

Rethinking the United Nations' concept of sustainability

In an era of accelerating climate change and deadly environmental crises that impact people from Guangdong to Alberta, along with the rest of life, 'sustainability' has become a global catchphrase. Touted by myriad businesses and institutions, it evokes images of clean air, abundant forests and a future in which we can all prosper on a thriving planet.

When the United Nations (UN) debuted its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015, the document referenced the word 'sustainable' more than 20 times within its stated goals to tackle everything from poverty and hunger to biodiversity decline and climate change (UN, 2015). While commendable for their breadth and optimism, these aims also exposed a core problem in the organization's approach to social, economic and environmental philosophy.

Jason Hickel, an anthropologist at the London School of Economics, points out that in order to eradicate poverty through the existing model of free market capitalism, the global economy would need to expand to 5 times its present size (Hickel, 2015). A similar analysis, exploring hypothetical rapid economic growth of poor countries to catch up to the average high-income country, estimates that this would require the resources of 3.4 Earths (Hickel, 2015). And this latter estimate does not take into account the need to leave a fair share of the one Earth we do have for the rest of life.

Therein lies the greatest contradiction within the SDGs: In a world whose economies thrive almost exclusively on industries which drill, deforest and pollute, how can the SDGs simultaneously hold nations to the goal of poverty eradication while requesting they do so 'sustainably',

when there's nothing sustainable about the engines of growth?

They can't. Mankind cannot save the Earth and itself while churning out relentless economic growth.

While this contradiction seems obvious when explicitly stated, it's often masked by the language of sustainability, rendering the term 'sustainable' little more than a flimsy bridge between the disconnected concepts of mankind and nature, and the developed world and the developing. This artificial disconnect lies at the core of UN thinking and is as old as Western philosophy itself.

The dominant Western worldview has for centuries made distinctions between 'man' and 'beast', creating an artificial divide between the 'natural world' and humankind. Unfortunately, the separation of these spheres has been to our global detriment.

Extractive capitalism has long lacked constraining ideas of interconnectedness. Instead, it has left us with the indelible concept of nature's bounty as a free resource to be tapped at will to meet the demands of human consumption. Even as these demands have grown and the worlds from which resources are extracted and those in which they are consumed draw together and begin to overlap – even as new poverties of water, air, land, climate and biodiversity emerge – this binary has persisted with the word 'sustainability' slapped on as a Band-Aid.

The binary, itself, however, has never been effectively challenged. Even as scientists and indigenous peoples protest against it through research and lived experience, governments, businesses and bodies like the UN still fail to operate from a stance of interconnectedness.¹

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“The United Nations must first tackle its dualistic thinking before it can broach issues of sustainability and ponder the more radical change that such a concept truly entails.”

Consider the 2014 Fifth Assessment Report by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014). At first pass it reads as an urgent case for changing how we interact with the planet within the global capitalist system, upon which human society currently depends. However, close inspection reveals the persistence of problematic dualisms that mask the dire consequences of our current trajectory.

The report notes that global warming above 2°C (3.6°F) will have detrimental impacts for “disadvantaged people and communities” (IPCC, 2014: 13). This language isolates the impact of climate refugees and ecological destabilization from the rest of the world, distancing one from the other and potentially affecting policy and practice within so-called ‘advantaged’ societies.

Furthermore, the report, much like the SDGs, approaches sustainability from an angle which seeks to maintain the ‘low cost’ of natural resources via unproven methods of carbon capture and environmental ‘restoration’ in the face of accelerating extraction. This reinforces the concept of man outside of nature and ignores the fact that the cost of natural goods is rising owing to scarcity and environmental externalities. In doing so, it denies that we are married to those price hikes, whether we like it or not.

In our interconnected world, there is no containment of ‘advantaged’ and ‘disadvantaged’, nor is there any harmony between relentless economic growth and

planetary limits. Humans are only a small part of nature; we cannot realistically extricate ourselves from each other or from nature, or adapt it to meet our demands. Moreover, we should be ethically compelled to reduce our negative impacts as a species on the rest of the planet, as it has a right to thrive independent of the benefit that we derive from it.

Though the UN has neither military nor financial might, it possesses the power of normative ideas, which are conveyed through the language of documents like the SDGs and climate change reports. The UN must first tackle its dualistic thinking before it can broach issues of sustainability and ponder the more radical change that such a concept truly entails. ■

Notes

¹ The UN's Harmony with Nature programme (see www.harmonywithnatureun.org) offers an important counterpoint to this trend (although its name does still imply a dualism).

References

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