

Symposium IV : The Adriatic Sea
“ A Sea at Risk , Unity of Purpose ”

Is Sustainable Sustainable?

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It will be my thesis today that the dogma of ‘sustainable development’ is inherently misleading, and is now deluding our mindsets in much the same way as the flat earth theory once did – but with implications which are infinitely more dangerous to our future survival.

Accordingly, I will refrain from the politically correct – and attempt to highlight how the once noble notion of ‘sustainable development’ has been diverted.

Despite all the rhetoric about basic needs and poverty alleviation – and despite several decades officially dedicated to development – the number of people in extreme or absolute poverty continues to increase.

The inclusive outcomes of the latest meetings in The Hague and Monterrey can hardly add to our optimism. This doesn’t augur well for Johannesburg.

The time has come to end what Kofi Annan has aptly described as ‘business as usual’. He is right in his analysis that ‘as our attention has been focused on conflict, on globalisation, or most recently on terrorism, we have often failed to see how these are connected to the issue of sustainability. That word has become a pious invocation, rather than the urgent call to concrete action it should be.’

The irony is that those who promote sustainable development often do so under the guise of providing benefits to the poor nations of the south. The fact remains, however, that 80 countries now have per-capita incomes lower than they were a decade ago, and the number of people living in poverty (those who earn less than \$1 a day) is stuck stubbornly at 1,2 billion, while those earning less than \$2 per day number almost 3 billion.

Someone on a daily wage of one dollar would take 109 years to earn what French footballer Zinedine Zidane is currently earning per day!

Sustainable development has been diverted in the following ways:

- I) The oxymoron of sustainable growth

Firstly by business – to become synonymous with sustainable growth – an oxymoron which reflects the conflict between a trade vision of the world and the environmental, social and cultural vision.

It has become a mantra for big business and multi-national corporations. Worse, it has unwittingly opened the door to a green backlash – the gradual hi-jacking of the environment movement by so-called ‘corporate realists’.

Even terms like ‘environmentalist’ or ‘conservationist’ are now not infrequently used to describe those who indiscriminately clear cut forests or kill animals for their skins. Such activities are now clouded in dubious euphemisms such as ‘yields’ or the ‘harvesting’ of natural and wildlife resources.

II) The ‘wise use’ movement

This leads me to the second negative evolution of ‘sustainable development’ into the term ‘sustainable use’ – an anathema conjured by the so-called ‘wise use’ movement to mask activities which are exactly the opposite.

It is the alibi which facilitates lethal consumptive use and which has regrettably infiltrated key international fora such as C.I.T.E.S and the I.W.C. ‘Sustainable use’ of marine resources means killing whales and ‘sustainable use’ of native wildlife has spawned a multi-million dollar ‘bushmeat’ industry, particularly in Africa.

‘Sustainable users’ hope to convince poor Africans and Asians that they should not kill wildlife to collect the equivalent of several years’ wages, while rich European and American trophy hunters kill the same animals for fun.

It is also the philosophy which has fragmented the movement – dividing to rule by divorcing ‘conservationists’ (serious and ‘scientific’) from ethical causes such as fur and circuses (emotional idealists). The fact that an activity such as whaling may be economically sustainable does not make it desirable, or acceptable ethically.

In a speech to I.W.C. delegates the assistant director general of the fishery agency of Japan – and his country’s I.W.C. commissioner – revealed that Japan had fishing agreements with eight countries, and has spent £400 Million in aid – ‘fishing for votes’ in the most literal sense of the words.

We have moved from a prudent, precautionary approach to a situation whereby our natural heritage has to ‘pay its own way’ and not form ‘an impediment to free trade’ if it is to have any chance of being preserved.

III) Corruption

Thirdly, the sustainable development mindset indirectly fosters corruption.

- Every year, businesses from O.E.C.D. (organization for economic and co-operative development) countries pay huge amounts of money in bribes to win friends, influence and contracts. These bribes are conservatively estimated to run to US \$80 Billion a year - roughly the amount that the U.N. has suggested is needed to eradicate global poverty.
- The trade in banned animal parts is second only to the trade in illegal narcotics. Indeed, it has become a lucrative and low-risk sideline for international crime syndicates, such as the Yakuza in Japan, the Poon family in Hong-Kong, or the South American drug cartels – especially as enforcement is relatively lax and discovery rarely involves more than a cursory fine. Already the trade has pushed species such as tigers and rhinos to the verge of extinction. Figures released last month indicate that the population of wild Asian elephants has been decimated by 80% during the last decade.
- An additional tragedy – again reflecting the drugs trade – is that war and the indiscriminate arms dealing that comes in its wake, invariably exacerbates the decimation of wildlife and its habitat.

IV) Corporate takeover of governance

The fourth negative impact of ‘sustainable development’ is that it fosters the corporate takeover of governance. Has the new hymn indeed become ‘he who pays the lobbyist calls the tune?’ Just look at the corporate quid- pro- quo exacted after George W. Bush’s election as president of the United States.

Richard Parsons, head of Time AOL speaking at the world economic summit meeting in New York has been cited as declaring (without apparently a hint that there could be anything abnormal or worrying in the statement) that: ‘once the church determined our lives, then the state, and now it’s corporations’.

