

## Just sustainabilities

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The ideas of 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' first achieved prominence among academics and international policy makers, together with policy entrepreneurs in Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), in the 1980s. They quickly became central concepts in policy, planning and development discourses, from global to local, especially after the publication in 1987 of the World Commission and Environment and Development (WCED) report "Our Common Future," which defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," and the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the so-called 'Rio Summit' or 'Earth Summit', which gave us Agenda 21 and Local Agenda 21, global and local sustainability agendas for the 21st Century.

Since then these terms, and variants such as 'sustainable communities', have become pervasive in government at all levels, amongst business leaders and in activist and civil society discourses, and there has been a massive increase in published and online material focusing on these topics.

The conceptions of sustainable development put forward by WCED and UNCED, while contested (e.g., Jacobs 1999; Bourke and Meppem 2000; Gunder 2006; Connelly 2007), imply a process in which reasonable human, material needs are met within ecosystem limits. Despite legitimate critiques regarding various and culturally specific definitions of 'development' and 'needs', Larrain (2002) describes, from a global south perspective, the concept of the 'dignity line' – a culturally specific minimum level of material consumption needed to allow a life with dignity. The ubiquity of the terms *sustainability* and *sustainable development* has also led to contestations over what is to be sustained, by whom, for whom, and what is the most desirable means of achieving this goal. To some, the discourse surrounding these terms is too all encompassing to be of any use. To others, the words are usually prefaced by 'environmental' and 'environmentally', as in '*environmental* sustainability' or '*environmentally* sustainable development'. The term 'ecological sustainability' is also sometimes used to emphasize the interdependence of species within this discourse.

The dominant discourse of sustainable development in Europe is, according to Smith (2003) *ecological modernization*, which is:

*"A discourse of eco-efficiency. Its primary concern is the efficient use of natural resources within a capitalist framework (Hajer 1995, Christoff 1996, Gouldson and Murphy 1997). Criticisms have been leveled at the lack of attention paid to social justice (both within and between nations) and the failure to conceive of nature beyond its value as a resource." (4)*

Some see sustainability and sustainable development as trendy, fashionable concepts

whose time in the limelight will soon pass. However, it is hard to see this happening when the terms have been around for over 30 years and are still generating a frenzy of interest in academic, activist and policy and planning circles. To still others, the discourse offers a sense of integrity and holism that is lacking in contemporary, reductionist, silo-based policy-making and planning (Davoudi 2001). Indeed, the trend is to talk of sustainable development policy making as '*joined up*' or '*connected*' policy making, that is, policy making in specific areas, e.g. housing, economic development, diversity or environment, with an explicit eye to its intersections, interconnections and effects on the policy architecture as a whole.

Two major challenges to achieving sustainability, sustainable development and more sustainable communities are the increasing scientization of sustainability, and the need to foreground the issues of equity and social justice. Despite the greater allocation of funding for research into the scientific aspects than the social scientific aspect, the 'science' of sustainability is not our greatest challenge. In almost all domains of sustainability, we know scientifically what we need to do, *and* how to do it. The problem is that all of us, whether in the global North or South, are simply not doing it. This is especially so for so-called *wicked problems* such as climate change: the challenge is not the science, but how do we shift the paradigm, the political and civic culture such that the will to act is prized by our politicians – and how do we inculcate *public* understanding such that the need for action is both supported and assured?

In part as response to these challenges, a growing number of activists and commentators in both the global North and South (e.g. Middleton and O'Keefe 2001; Adger 2002; Shiva 2002; McLaren 2003; Buhrs 2004) have commented on issues of equity and social justice, or what Agyeman (2005: 44) calls the '*equity deficit*' that still pervades most '*green*' and '*environmental*' sustainability theory, rhetoric *and* practice. Agyeman *et al.* (2002) note:

*Sustainability cannot be simply a 'green', or 'environmental' concern, important though 'environmental' aspects of sustainability are. A truly sustainable society is one where wider questions of social needs and welfare, and economic opportunity are integrally related to environmental limits imposed by supporting ecosystems." (78)*

Integrating social needs and welfare offers us a more 'just', rounded, equity-focused definition of sustainability and sustainable development than the WCED, while *not* negating the very real environmental threats. A 'just' sustainability is therefore:

*"The need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems"* (Agyeman *et al.*, 2003: 5).

