

Sustainable development

... or is it unsustainable sustainable development, questions Stan Edwards

The promotion of sustainability is perceived as a muddy minefield existing primarily for the direct benefit of its promoters. There is a rational explanation for faux sustainable development, but you have to dig to expose it. Stan Edwards attempts to identify the sustainable development agenda that impacts us all and, as constructed, can be seen as a dragging anchor to economic growth.

"Confusion of goals and perfection of means seems, in my opinion, to characterize our age." Einstein

Why is it that whenever you mention sustainability everyone runs for a glossary of terms, whether it be hard copy or from the net? The hunt is always on for some guru who turns out to be a partially sighted leader of the dumb! The purpose of this article is to drive the reader to first principles – even to turning over all the walnut shells at once to expose a pea which is still in the trickster's hand.

Sustainability is a matter of perspective, and driven by the pendulum swing of public perception and opinion. In the nineteenth century, when the industrial engine room of the wealth of nations was in an embryonic state, the environment mattered little. At the end of the cold war, the attack on the global environment became the new enemy, and even this perceived problem now conflicts with economic stability that is at the forefront of the IMF and European Union's considerations.

It is useful to put some of these issues together with those concepts that we know well, and see if there is some coherence in the present approaches or at least some common ground upon which to build some kind of model.

Future wellbeing (Everyone has an angle ... Pythagoras?)

Definitions

It would seem that originally in the UK there was a (correct) notion that sustainable development (SD) is to do with future wellbeing. Starting with the UN Brundtland definition, it is important to state key definitions from the outset:

- "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."¹
- the first part of the Welsh definition is acceptable "'sustainable development' is the enhancement of the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of people and communities, achieving a better quality of life for our own and future generations, in ways which:
- promote social justice and equality of opportunity, and
- enhance the natural and cultural environment and respect its limits – using only our fair share of the earth's resources and sustaining our cultural legacy."²
- in England the NPPF (the Framework) defines SD in terms of Brudtland, and then amplifies the strategy in setting out "five 'guiding principles' of sustainable development – living within the planet's environmental limits; ensuring a strong,

healthy and just society; achieving a sustainable economy; promoting good governance; and using sound science responsibly."³ The Minister in his foreword to the Framework states that "the purpose of planning is to help achieve sustainable development", and also states that:

- Sustainable means ensuring that better lives for ourselves doesn't mean worse lives for future generations
- Development means growth. We must accommodate the new ways by which we will earn our living in a competitive world.

The Welsh definition fetters SD by over definition to an in-built socio/environmental political bias. Not only that, it isolates the economic dimension as, bizarrely, being outside of SD when plainly it should not. The English one is wider and integrated, and at the other end of the spectrum focusing on growth, and at least recognises the immediate national and local priority.

Integration of wellbeing in existing policy and law

Wellbeing helps in the understanding of the state of the guality of life now, and maintaining that state undiminished, if not improved, for future generations, whilst going through the development process. Unfortunately wellbeing is expunded from the Framework in England except in the Foreword, where the Minister refers to wellbeing in terms of the natural environment. The English government has chosen to replace wellbeing with three economic, social and environmental (ESE) roles (playing a part). These integrated and mutually dependant ESE roles are expected to achieve SD gains, sought jointly and simultaneously through the planning system. However, they and the system give no indication as to how the success of any one or more of these impacts on the others – lacking the assessment to provide a balanced approach to SD. In avoiding wellbeing, the Framework provides brief detail of the roles, but leaves us to weave our way through a convolution of text, to come to an understanding that the "guiding principles" influence the roles of the three ESE dimensions, leading to the assumption that future wellbeing is the objective of Brundtland.

