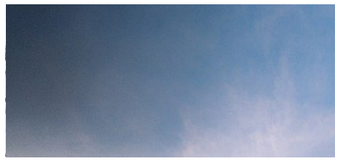
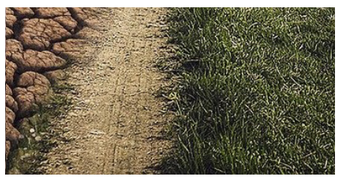
1



The Gap in the Ability to Sustain

Tony Fry



Split image with half depicting dry, cracked land (left) and half depicting lush greenery (right) (ELG21/Pixabay)

The issue with the common approach to sustainability

Since Al Gore's movie, An Inconvenient Truth, climate change has become a figure of popular consciousness, with governments and corporations of the industrialised world feeling increasingly pressured to express concern and take action. However, there is a vast gap between these moderate responses and the radical, immediate action that the problem of a rapidly changing global climate demands.
Of course climate change is not a discrete problem – it interconnects and exacerbates many others that can be gathered under the rubric of 'unsustainability' – desertification, deforestation, drought, ocean acidification and so on. Our aim here is to explore how we might think about the gap between rhetoric and action as it exists alongside what still remain confused articulations of the actual problems by those organisations who claim to be 'change agents' setting out to deliver 'solutions'.
The perspective to be adopted runs counter to the take-up of 'sustainability' by:

- government (who use it as a 'departmental and position-renaming tool' to cover mostly 'business as usual' and as a basis of policy that in no way challenges existing economic thinking and structures);
- by industry (who view it as a new market opportunity);
- and by education (who deploy it as a marker of progressiveness).

Certainly there are exceptions, but in the comparative scheme of things, and by the measure of the willingness to embark on fundamental material and dispositional change, not many.

The Time of the Problem

The impacts of climate change are not only already upon us, but they extend out into our future, no matter what is done now. Melting polar ice will alter ocean currents and thus alter weather patterns for decades to come; the two hundred year plus life of some greenhouse gasses ensures continued warming even if emissions levels are reduced; even if the planet's thermostat (deep ocean temperatures) were to be stabilised by the deceleration of global warming, the adjustment would take two hundred years; and to return oceans to a condition prior to levels of acidification caused by the absorption of increased levels of CO2 is projected to take two thousand years. Now while most of us can conceptually picture these historical events, we seem unable to gain a sense of their relative speed in relation to a passage of time.

Two questions thus frame human futures: 'how do 'we' (in all our modes of collectivity) place ourselves as change-agents before the massive imbalance between rate of growth of global unsustainability and the level of response, be it internationally, nationally, locally? And, how do the people of the world, especially the most vulnerable, learn to adapt to changing climatic circumstances?

...to return oceans to a condition prior to...increased levels of CO2 is projected to take two thousand years.

Not only is there an immense gap between the need for action and what is actually being done, but it is widened by every tick of the clock. In this context, and without hysteria, one can actually define unsustainability as humanity running out of time. De facto, those forms of defuturing human action that brought the problems of unsustainability into being are now running their course together with current activities that are worsening the situation. While one can identify some forms of instrumental action, like renewable energy generation and recycling which materially are very modest counter-responses to the leviathan of unsustainability, overwhelmingly the future is being negated by inertia. 'We' are simply not doing enough about ourselves and what makes us what we are. We continue to be the causal drivers of all those symptomatic figures of unsustainability that are designated as 'the problems'.

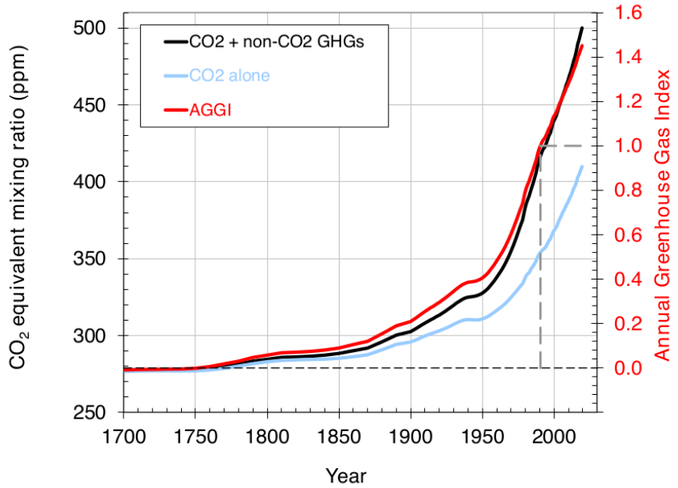
2

Penguin and polar bear standing on melting ice (Papafox/Pixabay)

Time, the Damage Trajectory and the Level of Critique

That event of time which is our lifetime gives us a totally inappropriate measure of worldly things in the medium of time. As a result, we human beings are extraordinarily bad at seeing things in time.

