

## Sustainable Development: 1987 to 2012 - Don't Be Naive, it's not about the Environment

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Purpose	In this paper we explore the concept of sustainable development through the lens of two United Nations publications. The documents, published 25 years apart, highlight how the understanding and enactment of sustainable development has changed over the course of that time. We highlight how sustainable development has been portrayed as an: epic adventure, the right and only choice, a challenge to categorical thinking, and a story of economic growth for human survival. While the tone of both documents differs, what is clear is from the publications is that sustainable development will not be achieved unless it is part of mainstream economic debate, supported by a holistic understanding of the entwined relationship between humanity, the environment and the economy.
Design/methodology/approach	As a discussion document the paper uses existing literature.
Findings	Sustainable development is a concept that is about perpetuating economic growth, but doing so through a non-categorical understanding of humans and nature relationships.
Research Limitations/Implications	As a discussion document, the key implication is that sustainable development is about economic growth.
Social Implications	If the key arguments in the paper are accepted, it offers a challenge to understandings that link sustainable development to protecting the environment. Because as discussed this notion is naive.
Originality/value	This paper is novel in that it reviews sustainable development through two key UN publications and thus goes back to a core treatise on the broad concept.

*Key words:* Sustainable development, our common future, human survival, economic growth

## Introduction

This essay provides a commentary on the concept of *Sustainable Development* across the space of 25 years. Examining these two United Nations (UN) publications provides a way to examine the changes in the meaning and understanding of the concept of sustainable development. The first document we examine is *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987). The second is *Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing* (United Nations Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Global Sustainability (UNSGHLPS, 2012). Many authors agree that sustainable development was brought to popular attention following the publication of *Our Common Future* (for example see: Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien, 2005; Kates, Parris and Leisorwitz, 2005; Lele, 1991; Mitcham, 1995; Mebratu, 1998; Redclift, 2005; Steer and Wade-Gery, 1993; Yates, 2012). The 2012 report, *Resilient People, Resilient Planet*, aims to "reaffirm...[the]...landmark report" that is *Our Common Future* (UNSGHLPS, 2012, p. 11). Consequently the two publications can be seen as a matching pair that illustrates the initial popularization and current state of the concept of sustainable development.

The commentary that follows brings forward the narrative aspects of the two publications. In doing so, we identify how *Our Common Future* has discursive elements of an epic adventure, whereas the language and discourse that is prominent in *Resilient People, Resilient Planet* moves away from heroism to discussions of practicality and measurement. Thus, sustainable development has moved from a heroic story to one that is based on pragmatic operationalization and business-like action plans. Our focus on the narrative aspects of the two documents is not an attempt to trivialise or develop a deconstructive critique of the concept of sustainable development. Rather, our aim is to enable further understanding of the concept of sustainable development.

In the following sections we provide a brief history of sustainable development. We then discuss *Our Common Future* and *Resilient People, Resilient Planet* in turn, drawing out

some of the key messages and narrative devices. In particular, we suggest that *Our Common Future* offers challenges to categorical thinking, whereby humans, nature, and the economy are considered as separate bounded wholes. Similarly, *Resilient People*, *Resilient Planet* is considered in terms of the change in tone from adventure to business planning.

### **A Brief History of Sustainable Development: The Human Survival Story**

While this paper focuses primarily on two UN publications we recognise that sustainable development as a concept does not begin and end with these two publications. For example, Shrivastava and Hart (1994) argued that sustainable development as a concept has its roots in the publication of *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962) and the environmental movement of the 1960s. During this time it was recognised that although the post second world war boom had brought significant benefits the boom had also realised significant negative effects on the natural environment (Shrivastava and Hart, 1994; Steer and Wade-Gery 1993; Yates, 2012).