England missed out on an integrated approach to the existing raft of wellbeing in policy and law. Wellbeing is a core pillar of Public Interest, and has appeared in many forms, including the Local Government Act 2000 and in CPOs. In CPOs, ESE in the form of wellbeing is to be found in empowerment and a compelling case in the public interest. The most readily recognised by practitioners is in Section 226 1A of the Town & Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended), where, without the contribution to any one or more of the social, economic and environmental wellbeing factors of the area, there is no qualification for the acquisition power to facilitate the development or improvement on, or in relation to, the land (Section 226 1(a)). The Government of Wales Act 2006 provides an empowerment that the Welsh Ministers may do anything which they consider appropriate to achieve any one or more of the promotion or improvement of the ESE wellbeing of Wales.⁴ The often poorly assessed "compelling case in the public interest" may also be considered in wellbeing terms, particularly when the UK

government's own definition of public interest states:

"the considerations affecting the good order and functioning of community and governmental affairs, for the **wellbeing** of citizens ... common to all members of the community (or a substantial segment of them), and for their benefit."⁵

Assessment of ESE wellbeing/dimensions/roles

Before we begin to consider how to effectively operate the governance applied to sustainable development, we must consider how we assess ESE. Based on the identification of ESE wellbeing, there should be an even rudimentary way in which these three impact on one another, and a simple matrix used in assessing CPOs may be acceptable. Essentially, the authorities need a tool to derive SD strategies, programmes and projects. Cross-impact is achieved through a matrix (note the adjusted PESTEL⁶ headings):

The ESE matrix

		1	2	3	4	5	6
		ECONOMIC	SOCIAL	ENVIRONMENTAL/ NAT.RESOURCES	POLITICAL	TECHNOLOGICAL	LEGAL
A	ECONOMIC	ECON/ ECON	ECON/SOC	ECON/ENV	ECON/POL	ECON/TECH	ECON/LEG
В	SOCIAL	ECON/SOC	SOC/SOC	SOC/ENV	SOC/POL	SOC/TECH	SOC/LEG
c	ENVIRONMENTAL/ NAT.RESOURCES	ENV/ECON	ENV/SOC	ENV/ENV	ENV/POL	ENV/TECH	ENV/LEG
D	POLITICAL	POL/ECON	POL/SOC	POL/ENV	POL/POL	POL/TECH	POL/LEG
E	TECHNOLOGICAL	TECH/ECON	TECH/SOC	TECH/ENV	TECH/POL	TECH/TECH	TECH/LEG
F	LEGAL	LEG/ECON	LEG/SOC	LEG/ENV	LEG/POL	LEG/TECH	LEG/LEG

ECONOMIC SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTAL	POLITICAL TECHNOLOGICAL LEGAL	WELLBEING INFLUENCERS	
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This is a simple shortened version focusing on the "ESE/wellbeing/ role" dimensions. For this purpose, "Community" may be considered as a social facet. Each category generates many issues that can be specifically utilised in report writing, or in deriving strategy and qualitative analysis.

The matrix then produces cross-impact categories:

	FACTOR	IMPACT	COMMENT – CROSS IMPACT
A1	ECONOMIC	ECONOMIC	Micro/macro, transport, sectors, national/local, finance, budgets
A2	ECONOMIC	SOCIAL	Economic circumstances impacting society/community
A3	ECONOMIC	ENVIRONMENTAL	Economy driving and impacting on environment
B1	SOCIAL	ECONOMIC	Society/community providing input into economy
B2	SOCIAL	SOCIAL	Society/community, levels, geography
B3	SOCIAL	ENVIRONMENTAL	Social impact on the environment
C 1	ENVIRONMENTAL	ECONOMIC	Environmental impact on economics
C2	ENVIRONMENTAL	SOCIAL	Pollution contamination, environment impact on society
C3	ENVIRONMENTAL	ENVIRONMENTAL	Cross impact, e.g. flooding measures v ecology

Wellbeing cross-impact categories

This is a simple enough matrix, but the function of assessing ESE wellbeing for SD is that it becomes the objective for promoting the optimal public Interest/benefit.

All that SD is trying to achieve is a positive move from one ESE wellbeing state to another without compromising the future. No one is saying that the ESE elements have to be equally balanced, but they all have to be assessed and considered in the decision making process. Those at the local level considering development will primarily focus on their specific needs, and rarely seek to accommodate national, let alone global, requirements. It is not possible here to delve too deeply into the assessments of wellbeing (sustainability), but some attempt should be made.

