped the construction of Auckland, the development of its ports and the Island's infrastructure.<sup>6</sup>

The New Zealand example also illustrates the sad but true saying that 'if you don't do it, then somebody else will'. Prior to the discovery of New Zealand by the Europeans, the Maori people enjoyed a life of relative harmony with nature. Meanwhile the empire building in the outside world continued to spread, spurred on by rivalry between competing predators. The eventual invasion and subjugation of undeveloped New Zealand (possessing only small arms) was inevitable. This also illustrates the subjectivity of development. In isolation from acquisitive neighbours, the level of development in New Zealand remained apparently adequate. With natural resources abundant and a relatively mild and tolerant climate in the North and the South Islands, were the imported improvements provided principally by the Europeans even needed?

In these cases the three dimensions, or triple bottom line of sustainable development<sup>3</sup> could not occur simultaneously, and certainly not for all parties involved. They show that there can be a political, religious and spatial element in defining sustainable development.

### 3. THE LATEST FASHION ACCESSORY

The acknowledged greatest interpreter of Bach's piano concertos, András Schiff, recently commented: 'A recording is a document of one's view of a piece of music at a given time. It is not a monument for eternity'.<sup>7</sup> So today we accept, albeit some of us most reluctantly, Brundtland, the World Commission, and sustainable development;<sup>1</sup> in fact, we are expected unanimously to embrace them. Sebastian Wood<sup>8</sup> hopes that by 'interrogating heads of engineering business [the] industry leaders will realise that sustainable development is not a fad that will disappear', and Ashley *et al.*<sup>9</sup> state that sustainable development 'serves as a comprehensive framework for the formation of policies and actions'. But can they be mistaken? The World Commission and Brundtland<sup>1</sup> appear to be powerful and self-perpetuating words, but do they really deserve to be made a 'monument for eternity'?

In a historical context, the world has progressed without sustainable development. So why has the phrase been adopted now? In many respects, as we shall see, the term has not been adopted in its true sense. Instead it has been added to phrases, infiltrated projects, and stealthily integrated into political jargon and environmental eco-speak, to add some spurious validity, and, as such, life continues as usual.

In the ICE 60-page proceedings *Engineering Sustainability*,<sup>10</sup> the words *sustainable* or *sustainable development* were used in all six briefing notes and six papers, and in a random sample of 20 pages it was used on average ten times per page. So, when should this moveable template of *sustainable* or *sustainable development* be used and when should it not be applied?

In their recent *Planning Newsheet*, Anthony Bowhill and Associates summarise 115 planning changes and significant cases,<sup>11</sup> and the word *sustainable* is used in ten of them. For example, the Sustainable Communities Plan aims to accommodate the 200000 extra homes needed in the South of England; a proposal for a new housing development was apparently turned down because the location was found to be 'unsustainable'. Conversely, a proposal for new flats was found 'not to cause harm due to loss of employment' because it is in a 'sustainable location'. Recent cases refer to the 'sustainable use' of a brownfield site, and a 'fairly sustainable location'.

Other eminent experts in planning law<sup>12</sup> observe that in most planning appeals the term *sustainable development* arises in reference to the impact on transport networks or car use. They note that the concept of sustainable development lacks a clear definition, and apart from in transport-related cases, the sustainable development criteria are not consistently applied. If sustainable development is to include all three dimensions—economic, social and environmental—then should it specifically be used as a rigorous test in all development cases?

In a lucid and reasoned draft review of the 'The Water Framework Directive and the Water Bill—a major change for environmental management', two senior Environment Agency staff noted in their introduction that 'economic considerations are an important element to the [Water Framework] Directive'.<sup>13</sup> However, throughout the seven-page article, economic issues in relation to the Bill are not discussed in any detail. Environmental objectives, dates for deadlines, and figures for abstraction volumes and penalties for abstraction offences are given, but no figures are given for the cost of implementation contrasted with the estimated benefits of the objectives set out in the paper.