While many authors cite the 1960s as the beginning of sustainable development, the concept is much older. For example; Shrivastava and Hart (1994) and Daly (1996) claim the roots of the concept lie within the societal impact of the closing of the western frontier in the United States of America in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The concept is much older and in fact, many aboriginal cultures and indigenous tribes have recognized the interrelationships between the natural environment, society, and the economy (Russell & McIntosh, 2011). Notwithstanding a history for the concept that may have begun in the 1960s or even earlier it appears that commentators agree the concept came to prominence with the publication of *Our Common Future* in 1987 (for example see: Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien, 2005; Kates, Parris and Leisorwitz, 2005; Lele, 1991; Mebratu, 1998; Redclift, 2005; Steer and Wade-Gery 1993; Yates, 2012).

Invoking a history that is intergenerational in its longevity is a classic narrative technique that helps to engage a reader and convey gravity, depth and a sense of scale and importance (Cummings, 2005; Guber, 2007). That Sustainable Development has a reported history that reaches back in time to potentially 100 years or more is an attempt to provide the concept with metaphorically, depth, weight and significance. Humans have authored the terms, policies, books and tomes. In this regard sustainable development is like all human conversations, policies, discussions and interactions; it is a narrative by humans and for humans, and by extension it is a human story about how humans may want to be; an aspect that will be explored later in the article.

### ***Our Common Future (1987)- An Epic Economic Growth Adventure***

This first snapshot focuses on *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987). The title, "Our Common Future", immediately sets a scene and denotes that what is about to be uncovered through the publication is something that is operating on an epic scale. This allusion to epic scale and a reference to the collective 'us' is reinforced in the opening sentence of the first chapter of the book. The Chairman's foreword begins by announcing that the authors were asked to produce "a global agenda for change" (WCED, 1987, p. ix). This global scale and sense of drama is continued by the description of the document being produced in response to an "urgent call by the General Assembly of the United Nations" (WCED 1987, p. ix). Urgency is emphasised by discussions of post Second World War construction, environmental disasters such as Bhopal and Chernobyl and depletion of the Earth's Ozone layer. Thus the document highlights the scale of the challenge humanity faces and by doing so it emphasises that all humans and all aspects of humanity (knowledge systems, economic systems, nation states, etc) need to be swept up into the pursuit of sustainable development:

*The challenge of finding sustainable development paths ought to provide the impetus – indeed the imperative – for a renewed search for multilateral solutions and a restructured international economic system of cooperation. These challenges cut across the divides of national sovereignty, of limited strategies for economic gain, and of separated disciplines of science (WCED, 1987, p. x).*

This description implies that sustainable development is not a choice. Rather, sustainable development is the “responsibility for meeting humanity’s goals and aspirations [i.e. finding a sustainable development pathway] will require the active support of us all” (WCED, 1987, p. x). Thus sustainable development is a common endeavour, operating on an epic scale, within which humans need to work “for new norms of behaviour at all levels and in the interests of all” (WCED 1987, p. xiv). The pursuit of this common endeavour is rewarding, because it will unleash a “new era of economic growth...[where that]...growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable” (WCED 1987, p. xii). Furthermore this future will echo the spirit of the 1960s – a decade when there was optimism, progress and “hope for a brave new world” (WCED 1987, p. x).

Sustainable development is reflected in the document as a set of challenges; an epic adventure; and a “typically modern idea of progress [as] an indefinite and continuous superseding of the past” (Mitcham, 1995, p.314). Thus, sustainable development is a grand adventure at the global scale. However, it is also a uniquely personal story, as illustrated towards the end of the foreword, where the scale is reduced and the focus returns to the individual. The message within *Our Common Future* is “first and foremost ... directed towards people, whose well-being is the ultimate goal of all environment and development policies” (WCED 1987, p. xiv). Thus, the text brings the concept down to an inclusive and personal scale that reinforces how sustainable development is not a concept that is solely about saving the environment, or saving particular species, but rather it is a human survival story. Thus, according to *Our Common Future*, sustainable

development is a concept for humans, a concept about humans and by extension it is a concept that also reflects on what it means to be human.