Assessment of sustainable development

If it was a straightforward assessment of cross-impacted ESE factors as it is operated at the very local level with CPOs, or even nationally with nationally significant infrastructure projects, it would be a simple matter of sustainable governance. However, it is not just at national and local level, but under the influence of international and global issues. In simple assessment, we see:



Some approaches at assessment have been made to assist sustainable governance:

1. Situational Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the cross-impacting of ESE dimensions (outlined above) can easily demonstrate the critical parameters for the decision making process. To date this is rarely undertaken at a local/national level.

2. Triple bottom line (TBL) – profit, people, planet

First coined in 1994 by John Elkington, TBL was derived from accounting techniques. This attempts to in some way quantify ESE for SD by primarily using carbon emissions/footprints as the environmental responsibility yardstick for assessing SD on all levels. Its application to date has mainly been at a global level, seemingly with a weighting towards the environment, but then again the answers relating to what has been measured depend on what has been paid attention to. TBL has weakness in its inability to be applied in a monetary-based economic system to make a comparison in monetary terms to measure the environment and society's benefits in the same way as you can with profit. **3. Cost/benefit analysis (CBA)**

This is used by Lomburg, who used it primarily in terms of global analysis, and is an adaptation of the usual public/private cost benefit approach to ESE, so that we have:

	NATIONAL	LOCAL	ECONOMIC	%	соѕт	%	Sustaina cost/ben
					BENEFIT	%	
Β			ENVIRONMENTAL	%	соѕт	%	
GLOBAL					BENEFIT	%	
			SOCIAL	%	соѕт	%	
			SOCIAL	70	BENEFIT	%	%

Sustainable development cost/benefit parameters

Application of WB/SD assessments

It would be comforting to expect from definitions and even limited range of SD analytical tools outlined above that such are applied to projects across the country, with each project being held to some meaningful scrutiny – nothing could be further from the truth. The Minister (England) says achieving the planning purpose of sustainable development must not simply be about scrutiny, and that it must be a creative exercise. However, this unfortunately gives an erroneous signal, that possibly scrutiny is not that important. This has seemingly given rise nationwide (in England and Wales) to an understandably cynical approach to SD, which can best be described as a DIY SD construction kit. Those promoting, for example, a superstore as a lone retail scheme, even if easily satisfying planning policy "needs" and "sequential" tests, when applied to town centre schemes, will lead to opposition. In order to make these schemes appear "sustainable", superstore operators (one in particular) have learned that councils can be easily won over by contributing social/affordable housing (social), plus some heritage/environmental elements (environment), in addition to their retail/commercial (economic) element. This accordingly attracts the label "sustainable development" merely because their have put together at least one of each of the magical SD ESE ingredients. With planning on their side, the developer/local authority partnerships rarely see the need for considering irritating cross-impact analysis leaving, for example, existing traditional town centre traders unable to counter schemes, causing additional collateral damage to existing high streets that were unassessed at the outset, and is tantamount to state encouraged (and in CPOs enforced) competition. The SD significance for future generations and the cultural heritage of town centres is somehow lost in SD expediency. All of this occurs because we are not attending to national/local SD in a structured way, and leaves a vacuum for the imposition of SD from a higher level - the greatest impediment in terms of SD comes not from within the UK, but without.

Hierarchy of sustainable development governance

"Big fleas have little fleas, Upon their backs to bite 'em, And little fleas have lesser fleas, and so, ad infinitum." Jonathan Swift⁷

The hierarchy of SD was alluded to above. This is where the SD of national and global/international interests impact at a lower level, being brought to bear through government policy due to international agreements, and where governments consider that the national (and through them global) interest is considered to be the greater public interest. The impact of these interests delivered through policy, although with the best of intentions, is rarely acceptable at a local level by the community. If we consider like-for-like, the global ESE factors should be assessed and agreed at that level. However, we do not have integrated global governance in terms of unbiased SD, so individual ESE dimensions of SD are passed down and impact at the next lower level and so on.

At what level?

Global and international impact

We see daily that global issues affect our lives, whether it be economic or environmental. The question is who assesses the global priorities, and the acceptability by those of individual sovereign state governments. We see the influence of the IMF, credit ranking and world/European banks in attempting to refloat the world economy, but then also see the UN promoting socio/environmental issues as priorities, claiming that they have the corner on sustainable development. At a national level, the government of a country can adjust its ESE priorities in a way acceptable to the electorate. However, globally there is no world government. This is not to say that there is no mechanism for socio/environmental impact – there is the UN Agenda 21.