The trajectories of the forces of unsustainability which now threaten were unwittingly set long ago. It could in fact be argued that they commenced with the start of human settlement as it created circumstances that made it possible for human populations to live beyond their material needs and to create a surplus of tradable goods. This is to suggest that unsustainability is grounded in the productivist drive within the human psyche and the arrival of proto-producer societies. Certainly the discernable impacts of global warming have been shown to have been significantly increased by human actions (the generally accepted level is that industrialisation to date has increased atmospheric greenhouse gas levels by around 30%). Yet it is very likely that there were impacts on atmospheric conditions before this event. For instance, in the two centuries immediately prior to the first industrial revolution there was massive deforestation of Europe with the arrival of a charcoal-based iron industry and an expansion of shipbuilding.

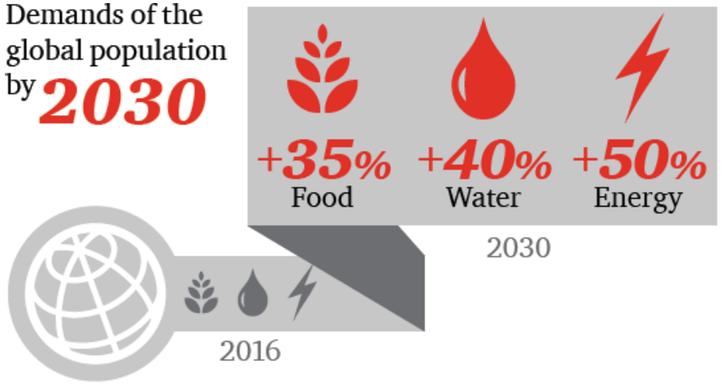


Increase of greenhouse gases over time (NOAA)

Over the expanse of global time, change has often been very gradual as well as rapid. Yet to see events in terms of variable velocity over a linear path is not appropriate. The event of time in which things exist is of course made up of an internal dynamic (the unfolding of the event) and the relative relation of one event to another. In the case of climate change, in one context, it is unfolding slowly over a vast expanse of years (say, the slow global 'thermostatic' effects of changes in deep-sea temperatures which take hundreds of years to influence ocean currents and thus weather patterns). In other circumstances, climate change is rapid, as when a 'tipping point' is reached (say, when fast-melting polar ice cools warm ocean currents and thus turns a landmass's climate from temperate to cold in a matter of a few decades). Both slow and fast 'events' of course exist at the same time.

One of the main popular perceptions about climate change is that it will happen gradually, in a measured incremental way, with solutions arriving quickly to 'save the day'. But this is patently not the case.

The damage already done to the planet's atmosphere will go on producing problems out into the future no matter what is done to mitigate them in the short term. Moreover, because what is being dealt with is a vast and complex process of huge systems, our ability to directly halt or modify the behaviour of these systems is limited and uncertain. So while, for instance, climate models might suggest it is possible to stabilise the level of global warming at three degrees above current levels by 2050 if major cuts in global CO2 levels are made within the next decade and a half, what does not get communicated is (i) this condition would have to maintained permanently and (ii) it would have to occur despite the growth of global population and the continuing industrialisation of many of the world's 'newly industrialising nations'.



Projected increase of resources from 2016 to 2030 (National Intelligence Council)

Economic Growth and Sustainment

Effectively countering the current condition of unsustainability means taking action that transcends the contradictory trend of governments and capital to simply add 'sustainability' to the current economic paradigm.

