Current understandings of sustainable development depend on a broad inter-relation of ideas and perceptions on social, enconomic, and evironmental issues. **BY SCOTT GRAHAM**

The sustainable development discourse:
A view through the social constructivist lens

ALTHOUGH A COMPLETE INTELLECTUAL history of the discourse of "sustainable development" and its sister term "sustainability" is out of the question,[1] it is useful to highlight the major elements constituting the discourse or, in other words, examine the talk and text about the idea. This kind of exercise, more than anything, is an invitation to explore an alternative way of thinking about sustainable development.

Because all discourses evolve, how we understand the evolution of the sustainable development discourse is contingent upon the frame of interpretation that one employs. One way of peeking into how the sustainable development discourse has been created is to employ the social constructivist lens.

What is the social constructivist lens?

Simply put, the social constructivist lens is a way of looking at the processes and results of human efforts to create meaning for expressions of language. It involves a consideration of the actors who create the language, the techniques for deploying it, and the processes by which its meanings are contested and transformed. In *The Social Construction of What?,* Ian Hacking argues that when something is said to be "socially constructed" this is a shorthand way of saying that in the present state of affairs X is commonplace and therefore appears to be inevitable.[2] The sustainable development discourse appears to be inevitable to us due to the efforts of individuals and organizations to create meanings for the discourse's expressions.

Thus, to say that the sustainable development discourse and the goals toward which it strives is socially constructed assumes that ideas with respect to sustainable development are created, re-created, and instantiated by proponents of sustainable development in particular socio-historical settings. This means that the components of the discourse—concepts, principles, policies, theories, research reports, conversations, declarations, and so on—are built up through the appropriation of the possible meanings of the term. This method of thinking about sustainable development involves understanding the creation of the sustainable development discourse as both a historical and an ongoing process that will continue to be re-created by people acting on

1 See the following article for a more comprehensive overview of the sustainable development discourse: Wagle, S., (1998), "Sustainable development: Some interpretations, implications and uses," *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society,* 13, 314–323.

2 Hacking, Ian (2001), *The Social Construction of What?*, Harvard University Press, 12.

their interpretations and their knowledge of it. The articles on sustainability in this issue of *SPARC BC News*, including this one, all fall into the historical trajectory of the collective efforts to add to the sustainable development discourse.

A glimpse of the building process

When we talk about sustainable development, we are talking about a particular kind of development. In idealistic terms, development is a planned change towards a perceived improvement in the quality of life of people in a place. The question that rises next is: How does the descriptor "sustainable" modify or put constraints upon how we understand development? Although contestable, general consensus exists around the definition of sustainable development advanced in the 1987 Brundtland Commission report *Our Common Future*. The report defines sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This definition contains two key concepts:

- The concept of 'needs,' in particular the essential needs of the world's poor to which overriding priority should be given; and
- The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.[3]

It is in *Agenda 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development* that the nations of the world endorsed the doctrine of sustainable development and created an approach to integrating its basic principles into development activities.[4] Out of *Our Common Future* and *Agenda 21*, a plurality of meanings and methods of measuring sustainable development have been socially constructed. There are at least two central factors that influence how sustainable development is conceived and measured.

The first factor relates to how different methods of analysis are used to conceive and measure the sustainability of a given development. In the case of welfare reforms, for example, a data analysis can lead decision-makers to the conclusion that cuts to welfare is a development that will contribute to the increase and sustainability of economic activity. A different method of analyzing the same data, however, might conclude that an increase in particular kinds of spending on welfare will better serve the sustainability of economic activity. The different outcomes of analyzing the same data complicate efforts to understand which conclusion would most contribute to the sustainability of the economy and, moreover, presupposes that there is one method that is inherently better suited to produce the outcomes and understandings we seek.

The second principal factor contributing to the social construction of sustainable development relates to the first and is the goal that prac-

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3 World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). *Our Common Future*. Oxford University Press, 43.

4 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992). *Agenda 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development*. Rio de Janerio.

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titioners and academics alike strive toward: innovation. For practitioners, a common goal is to tailor-make sustainable development action plans, implementation strategies, and evaluation tools to address the issue in question. As such, practitioners are required to adapt old practices to work in new contexts. Similarly, academics that produce novel research about sustainable development often employ their research findings as a resource for expanding contemporary notions of sustainability. Such intellectual innovations expand what we can know about sustainable development by adding to the discourse new variations of the theme and thereby make possible the integration of such insights into future sustainable development initatives.