Agenda 21 - United Nations

Agenda 21 is a non-binding, voluntarily implemented action plan of the UN with regard to SD for the UN, other multilateral organizations, and individual governments around the world that can be executed at local, national, and global levels. Its commission on SD acts as a secretariat and works "within the context of" Agenda 21. The United Nations pursues this Agenda, which is to do with climate change, resources and the socialist global redistribution of wealth. Many countries do not sign up because of the serious impact on an individual country's sovereign affairs, and the ability to govern effectively in a balanced way. The preamble to the Rio Summit in 1992 sums it up, as does its object:

Preamble

"Humanity stands at a defining moment in history. We are confronted with a perpetuation of disparities between and within nations, a worsening of poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy, and the continuing deterioration of the ecosystems on which we depend for our wellbeing. However, integration of environment and development concerns and greater attention to them will lead to the fulfilment of basic needs, improved living standards for all, better protected and managed ecosystems and a safer, more prosperous future. No nation can achieve this on its own; but together we can – in a global partnership for sustainable development."⁸

Objective

[A prime objective of Agenda 21 is] to promote patterns of consumption and production that reduce environmental stress and will meet the basic needs of humanity.⁹

In some countries such as the USA, there is diverse opinion. The Obama administration is effectively pro-redistribution and Agenda 21, whereas the GOP (Republican) is pro-wealth creation, "strongly rejecting the UN Agenda 21 as erosive of American sovereignty." China too has its own agenda of growth, seeing that its economic, therefore social, stability in terms of such a large population, prioritises attention to its own interests before considering the global environmental factors. Actually, in having over one third of the world's population in one country, it contributes to the global redistribution of wealth alone, in-house.

Ineffectiveness of carbon emission control and footprints

Whereas many of the population have been encouraged to fear climate change and associated environmental factors, the truth is that it is only a small part of a wider socio/environmental agenda. In SMART¹⁰ terms it has been demonstrated that restricting carbon emissions is an unachievable and unrealistic method of impacting climate change in a required time frame. However, what it does provide is a measurement for taxing global wealth and growth in line with Agenda 21.

Bjørn Lomborg, a Danish professor at the Copenhagen Business School, is well known for his book "The Skeptical Environmentalist."

In 2002, Lomborg and the Environmental Assessment Institute founded the Copenhagen Consensus, which seeks to establish priorities for advancing global welfare using methodologies based on the theory of welfare economics. He campaigned against the Kyoto Protocol and other measures to cut carbon emissions in the short term, arguing instead for spending money on research and development for longer term environmental solutions, and on other important world health problems. In 2012, at the UN Conference on Environment and Development, Lomborg stated, "Global warming is by no means our main environmental threat." Lomborg accepts the reality of man-made global warming, but finds that forecasts of climate change of six degrees by the end of the century are not plausible. He supports the position that global warming exists, but CBA as calculated by the Copenhagen Consensus ranked climate mitigation initiatives low on a list of international development initiatives. In 2010, Lomborg summarized his position on climate change - "Global warming is real - it is man-made and it is an important problem. But it is not the end of the world." Measures to cut carbon and methane emissions, such as carbon taxes, came bottom of the results list, partly because they would take a long time to have much effect on temperatures. No matter whether global warming is man-made or not, the question is whether such a threat can be fixed at local (or even national) level. It seems that without the agreement of all nations, it is unlikely that limiting the carbon footprint in the UK will have any impact at all. Some argue that it is all political, and more to do with the UN's attempts in respect of the global redistribution of wealth through "cap-in-trade", with richer countries buying up poorer countries' carbon emission guotas.

Local and national

This is a different matter. We have been through attempts at preservation (which conjures up the idea of pickling environments in a jars), conservation (harmonising the environmental and economic programmes) through to sustainability. Even though global SD is unrealistic and unachievable, there are opportunities to integrate the ESE dimensions in the public interest in a responsible way.