The global economic system is predicated upon the notion of continual economic growth, with production driving 'consumption.' The system has become totally disarticulated from meeting basic 'needs' of human beings (let alone the bio-physical conditions of human dependence). As is now well-known, an entire 'cultural industry' has been created to propel the manufacture of 'wants' across the total domain of consumer commodities. Within this logic, the current problem of the US economy gets characterised as a poorly performing property and labour market excacerbated by 'consumers' not buying enough 'stuff' because of a credit squeeze.

In a world of finite resources, to base an economy on the continual amplification of 'consumption' of materials, goods and services by an ever increasing global population is to ignore entropy. To place faith in eternal economic growth is akin to the impossible dream of building a perpetual motion machine.

The...[current] production...[is] 'eating' the planet's finite and renewable food resources at a faster rate than... can be replenished.

Current economic thinking is seriously flawed. To talk, for example, of "a consumer-led recovery" is to be oblivious to the defuturing force of economic consumption. It is more like the medical disease of 'consumption' that eats away at body parts. The consumption-centred economy drives forms of production that are 'eating' the planet's finite and renewable food resources at a faster rate than they can be replenished.

Sustainable development buys into the illogic of capital's economic perpetual motion machine. It is predicated on 'having your cake and eating it' – asserting that the global economy can continue on a constant growth path while sustaining finite resources and reducing environmental impacts. The concept rides on a lie. It rests with the same technological utopianism as idealistic inventors trying to create perpetual motion machines. The 'success' of anthropocentrically directed planetary domination is now arriving at its nemesis. The seed of unsustainability sown as soon as nomadic human beings abandoned 'the world' as their home and started to make their own world has now reached its apotheosis. It reigns in all its 'glory'. It is sovereign. The planet will survive via our auto-destruction (its own route to recovery) or by our learning how to sustain what needs to be sustained to sustain our selves and all we depend on.

5

All the media, education, scientific and design talk is of sustainability... talk of unsustainability is deemed as being 'negative'

Unsustainability and the Negative

All the media, education, scientific and design talk is of sustainability. The publicly circulating analysis of unsustainability, which has only been touched on here crudely and quickly, besides being weak and fragmented, is frowned upon in the media and 'polite' society. It seems it's not good form to talk of unsustainability; it is deemed as being 'negative', as 'doomsaying'. Such characterisations, uttered by defenders of the status quo and amplified by the media, have become hegemonic. Of course, there will always be those who wallow in bad news. But seeking to transcend this must not displace the necessity of a solid rigorous analysis of what actually threatens. For without this, without having problems clearly identified and defined, solutions are just not possible.

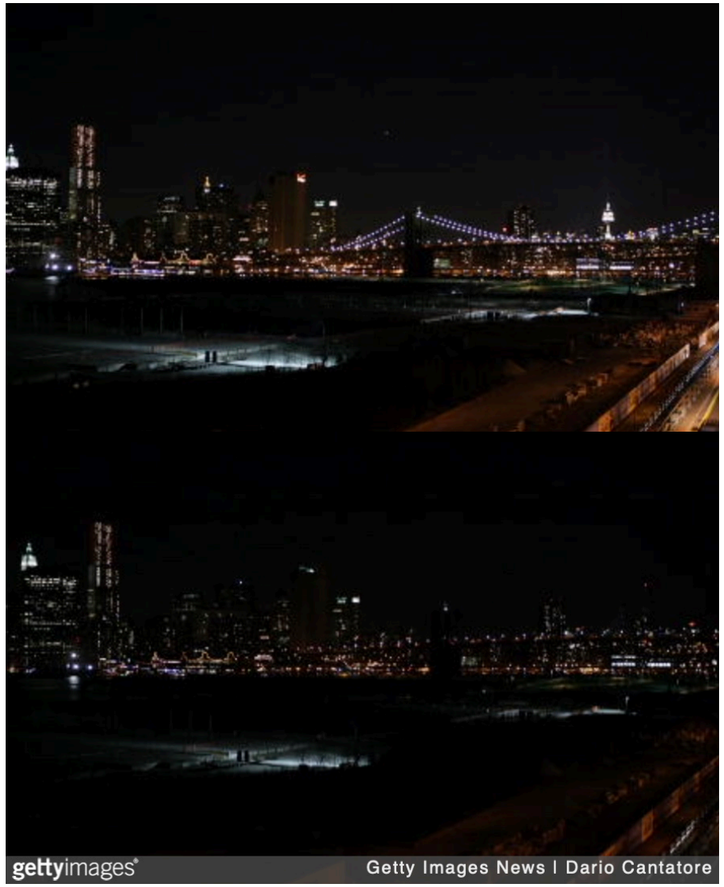
Thinking, Sustainability and Action

In the public sphere, the level of critique of unsustainability is philosophically vacuous and rarely transcends instrumentalism.