A second key argument developed in *Our Common Future* is the paradox of humans being significant, yet also insignificant. To explain further, the text highlights how the Earth, when viewed from space, is “a small and fragile ball dominated not by human activity and edifice but by a pattern of clouds, oceans, greenery and soils” (WCED 1987, p.1), thus humans are relegated to insignificance. Within the next sentence, paradoxically humans are indicated as being significant, as humanity’s “inability to fit its doings into [the patterns of the clouds, oceans greenery and soils] is changing planetary systems” (ibid, p.1) and this is causing “life threatening hazards...which must be recognised and managed” (ibid, p.1). This movement between humans as significant and humans as insignificant could be seen as “an instability bordering on equivocation, if not contradiction” (Yates, 2012, p.23). In actuality, however, it is reinforcing a call for human action. First, humans are insignificant because the Earth is amoral with regards to humanity’s survival. Hence, humans are driven to action because the human race’s survival cannot be outsourced to an amoral Earth – it is within the realm of their own actions.

The ability for humans to realise a future in which they thrive is reinforced in the text by reference to significant aspects of progress that have been made in the last 100 years or more. For example, progress that includes movement of information, movement of goods, efficiency in food production and advances in technology and science (WCED, 1987). After offering these indicators of progress, the text again offers a paradox. First it argues that humans are a constituent part of the Earth, thus collapsing any split between humans and nature. Then it argues that humans and nature need to work together, thus reinforcing notions of separation akin to a Cartesian dualism (Castree, 2002; Latour, 1999a&b; Newton, 2002).

To explain further, first, the text highlights how “from space, we can see and study the Earth as an organism whose health depends on all of its parts” (ibid, p.1). This statement echoes Lovelock’s Gaia theory (1996) but it also, importantly, points towards an understanding that views humans as component parts of the Earth. In this regard what is being indicated is that humans are not a separate category to the Earth. By extension this challenges any notions of a Cartesian dualism that splits humans and nature and treats them as separate categories. After offering this view of humans being intimately entwined with all that surrounds them, the document subsequently outlines how “ [humans] have the power to reconcile human affairs with natural laws and thrive in the process” (ibid, p.1). Thus the text once again offers a paradox; as now humans need to reconcile themselves with an abstract and separate nature. Thus, such a situation can only occur if humans are not entwined with nature, but rather the text now suggests that nature and humans are separate and distinct categories.

After dealing in paradox the focus moves towards economic growth. The text argues that sustainable development is a concept that can enable humanity to “build a future that is more prosperous, more just, and more secure” (ibid, p.1) where there is the “possibility for a new era of economic growth” (ibid, p.1) that will allow “both sustainable human progress and human survival” (ibid, p.1).

What *Our Common Future* highlights is that the ultimate aim of sustainable development is economic growth. In this regard *Our Common Future* can be seen as the ultimate economic story, whereby economic growth is not just required it is fundamental for enabling human survival. However, critical to enabling economic growth is the change in understanding that is alluded to in the paradoxical narratives. Hence, *Our Common Future* challenges conventional understandings of a human nature split, albeit this challenge is offered because in so doing it enables continued economic growth. Thus, there needs to be an alignment between theory and reality, an aspect that is explored in more detail in the following section.

## Challenging Categorical Thinking

*You are not separate from the whole. You are one with the sun, the earth, the air.*

*You don't have a life. You are life.*

Eckhart Tolle

One of the underlying narratives of *Our Common Future* suggests that in order to enable continued economic growth, humanity needs to move away from categorical thinking. This move is a challenge to the convention of modernity, which is the Cartesian dualism that separates the world into two categories: humans and nature (Castree, 2002; Latour, 1999a&b; Newton, 2002). In this way, humans are a separate bounded category and nature is another separate bounded category.

To explain further, *Our Common Future* outlines how “until recently the planet was a large world in which human activities and their effects were neatly compartmentalised within nations, within sectors and within broad areas of concern (environmental, economic, social)...[however] these compartments have begun to dissolve” (WCED, p.4). This narrative suggests a move away from categorical thinking towards a more holistic perspective. Furthermore “ecology and economy are becoming ever more interwoven into a seamless net of causes and effects” (ibid, p.5).

The recognition of entwinement offers a challenge in achieving sustainable development. The text outlines that the challenges sustainable development intends to tackle are both “interdependent and integrated” (ibid, p.9), and the issue for “most of the institutions facing [the] challenges... [are that they tend to be]...independent, fragmented [and] working to relatively narrow mandates with closed decision processes” (ibid, p.9). Thus Sustainable Development poses “problems for institutions, national and international,



that were established on the basis of narrow preoccupations and compartmentalised concerns" (ibid, p.9).