Levels of SD governance

	ENVIRONMENTAL	ECONOMIC	SOCIAL	Comment
GLOBAL	High	Medium	High	Suggested UN Agenda 21 position. High impact on sovereign states
NATIONAL	Medium	High	High	Suggested England position (focus on growth — housing) varies with emphasis of national interest
LOCAL	High	Medium	High	Suggested localism balance – varies with each local authority/community focus

We are left with the distinct impression that carbon emissions, in not being able to realistically achieve a change in climate within a given time, are now merely a tool for measuring wealth and economic growth. We know that if something can be measured it can be the basis of a tax, and in this case a tax on wealth and growth – effectively a tax on capitalism.

Wales - a case study on adopting Agenda 21

There is always a problem of global intervention in the sovereign affairs of a nation. It is of even more concern if that nation actively

encourages it. The Welsh Government has launched its White Paper in respect of the Sustainable Development Bill, seeking to ensure that sustainable development is at the heart of everything they do, and building on their strong commitment. They see the Sustainable Development Bill as the next stage in their devolution iourney, setting out in legislation the delivery of a governance framework for a sustainable Wales, and the strategic direction for sustainable development ensuring decisions taken demonstrate real outcomes. Looking behind this rhetoric and deeper into the details, the truth is guite bizarre. However, when the Welsh Government mentions SD, it is from their definition of it skewed in favour of social justice and the environment. I refer to the earlier Welsh definition which leads to erroneous thinking that the economy is outside SD. The bias in Wales comes from stakeholder groups promoting the environmental signing up to the United Nations Agenda 21 and the associated Summits. Wales seeks to be legally fettered by the environment under the banner of sustainable development. It would be an unimaginable argument in Greece.

Most embarrassing for the Welsh Government is their learning curve in funding affordable housing, which is not just the cost : value disparity due to the recession, but the burden of the cost of unrealistic environmental standards and regulations which have the effect of restricting growth. Wales seems fettered to the financial cost of pursuing environmental change when the national and local priorities cry out otherwise.

The Welsh approach to SD Indicators

Due to the built-in weighting to social justice/environment, it makes for incoherent and distorted analysis of SD indicators, and where an inappropriate and over-specified definition of SD has caused strange results, in that although ESE wellbeing is central to its SD definition, they are not individually mentioned in coherent alignment as indicators. Local authorities, in the absence of sensible SD indicators, use these blindly. Wellbeing is only measured in terms of health. It leaves the perception of an unsustainable ideological bias towards global social and environmental factors.

National SD policy and legislation

Sustainable Development Bill – Wales

So, why the Bill? The Welsh Government have the principles of global sustainable development as policy in the document "Planning Policy Wales – One Wales, One Planet", aligning not with national or local sustainable issues, but with Agenda 21. National and local policies of ESE wellbeing are well catered for in our democratic system, and it is argued do not need the excesses of global Agenda 21. In having its own law-making powers, Wales proposes to enforce an environmental bias, making it legally binding in respect of all facets of public life. The EU has signed up to Agenda 21, and it has an arm, "Inspire", to promote changes in behaviour and attitudes positively in favour of the environment - England falls within the EU embrace in this area. This Bill seeks a Welsh body with legislated powers to advise on and monitor the promotion of the principles within Agenda 21, particularly the environment. The main thrust of the proposal for the SD Bill is an approach openly based upon Defra's 4Es in "A framework for pro-environmental behaviours", and the proposal for an environmentally orientated "independent" body to drive forward that framework using social marketing, a form of propaganda,

to achieve it. The Welsh Government have said that they want sustainable development to be the **central organising principle**, placing a stronger sustainable development duty on not just itself, but also the wider devolved public service.

The consultation in respect of this Bill has been sheltered from the general public. The promotional events getting to this stage have contained very little economic commercial input, and the events in respect of the White Paper are not intended for the general public, but for sustainability stakeholders and representatives of the public service that would be directly subject to the duty. The fact is that the general public have an interest in the opportunity cost impact on services such as health, education and to the economy. The usual academic/political paternalism still prevails, and wider public awareness is too dangerous to the success of the Bill for the consultation to be extended into the hands of good old Joe Public. If you turn over all three of the Welsh sustainable development walnut shells of social, environmental and economic wellbeing, you will find no pea! The environmental behavioural pea is up the sleeve of the Welsh Government.