A central dialectic in the sustainable development discourse

Although the major builders and the tools of their respective trades have contributed to the creation of several dialectics in the sustainable development discourse, I will draw our attention to a key dialectic between critical theorists, proponents of neo-classical economics, and business consultants that drives change within the sustainable development discourse.[5]

Critical theorists from a wide range of disciplines have worked to highlight the issues inherent to the sustainable development thesis, especially as it is conceived within the neo-classical economic development model. To risk oversimplifying this model is to claim it involves maximizing aggregate economic growth by adopting either the capitalist 'free market' or the planned 'state monopoly capitalist model' (or appropriate combinations and variations thereof). Such an idea assumes that, in the long run, the 'trickle down' effect of growth will make the inequality of wealth distribution palatable. Critics, however, point to the high poverty rates among minorities and lower-class citizens in industrialized nations as evidence of the failure of the neo-classical approach. After more than two hundred years of economic growth, these groups remain poor—and the critical theorist might quip that the tide does not raise all boats.

Such critics claim that principles of sustainability as defined in *Our Common Future* and *Agenda 21* are incompatible with the kind of development that results from the functions of the neo-classical economic model. Thus, any effort to marry the two is to embark upon an impossible task. From this slant, what is needed is the refinement of economic theories, practices, and legal constraints that harmonize with the principles of sustainable development.[6]

The popular counterpoint to the demand for innovations to the neo-classical economic model and its corresponding functions is the assertion that economic growth is the key to sustainable development and there is no better model for the job. Simply put, the cost of sacrificing economic growth at the expense of social and environmen-

5 Broadly defined, a dialectic is an exchange of propositions and counter-propositions resulting in a synthesis of the opposing assertions.

6 Govindan, Parayil (1998). "Sustainable development: The fallacy of a normatively-neutral development paradigm." *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 15(2), p. 186.

tal consideration will not result in the improved living conditions sought by critical theorists, and could in fact worsen conditions by depleting the economic base that currently sustains people. One synthesis of these opposed views is the metaphor of the triple bottom line as advanced by green-minded business consultants.

Traditionally, companies and economists alike have used the metaphor of the 'bottom line' as a profit figure. In trying to assess a company's economic bottom line performance, accountants gather, record, and analyze a wide range of numerical data. This metaphor has been expanded in recent years to reconcile principles of sustainability to economic activity. In his book *Cannibals with Forks*, John Elkington works to include two more 'bottom lines' that companies ought to consider when planning, implementing, and measuring their activities: the environmental bottom line and the social bottom line.

The environmental bottom line involves the concept of natural capital, which is typically thought of as coming in two major forms: critical natural capital, which includes any element in the environment that is essential to the integrity of a given ecosystem, and renewable natural capital, which consists of elements of the environment that can be renewed. Inquiries into a company's environmental bottom line will involve asking questions like: What forms of natural capital are affected by our operations, and are the identified forms of natural capital sustainable given our activities and other pressures?

The social bottom line involves the concepts of human and social capital. Simply put, human capital involves the public health, skills, and education of a population group, whereas social capital involves the ability of people to work together for common purposes in organizations. Organizations concerned with the social bottom line will ask the following questions: What are the forms of social and human capital that are imperative to our ability to become a sustainable organization? What is the role of our organization in creating and sustaining the identified forms of social and human capital?[7]

Albeit not comprehensive, the above mini-map of the this central dialectic in sustainable development points to how it will continue to be played in the discourse, intersecting with other dialectics and resulting in innovations in what is known and understood about the subject. Regardless of future directions in the discourse, the fundamental principles of sustainable development remain imperative to our thinking about the kind of world we want and the kind of world to which future generations are entitled. In closing, I offer a recycled piece of this discourse that I believe provides a succinct description of the basic spirit of sustainability: "A sustainable society which is unjust can hardly be worth sustaining. A just society that is unsustainable is self-defeating."[8] ■

7 Elkington, John (1998). *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business*. New society publishers, p. 69–96.

8 Birch, C. et al. (1979). *Faith, Science, and the Future*. Preparatory readings for a World Conference Organized by the World Council of Churches at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Cambridge, Mass.