There is recognition within the text that there is a misalignment between humanity's ontology (reality) and epistemology (knowledge practices). This is demonstrated in a discussion of how there is the "real world of interlocked economic and ecological systems will not change" (ibid, p. 9). However, in order to achieve sustainable development it is also recognised that "the policies and institutions concerned must [change]" (ibid, p.9). Thus, the challenge is to reconcile a fractured, categorical epistemology with a non-categorical ontology. This challenge is also questioning modernistic thinking that separates humans and nature. What is being indicated in the text is that nothing is separable, nothing is bounded, and all the constituent components of the planet flow into each other. Thus, ultimately everything is related and in a relationship (Ingold, 2011). This entwinement is reinforced in *Our Common Future* through simple phrases such as "the environment is where we all live" (ibid, p. xi). This phrase is almost banal, yet behind it is a really important point. The phrase highlights that the environment is not something that is separate and at a distance to humans. Rather the environment surrounds humanity (Ingold, 2011) and therefore, humanity exists in the environment and is of it. Or as *Our Common Future* states "the environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs, and attempts to defend it in isolation from human concerns have given the very word environment a connotation of naivety" (WCED, p. xi).

In sum it can be argued that *Our Common Future* is indicating a move away from distinction and difference where things have intrinsic attributes and exist independently and in advance of their relations with anything else (Ingold, 2011). *Our Common Future* is moving towards a consideration that things are not "bounded entities set aside from their surroundings" (Ingold, 2011, p. xv), rather things are "a nexus of creative growth and development within an unbounded and continually unfolding field of relations" (ibid).

In propagating this move away from categorical thinking towards understanding everything as a field of relations, there is also a challenge to our understanding of what it means to be human. *Our Common Future* is pointing the reader to consider humans as a bundle of intrinsic and extrinsic attributes, a phenotype – a nexus of the relationship between genes and environment (Ingold, 2011). This challenges Darwinian reductionism where humans are considered as merely an outcropping of genetic code (Ingold, 1994 & 2011). Rather humans now need to be considered as an expression of a particular field of relationships between genetics and environment where each is not separable from the other. Consequently, while *Our Common Future* can be considered as an economic growth and human survival story it is also a text that has ramifications regarding our understanding of what it means to be a human. In turn it challenges our understanding of how humans should live and thus how humans understand themselves as a species. Specifically, “the environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs” (WCED, p. xi).

Although *Our Common Future* may challenge our understandings of what it means to be human, the text is clear that the goal is a “new era of economic growth” (WCED, p.1). As such the text offers a clear indication that sustainable development is where humans see themselves as economic agents who enhance economic growth prospects by thinking holistically. This move to new thinking will enable a new kind of economic growth which is “forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable” (ibid, p. xii). Thus, *Our Common Future* offers a somewhat reductionist perspective that economics and economic growth is key; And for growth to continue humans need to change their understandings. In doing this, only then, will “the abundance that modernity has...accomplished” (Yates, 2012 p. 22) be able to continue.

### ***Resilient People, Resilient Planet (2012) – A Business Plan***

The 2012 UN publication *Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing* is less ambitious than *Our Common Future* (1987). The new document reflects on and

formulates a new vision for sustainable growth and prosperity relative to the introduction of the concept of sustainable development in 1987. Thus, where *Our Common Future* sets a stage, *Resilient People, Resilient Planet* is necessarily less ambitious because it is a continuance of that which has gone before. The 2012 report underscores the acceptance of sustainable development by suggesting that “sustainable development provides the best opportunity for people to choose their future” (UNSGHLPS, 2012, p.6) and that the choosing of sustainable development will help in delivering a long term vision “to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality and make growth inclusive, and production and consumption more sustainable” (UNSGHLPS, 2012, p.6).