Everywhere we hear about the advantages of an essentially market-based response to the world’s ills – philanthropy, self-regulation, corporate social responsibility and voluntary codes of conduct. None of these can be deemed an acceptable proxy for state responsibility, policy and control.

Even the U.N system has been jumping on the bandwagon through initiatives such as the ‘global compact’ with 50 of the world’s biggest and most controversial corporations. As ‘The Guardian’ commented, the U.N ‘appears to be turning itself into an enforcement agency for the global economy, helping western companies to penetrate new markets while avoiding the regulations which would be the only effective means of holding them to account. By making peace with power, the U.N. is declaring war on the powerless.’

V Consumption

Everywhere the emphasis seems to be firmly on money and conspicuous consumption. This brings me to a fifth side-effect of sustainable development philosophy which has fostered a wholly abhorrent notion of 'Sustainable Consumption'. This in turn illustrates just how far the concept of sustainability has been allowed to stray down the path of Orwellian newspeak.

'Sustainable Development', as defined following the Brundtland Report, calls not for a *continuation* of present growth patterns but a five to ten-fold *acceleration* thereof! But, surely, growth during maturity is either obesity or cancer.

800 million people are suffering from malnutrition while a small percentage of the world's population is choking on 'Fast Food'.

The food industry provides excellent focus for the themes of this session – including consumerism, global disparities and the breakdown of governance.

The opening up of a great world market in the name of free trade, the rules of the W.T.O and the orientation of grants, all promote the consolidation and centralisation of the food industry. 60% of the international food sector is controlled by ten companies dealing in seed, fertilisers, pesticides, processing, manufacture and shipment.

Business has gone global – but our systems of governance have failed to keep pace.

There currently exist more than 200 treaties of the environment – three-quarters of which have been ratified during the last thirty years. But, for the most part, the commitments made with such a media splash in Rio and elsewhere remain a dead letter. Worse still, the effectiveness of these agreements is all too often undermined by vague commitments and lax enforcement.

Could the subtle shift in emphasis from focus on the 'Environment' (Stockholm 1972) to 'Environment and Development' (Rio, 1992) have anything to do with this?

It may not be popular to emphasise just before Johannesburg, but many processes are already probably irreversible. I wonder if it is not already too late for 'Sustainable'.

Environmental crises, like climate change won't wait while we procrastinate for 'Conclusive' scientific data. The Gods' punishment for Hubris is blindness to warnings of impending doom.

Nor can we expect too much from technological lifeboats when the final S.O.S calls go out.

Must we be doomed to proceed by ‘Catastrophism’? To limit ourselves to dealing with symptoms rather than addressing the causes? Perhaps the time has come to impose a moratorium on new scientific or technological innovations that have potentially negative implications for the planet and society.

Indeed, science – or what I fear we should increasingly term ‘Corporate Science’ – always seems to be in on the verge of some major new breakthrough which, however ominous it may sound, is inevitably accompanied by reassuring noises regarding its ultimate potential to cure cancer, reverse climate change or end world hunger, if only we can keep the research grants flowing.

If the nations of the European union are prepared to surrender part of their sovereignty to promote *economic* unity, why can’t the nations of the world do the same to safeguard the *ecological* capital on which our survival depends?

Can’t we identify a new direction? One which places greater emphasis on ‘Regeneration’ rather than ‘Sustaining’ an untenable status quo, on sound ‘stewardship’ rather than ‘development’ and relentless pursuit of growth? On quality of life rather than living standards? On *being* more rather than *having* more? About living more *fully* rather than faster? About multiplying our *values* rather than our possessions?

Stewardship has the advantage of going beyond mere economic values – important as these may be – by restoring the equilibrium and giving parallel emphasis to the environmental, ethical and spiritual values that are vital ingredients of any true and viable civilisation.

Look at how quickly progress was made in reducing violence in New York once the neighbourhoods were re-connected and re-involved. The same goes for restoring the urban landscape, as we heard yesterday from the mayor of Tirana.

Even ‘Stewardship’, whilst already a significant improvement, could be taxed for its anthropocentric connotations. And besides, I wonder if any term – however nobly conceived (like sustainable development) – could not ultimately be diverted in the pursuit of human greed. Perhaps the world has had enough of slogans, soundbites and spin-doctors. Especially in an age when everything seems to have become urgent except for the essential.

We must strive towards a new mindset – one which will allow us to challenge what we are trying to achieve, a new pact with nature – one that restores our sense of balance, moderation and humanity.

Somewhere in our scientific confidence and economic gigantism, we have lost the plot – lost our vision as well as the spiritual unity which these gatherings so rightly emphasise.

What is needed is a new **renaissance** – on a par with that which moved us out of previous dark ages into a new spirit of enlightenment. As Einstein wrote, ‘you cannot solve the problems with the ways of thinking that led to their creation’.

If globalisation has any positive merits, the creation of a universal social consciousness must be the greatest among them. Thanks to global communications, we are instantly aware of the slightest outbreak of injustice, hardship or abuse wherever it may be occurring on the planet. This has facilitated the emergence and global organisation of alternative movements exemplified by the Porto Alegre initiative. Here lie the seeds of hope.

Just as the key to human sickness is often in the mind, so the key to the planet’s ills may be in our collective mindsets – the priorities we give to our lives and our lifestyle choices.

In the final analysis, change can only come from within ourselves, and the only truly ‘sustainable’ progress must be that of the heart.