The examples cited in the present paper show that it is not always apparent what meaning the authors attach to the use of either *sustainable* or *sustainable development*. In many cases it is not clear whether the word *sustainable* has been added as an ill-defined imprimatur, or as one which has been systematically applied to satisfy the three-dimensional test.

### 4. SCRATCHES ON THE ESCUTCHEON

Of all environmental decision making, the template of sustainability should be applied to transport and highways development. This must have been what the Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions had in mind when he said in his address at the Royal Geographical Society in 1997 that 'I will have failed in five years' time if there are not many more people using public transport and far fewer car journeys'. In June 2002, Whitehall officials denied that the Deputy Prime Minister had ever made a pledge to cut the number of journeys made by car.<sup>14</sup> In August of 2002 it was reported that car use had increased by 1% in 2001 and 2% in the first half of 2002.<sup>15</sup>

Alas, the ephemeral nature of sustainable development was quickly shown when Alistair Darling, the new Transport Secretary of State, adopting his own sustainable development principles, stated that he is now proposing, *inter alia*, to widen the M25 and the M1. The Government's Transport 10-Year Plan states that in addition to 'a bigger and better railway',

congestion will also be tackled by 'targeted improvements to the existing road network'.<sup>16</sup> According to the Plan this will involve 'widening 360 miles of trunk roads' and 'wiping out the maintenance backlog on local roads'.

Ignoring these two severe scratches on the shining escutcheon of sustainable development, the question must remain, how can these sustainable development tergiversations all be funded? Certainly the issues of funding should have been investigated at the time when these changes in policy took place. According to a Government announcement released in October 2003, 'Public money likely to be needed for roads projects is to be diverted to fill a £1.5 billion-a-year hole in the Government's rail budget'.<sup>17</sup>

Again we must examine the social dimension of sustainable development. When the Government announced recently that Network Rail maintenance work will no longer be contracted to private companies, are they really presuming that Network Rail engineers will be better than those employed by private companies? Given the skills shortage in the civil engineering profession, it would be interesting to see how much of the future work is actually carried out by the very same people, who have changed employer and possibly relocated. What important social issues are involved in those decisions? The resolution of industrial relation problems will certainly be more difficult in the future.

These inconsistencies and the piecemeal application of the triple bottom line do not help in maintaining the original respect for the term *sustainable development*, not only among the profession, but also among the public.

## 5. DOES SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT HAVE A FUTURE?

This paper has examined the term *sustainable development* and discussed its history and present use. Their application suggests that the terms *sustainable* and *sustainable development* are being used before a common understanding and definition have been properly established. Sustainable development should encompass at least three dimensions—social, economic and environmental—but the economic dimension is often ill-considered. There is a lack of consideration of economic factors in the Environment Agency's analysis of the Water Framework Directive,<sup>13</sup> and blurring of the financial analysis in the change in transport policy from Prescott to Darling.

But how can the Ministers be blamed when Brian Bender of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) states that 'our priorities are to get all of the headline indicators of sustainable development moving in the right direction [there are 15 of them], and industry has a valuable role in helping to achieve this'.<sup>18</sup> He might excuse the tergiversation from the elimination of cars on roads by another Secretary of State by saying that sustainable development is flexible and changeable according to a change in office or political party change in office. Political flexibility may be a part of the criteria for sustainable development, but this should be made clearly apparent to the public and accepted by environmental managers. Charged with the task of playing a 'valuable role' in helping to

achieve sustainable development, it is crucial that industry holds each government accountable for its policies. Industry must not find itself engaged in chasing unattainable, moving targets, and unless deserved, the industry will not like being the scapegoat for an incomplete achievement.

What is needed is consistency of meaning, consistency of application, consistency in examining the criteria, consistency of the results of inadequate criteria (i.e. a draft Directive or policy should not be agreed if it does not satisfy sustainable development in all three dimensions). Any move towards these will justify the research for and writing of this paper.

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