SD England

"O to be in England with its laws and policy there, And whoever wakes in England sees some SD unaware."

In England, there is no such move towards a big-brother organisation to see global SD principles embedded as behaviour moulding in the national psyche, although there are the economically punishing parameters of the Climate Change Act 2008 (CCA), the key provisions of which are:

- a legally binding target of at least an 80% cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, to be achieved through action in the UK and abroad. Also a reduction in emissions of at least 34% by 2020. Both targets are against a 1990 baseline
- a carbon budgeting system that caps emissions over five year periods, with three budgets set at a time, to help us stay on track for our 2050 target. The first three carbon budgets will run from 2008-12, 2013-17 and 2018-22, and were set in May 2009. The government must report to Parliament its policies and proposals to meet the budgets, and this requirement was fulfilled by the UK Low Carbon Transition Plan
- creation of the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) this new committee will submit annual reports to Parliament on the UK's progress towards targets and budgets. The government must respond to these annual reports, ensuring transparency and accountability on an annual basis. The CCC was established as an independent, expert body to advise the government on the level of carbon budgets, and on where cost effective savings can be made.

The previous UK government passed the Climate Change Act 2008, attempting to improve carbon management and a transition towards a low carbon economy in the UK. It attempted to signal internationally a commitment to taking its share of responsibility for reducing global emissions in the context of developing negotiations on a post–2012 global agreement at Copenhagen in December 2009. It set ambitious, legally binding targets and an institutional framework to meet them. At the very time this Act came into being, the world plunged into recession and the world economy began to become a priority. The UK have now been wrong-footed on a number of counts:

- the validity as to whether climate change is man-made
- theLomborg Factor
- increasing costs on industry at a time that growth is the priority

a tax on carbon emissions that does little to affect climate change.

An attempt was made by the incoming government in 2010-2012 to change the Act, but it has been left as it is. There is some hope.

"The best way to get a bad law repealed is to enforce it strictly." Abraham Lincoln.

The CCA is embedded within the NPPF definition of SD but is not too obvious. The policy states a presumption in favour of SD with a focus on growth, which is the national priority at this time. However the national policy and Localism Act 2011 leave many people in society unprotected from the cynical mixing of SD ingredients. The government, in its proposed Growth and Infrastructure Bill, will leave itself the opportunity to impose housing development in targeted areas by direct planning access to the Minister. This is where one can understand that national priorities can be imposed through a democratically elected government. England still has, however, self imposed carbon emission targets imposed through the EU and its CCA commitment to Agenda 21. So, even though carbon emissions and footprints are being discredited as affecting climate change in the next century, England still has to pay its taxes for infringement. The people of Wales may have their own problem paying the tab for the luxury of being globally environmentally friendly and for a costly body to enforce pro-environmental behaviours.

Summary

There are mighty distortions in SD created by faulty definitions and alignments provided by some self-serving agendas. Those who attempt to bring a measure of realism are described as short-termists. However, as the long term is quite illusory, and even predicting tomorrow can be fraught with problems, trying to reach for an environmental moon may mean pulling a lot of economic muscles. After all, is not the long term always a succession of short term decisions? For the pragmatic British, the answer has to be "best fit" SD – there is nothing better than a good fudge!

Footnotes:

- Brundtland World Commission on Environment and Development. "Our Common Future, Chapter 2:Towards Sustainable Development." Resolution 42/187 of the United Nations General Assembly
- 2. One Wales: One Planet Consultation on a new Sustainable Development Scheme for Wales November 2008 (PART ONLY)
- https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/ file/6077/2116950.pdf
- 4. Government of Wales Act 2006 C32 Section 60
- 5. Office of the Information Commissioner (QLD) Information Sheet Public Interest Balancing Tests in the Freedom of Information Act Issue Date: 5 February 2003
- 6. Political Economic Social Technological Environmental Legal
- 7. The Siphonaptera" is a nursery rhyme based upon "On Poetry: a Rhapsody" (1733)
- 8. Preamble Agenda 21 United Nations Conference, Rio De Janeiro, June 1992
- 9. Agenda 21, Chapter 4, Objective 7A
- 10. Specific Measurable Achievable Realistic Time

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