While defining 'just sustainability,' we used the term 'just sustainabilities' because we acknowledged that the singular form suggests that there is one prescription for sustainability that can be universalized. The plural, however,

acknowledges the relative cultural and place-bound nature of the concept. This definition of *just sustainabilities* focuses fundamentally on four essential conditions for just and sustainable communities of any scale. These conditions are:

i) *Improving our quality of life and wellbeing.*

Improvement in people's wellbeing is essential for both justice and sustainability. As is becoming increasingly clear, our current neo-liberal model of economic growth cannot be relied upon to deliver wellbeing to the majority rather than a minority. Can wellbeing be delivered without continued economic growth? There is growing interest in the idea that there are emerging economic models, such as *co-production*, that might enable social wellbeing and flourishing. It refers to the involvement of the consumer in the manufacture of the goods and provision of the services they consume, thereby blurring the distinction between producer and consumer. One thing is for certain: humanity needs better yardsticks for measuring progress based on wellbeing than our current headline indicator: GDP.

ii) *Meeting the needs of both present and future generations (intra- and inter-generational equity).*

A key question is what is the relationship between material consumption and needs, particularly considering the extent to which justice and equity are needs? There is growing evidence (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, Piketty 2014) that inequality damages our capability for flourishing, our ability to meet our needs. Increasingly, human need for social identity is defined by our ability to consume. This is 'Bling' culture. How do we break this link, supplanting consumption-based social identity generation within a more just and sustainable framework?

iii) *Justice and equity in terms of recognition, process, procedure and outcome.*

Justice is not a simple concept. Different ideological foundations can lead to very different conclusions and outcomes: for example, *utilitarian* (justice as the most beneficial outcome for wider society), *egalitarian* (justice as meeting individuals' needs) and *libertarian* (justice as fulfilling merit) perspectives can differ radically. Sen (2009) takes this as reason to argue for a goal of reducing manifest injustice, rather than seeking perfect justice. Both Sen and Nussbaum (2000) suggest a central role of the notion of capabilities for flourishing. Nussbaum's full capability list includes: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment. Sen, on the other hand, suggests that communities must be involved in listing their own set of capabilities – more because such control over the conditions of life is necessary for justice, than because capabilities may be culturally specific, although this latter factor should not be ignored.

*iv) Living within ecosystem limits (also called one planet living).*

Despite several decades of research, the very concept of *environmental limits* remains controversial, especially in the USA. The Club of Rome report (Meadows *et al.* 1972), and in the UK *The Ecologist* magazine's 1972 'Blueprint for Survival', framed debate in terms of 'limits to growth' that stimulated very powerful and well-funded counter-arguments and rebuttals. By the 1990s, in public and political discourse around the world, the very idea of 'limits' had been discredited by the apparent failure of predicted shortages of natural resources to emerge.

However, ecosystem limits are very real (Rockström *et al.* 2009). Whether they constitute a fundamental limit to economic growth probably depends more on the nature of the economy than on the economy of nature. What is clear is that as constraints on natural resources have emerged, the capitalist economy has sidestepped them by shifting the crisis around in space, or between environmental domains. For example, in the US, the approach of Peak Oil has triggered the cry of "Drill Baby Drill", exhorting Americans to exploit oil in yet more remote locations, and to develop unconventional gas and oil sources through 'fracking' and tar-sands extraction, both of which involve significantly higher carbon emissions than conventional fossil fuels. As a result, apparent limits in resource availability have been translated into still greater pressure on the climate system.

The concept of 'Greenhouse Development Rights' (Baer *et al.* 2008) makes an allowance of emissions to meet basic needs, and takes into account the differential capabilities available to reduce emissions (as a function of disposable income) in attempting to determine globally just targets for emissions reduction. Typically, such assessment (e.g., Baer *et al.* 2008) concludes that rich countries need to make greater reductions in emissions than current emissions levels. In other words, as well as reducing their own emissions to zero, they need to also take responsibility for financing additional reductions in poor countries, or develop technical means to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, the so called 'Negative Emissions Technologies' (NETs).

Sustainability, sustainable development and sustainable communities are contested concepts on many levels. For the past thirty years they have been subject to eager and heated debate. Are they political constructs or rational, technical, or scientifically achievable notions? Are they 'destinations,' places that we will recognize when we get there, or 'journeys' in local civic participation, or both? Should they focus on a 'brown' agenda of poverty alleviation, infrastructure development and public health as many activists and academics in the global South have argued, or a 'green' agenda of wilderness preservation, greenspace provision and climate change, as many activists and academics in the global North would argue? One thing that is becoming increasingly clear is that the potential in these concepts will only be fully realized on two related conditions: First, that progressive activists in different domains should work together to build large scale, even global 'movements' (MoveOn.org (US); 38degrees.org.uk (UK); Los Indignados (Spain); MST (Brazil)), and second, if there is a shift from current reformist strategies toward a politics of transformational change.

Incremental, linear change based on reform is unlikely to seriously challenge the underlying structures that (re)produce injustice and un-sustainability.

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