The document also frames sustainable development as a choice for humanity to make. Like the paradox found before in *Our Common Future*, this reiteration also offers humanity a paradox – the choice between a liveable future and the extinction of the human race – and therefore offers no choice at all. A point emphasised in the final chapter of the document which discusses how “sustainable development provides the best opportunity for people to choose their future” (UNSGHLPS, 2012, p.79) as at this “propitious moment in history...[humanity should]...make the right choices and moves towards sustainable development in earnest” (ibid, p.79). Thus there is no choice other than the path to sustainable development.

In a similar fashion to *Our Common Future*, the 2012 document, *Resilient People, Resilient Planet* argues that in order to deliver sustainable development there is a requirement for economic growth and a shift to “green growth” (ibid, p. 7) where social and environmental costs are fully accounted for and a new range of progress measures brought forward. The text argues that a key requirement to enabling sustainable development is “empowering people to make sustainable choices” (UNSGHLPS, 2012, p.6) and that “real choice is only possible once human rights, basic needs, human security and human resilience are assured” (ibid, p.6). Furthermore, to enable green growth requires transformation not just “tinkering on the margins” (ibid, p. 7), where transformation requires a new framework of institutions, a new set of sustainable

development goals, a sustainable development outlook report and the creation of a sustainable development council.

*Resilient People, Resilient Planet* argues that sustainable development has not been achieved and it reinforces that sustainable development is about economics. The text does this by outlining that progress towards sustainable development will only be achieved once it is incorporated into “mainstream national and international economic policy debate” (ibid, p. 12) as then it will be “much harder to ignore” (ibid, p.12). Thus if sustainable development, economics, and economists align, issues such as climate change can be avoided and sustainable development will be achieved. The text further emphasises the importance of economics by suggesting that climate change is largely a “market failure” (ibid, p.12). For example, the text indicates that issues such as inequality and food security would not occur if full cost benefit analyses were conducted.

*Resilient People, Resilient Planet* acknowledges that sustainable development is a “new paradigm for economic growth, social equality and environmental sustainability” (UNSGHLPS, 2012, p.6) as outlined in *Our Common Future*. In so doing, *Resilient People, Resilient Planet* offers a report card on progress towards numerous sustainable development goals. Where *Our Common Future* discussed a requirement for economic growth within a narrative of a grand and epic adventure *Resilient People, Resilient Planet* measures progress and offers 56 recommendations. These recommendations are necessary as “active follow up is...crucial” (ibid, p. 7) and there is a requirement to “advance... recommendations with other stakeholders” (ibid, p.7). In this regard, sustainable development is now framed as a management issue. The key focus is to “address the sustainable development challenge in a fresh and operational way [and] demonstrate that it is also rational – and the cost of inaction far outweighs the cost of action” (UNSGHLPS 2012, p.13). This new narrative moves away from emotional appeals and the text of *Our Common Future* that framed sustainable development as an epic adventure and quest. Rather, in 2012 sustainable development requires a rational

approach where that rationality has hardness to it because it is reinforced by “concrete recommendations” (ibid, p.12 – emphasis added).

As indicated 56 “concrete recommendations” are offered. These recommendations are discussed in three chapters of the report (1. Empowering people to make sustainable choices, 2. Working towards a sustainable economy and 3. Strengthening institutional governance). Twenty-six of the recommendations discuss empowering people and cover topics such as: reducing income inequality and gender inequality; enabling greater access to work opportunities for women; and fostering partnerships between government and business to enable an “ever-green revolution” (UNSGHLPS, 2012, p.40). The next 13 recommendations discuss working towards a sustainable economy. These recommendations cover areas such as establishing price signals, sustainable procurement policies, respect for human rights, and how governments and businesses should share risk and shape future investment patterns. The remaining 17 recommendations discuss strengthening institutional governance and discuss topics such as: the increasing use of scientific advisors; increased participation of young people in government; and the development of a UN sustainable development strategy.

Throughout the chapters the recommendations reinforce the importance of business organisations and in turn the importance of “corporate strategists” (UNSGHLPS, 2012, p.22). Corporate strategists are considered key agents in the development of new innovations, practices and technologies that can enable sustainable development. In this regard the 2012 report is clear that economic growth and in turn businesses are key to the achievement of sustainable development.