Dominantly, the problem is posited as purely empirical (climate change, resources pressure, population growth, unsustainable consumption and so on). There are widespread variations of faith (both conscious and unconscious) in resolution by a combination of: classical economics (whereby supply, demand and price adjustment regulate negative impacts); new technologies (that do less environmental harm); and humans becoming (instrumentally) smarter at solving 'the crisis' when it arrives. Many, perhaps most, 'environmentalists' are complicit with such thinking (as illustrated by the arrival and lingering afterlife, of the Club of Rome 'Limits to Growth' thesis and the broader notion of 'sustainable development').This kind of instrumental thinking, focussing on empirically-defined problems, is not capable of perceiving that unsustainability is fundamentally a problem that rests with the universalisation of the mind and actions of beings with anthropocentric and individuated ontologies (who simply do not see their own destructiveness).

Such beings did not arrive by evolution or accident. They arrived as a consequence of what the processes of modernity sought to bring into being. The establishment of 'self-centred competitive beings' (as the global norm) can be listed of one of modernity's main 'attainments'. What this means is that no matter what 'the market' does to 'deal' with the crisis (which has always been a dynamic of capitalism) the cause of unsustainability remains (i) fully ensconced in its host beings (us), (ii) symptomatically manifest at a planetary level with global political structures (especially sovereign nation states) that have no effective means to deal with it collectively (because nothing – even and especially the United Nations – can subsume their sovereignty). Meanwhile the profiteers will move in to 'cream-off' whatever they can from the situation (vis-à-vis carbon trading, which if it ever gets globally emplaced will only be when the impacts of climate change are already so entrenched that major disasters are insured).

To repeat my oft-stated position, current practices of sustainability based on the notion of sustainable development are largely 'sustaining the unsustainable'. So often an entity presented as 'green,' be it a building, product or service (as with 'eco-tourism') is an iconic deflection. It masks: the unsustainability of the impact of the business housed in the 'green building'; the impact of



Lights-out fest at the Brooklyn Bridge in New York (Dario Cantatore/Getty Images)

the total volume of the products produced; the travel impacts of getting to the eco-tourist destination. Additionally, such examples instance a dramatic expansion of the creation of buildings, products and services that unambiguously extend the unsustainable.

The cry always goes up: 'but we have to start somewhere' and 'reducing some impacts is better than reducing no impacts'. The response to the first is: 'the place to start is to confront the actual problem, no matter how hard it appears to be'; the response to the second is 'true, providing overall impacts are actually reduced.'

Obviously, there are some affirmative actions to acknowledge, but only after validation through critical inquiry that is far more rigorous than the likes of 'green rating' schemes for buildings and product 'green labelling'. Conversely, no matter the good intentions driving 'feel good', but essentially uncritical, actions (like 'earth hour' lights-out fests) these have to be named as such. Technical utopianism also requires exposure as a completely flawed path to 'environmental salvation'.

6

It is not possible to solve the political, socio-economic justice and psycho-cultural problems intrinsic to 'unsustainable human being' with technology. Certainly technology has a part to play, but it is a much smaller part than is generally thought. Placing absolute faith in smart 'green' technology is really dumb!

Framed by the remarks above, there are three priority actions to be seriously explored:

- making the invisible problems visible (that is, putting ourselves squarely in the frame as the problem, not merely part of it because of our values – we are 'our values');
- finding practical ways (by design) to move from mild reform of the status quo to radical transformations and paradigmatic shifts towards gaining actual sustain-ability;
- creating a model whereby 'sustainment' is sovereign and thus becomes the basis upon which to regulate 'commonality in difference' (sustainment does not have one expression, colour or culture).

Individually, we cannot make any of these things happen, but we can create the imaginaries, communicate ideas and agitate to insinuate them onto the political and cultural agenda (not least of education).

