

Sustainability

– Disentangling Sustainability

What is sustainability? What does it mean to be sustainable? The most commonly iterated is the Brundtland Report's definition of sustainability, which labels sustainable development as that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

I have often been confused by how to interpret this definition and, have witnessed many a failure at trying to illuminate it. However, this may not be surprising as although the definition may be clever, creative and cooperative, it is not necessarily readily comprehensible.

My interpretation of the definition is that it is to ensure that the needs of all humans that occupy the planet today are met (which is a tough, arguably unachievable task). Furthermore, we must achieve this act, and all the resources it takes to complete it, without affecting the way all humans that follow us meet their own needs. Pause, and take a deep breath. Surely this is the finest example of having the cake, and eating it too – another concept that has always puzzled me.

Having worked out what it may take to be 'sustainable', the key question is whether it is practical. Given that as soon as a baby is born (often, even before), it begins to consume, and we continue this ritualistic act until we die (and sometimes beyond) within a confine of limited resources, surely we cannot be 'sustainable' until all resources are renewable and renewed (every drop of water, every unit of energy, every ounce of metal etc). Furthermore, according to the Bruntland definition, we must learn to spread the resources so as to meet the needs of all the present. Even if all of this is possible, why would

we bother? (I am playing the devil's advocate here, and not eliciting letters to the editor) After all, it's not anthropocentric (nor intrinsic to the behaviour of any other creature) to consider the neighbouring tribe, lest the sons and daughters of all tribes to come. Darwin did not postulate the theory of survival of the most enlightened, but rather the survival of the fittest.

Whilst I believe the Brundtland definition is enviable and morally takes the highest ground, I am not sure that we as the present holders of our home are capable of even comprehending the task, let alone achieving it. We have, since the definition was crafted, gone backwards, not forward, with further rising carbon dioxide levels, increasing quantities of waste and dwindling water resources. There must be a cultural shift – one that this column is insufficient to explore as it is both a radical and mammoth task. One suggestion is that we establish a Global Commission on Sustainability, with several representatives of tribes to come - thoughtful leaders with the task of representing the future unborn generations. That is perhaps one way to hear the voice of the future.

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