## **Discussion**

The two reports provide an effective illustration of how the discussion of sustainable development has changed over the last 25 years. *Our Common Future* set the stage for sustainable development and had a key aim of inspiring and challenging the status quo.

In contrast, *Resilient People, Resilient Planet* demonstrates how sustainable development has moved from an inspirational story to one focused on strategy and action. As discussed, *Our Common Future* uses a narrative that invokes historical understandings, common cause, the offer of progress, and ultimately a brave new world. In this regard, sustainable development was being conveyed as a theory of the end of the world. Thus, sustainable development is eschatology and deals in the “heuristics of fear and hope” (Pesquex, 2009, p. 231). This narrative has led some commentators to describe sustainable development as a slogan (Banerjee, 2011), an ideal like “love or patriotism” (Mitcham, 1995, p. 311), a cliché akin to motherhood and apple pie (Lele, 1991), or a catchall (Pesquex, 2009). In this way, sustainable development fails to realise choices that are offered; choices that would by default include some and exclude others. It is not to be unexpected that sustainable development can be considered a catchall, as it allows the concept to be bigger than the individual and the right and only choice. This is a common story telling technique that is used to enrol individuals to a cause or course of action (Guber, 2007). This use of simple story telling techniques also reinforces how the concept is a human construct, an aspect further reinforced by the plurality of definitions (Banerjee, 2011; Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause, 1995; Hopwood, Mellor and O’Brien, 2005; Lele, 1991; Shrivastava and Hart, 1994).

Sustainable development, as discussed by *Our Common Future* and *Resilient People, Resilient Planet*, is primarily concerned with economic growth and economics is placed as central to the enabling of sustainable outcomes and ultimately the survival of humanity. For example, *Our Common Future* highlights how where in the past there would have been concern about the “impacts of economic growth upon the environment...[the concern now is]...the impacts of ecological stress upon our economic prospects” (WCED, 1987 p.5). This point is reinforced in *Resilient People, Resilient Planet* where it is argued that sustainable development will only occur when the concept is embraced by the “mainstream national and international economic policy debate” (UNSGHLPS, 2012, p. 12). Through these two documents, it is possible to see that sustainable development is

and has always been a concept about economic growth and a requirement for a sustainable future.

To enable continued economic growth, *Our Common Future* highlights how humanity needs to move away from the “fractured epistemology” (Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause, 1995, p. 874) of categorical thinking understandings to a more holistic perspective. While this is alluded to in *Resilient People, Resilient Planet*, it is not discussed in the same depth. The new understanding indicated is that humanity needs to change its values, institutional behaviour and as such rethink its relationships with the planet (Banerjee, 2003, 2011; Gomis, Parra, Hoffman and McNulty, 2011; Hoffman and Sandelands, 2005). As *Our Common Future* highlights “the environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs, and attempts to defend it in isolation from human concerns have given the very word environment a connotation of naivety” (ibid, p. xi). Consequently sustainable development is not about saving ‘the environment’, because to do so separate humans from the environment. Rather with holistic understandings the environment is a relative term, relative to humans or any other being whose environment it is (Ingold, 2011). As such if ‘the environment’ is not a separate category and merely a relative term, it can never be complete, it is always negotiated. Therefore the environment is “forged through the activities of living beings...[and]...continually under construction” (Ingold, 2011, p.20). Because an environment and an individual are in a relationship together, an individual plus their environment is a nexus of growth and development (Ingold, 2011).

In sum, as told through *Our Common Future* and *Resilient People, Resilient Planet* sustainable development is a concept that will enable human survival through continued economic growth. In this regard sustainable development is furthering an agenda that is in essence a form of enlightened, economic, self interest (Banerjee, 2011). An issue with this is that sustainable development could be considered as just a commodity to be bought and sold (Banerjee, 2003; Byrch, Kearins, Milne and Morgan, 2007). However, the narrative of sustainable development, as told through the two documents is a call for

humanity to realise its "fullest potential as managers of the earth and our future on it"  
(Yates, 2012, p. 22).



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