7

Three Paradigms

Forget ‘Sustainable Development’

As indicated, sustainable development is rejected as the means to bring the moment and the process of sustainment into being. It is wedded to the fantasy of the economy as perpetual motion.

A New ‘Development’ Paradigm

The economic, cultural and political developmental challenge for a new paradigm is change without net growth that can accommodate population expansion via mechanisms of redistributive justice, curbing material ‘consumerist’ excess while redressing poverty. This has to be underpinned with shared visions of viable and desirable futures that elevate ‘the common good’ as an affirmative condition of the inter-species reciprocity of ‘the community of life’ rather than as a moral order.

So what needs ‘development’ is a synthesis of ‘the common good’ with the quality of built environments, goods and services together with meaningful and rewarding labour. To begin to realise this objective is not a matter of absolute reinvention and transformation according to some kind of utopian dream. There are concrete starting places – and they centre on developing the processes of designation, discovery, selection, generalisation and elimination.

To elaborate: what has to be designated are the norms of what constitutes ‘the good’; next is the discovery of what already materially and immaterially exists that conforms to these norms; thereafter, it’s a matter of how that selected can be turned into replicateable type-forms. Alongside all this, is a complimentary activity: the elimination of what is ‘bad’ (again, according to pre-existing norms based on a measure of sustain-ability as opposed to, for instance, moral or aesthetic criteria). What is being indicated here is not just the need for less ‘stuff’, but new conditions of ontological designing (via action taken and the ‘desire transformations’ that this process of dematerialisation/rematerialisation can create).

The creative challenge of selection is enormous and it breaks the production/consumption binary. It effectively adds up to the editing of material culture and thereafter recovering as much as possible of the materials that made up what has been edited out of existence. For this process of elimination to happen as a designed practice of sustainment, it has to arrive as an ethos – an ethos of sacrificing material ‘goods’ (here ‘goods’ and ‘the good’ converge) to the future. The construction of an ethos can be seen as part of the formation of the conditions in which the ‘subject of sustainment’ is brought into being under the authority of a new sovereign power predicated upon sustain-ability.

As noted, the selection of ‘the good’ and the accompanying process of elimination is merely one starting point in the formation a new economy in which modes of exchange between human beings, their social and economic institutions and the processes of exchange that the life of all living organisms depend upon, become integrated into what has been called the ‘general economy’. Now, no matter how fanciful or impossible this challenge of ‘economic integration’ sounds, it constitutes one of only two options human beings have, if we are to have the possibility of an enduring future. Either we (as already natural/artificial hybrids) ecologically integrate with the biological ecologies of our current dependence (rather than surviving at their expense, which is increasingly the case) OR we dramatically extend the post-natural ecologies that in part already exist in the form of synthetic materials and become fully artificial (and thereby become totally technological entities). Scaling back the material footprint of the advantaged segment of humanity and bringing redistributive justice to the disadvantaged segment, combined with substantial efforts to advance ‘the common good’, including the realisation of the ethos of sustain-ability (and the level of sacrifice this implies) – all within a new model of exchange – opens up contemplation of a very different way of developing culture and economy than what currently exists. Change will happen, it always does. To understand this is to realise that the status quo will fall, it cannot surmount the force of change. Likewise, the future will be contested, it always is. In the contest between ‘sustainable development’ and the ‘development of sustainment’, what is at stake is our finitude. The question is: can we sustain ourselves by sustaining our conditions of dependence, for a short or long time? Sustainment is an anthropocentric preoccupation, in this respect ‘saving the planet’ is a means not an end!

None of the transformations sketched can occur without massive political changes. In particular it is essential to go beyond democracy and to what it is subordinated (another story for another time). To give a more situated example of the kind of change sustainment demands, I will conclude with some remarks on change, sustainment and education.

In the contest between ‘sustainable development’ and the ‘development of sustainment’, what is at stake is our finitude.

1. Education to know God

2. Modern knowledge

3. Education for sustainability

A New Education Paradigm (Paradigm Number Three)

The ideas of ‘the good’, selection and elimination need to be brought to education across the board. Currently, a great deal of education is an induction into error. We do not become unsustainable as individuals or as a species by accident but via inculcation. Education, from the nursery to the university, is a large part of this process. De facto we learn to become unsustainable. In so many forms,

8