



The Centre For Business Relationships,  
Accountability, Sustainability and Society

## Comment and Analysis

Sustainability and Equity

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## **SUSTAINABILITY AND EQUITY: A RESEARCH AGENDA TO UNDERSTAND WHY CHANGE DOES NOT HAPPEN**

**Dr Peter Wells**

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". As definitions go, it is concise, compelling and robust – and applies with equal force today as it did back in the 1980s. This definition was constructed with a view to meeting human needs in the context of a gross disparity between the rich 'North' and the poor 'South'. There was a moral and humanitarian imperative to ensure that billions of the world's poorest could access the fundamentals of existence: An agenda of social equity on a global scale.

The context has changed in many important ways. There has been startling economic growth in many of the countries of the South, and attendant increases in material prosperity. On many key indicators such as infant mortality, life expectancy, educational levels, and quality of diet there have been remarkable gains despite rapid population growth. There has also been a series of milestone events going back to Rio in 1992 in which concerted and effective action has been sought. Tragically, Copenhagen in 2010 stands as mute testimony to the difficulty of constructing a coherent multinational response. So in terms of the environmental indicators, crisis merely seems closer than ever. Carbon emissions continue an apparently inexorable rise; fish stocks dwindle; deforestation abounds; habitats, ecosystems and species wane and disappear; and humanitarian emergencies continue to flare. The only real certainty appears to be that as our scientific understanding grows, so the enormity of the challenge becomes ever more readily apparent, while the time available for remedial action becomes ever-shorter.

It is time to ask why change has not happened. This is a difficult question, as it penetrates into cultural attitudes, social structures and personal beliefs but it is our duty to insist more stridently for answers no matter how uncomfortable they may be. In part the deluge of data is overwhelming, and we become information-rich but knowledge-poor, and in terms of deep understanding absolutely impoverished. This, allied to a sense of powerlessness and with cognitive dissonance in behaviours, results in individual and collective lack of action. We may even have been distracted by the relentless insistence on evidence-led policy, of quantification masquerading as understanding, when what we need now is principle-led policy.

The answers are unlikely to be found in technology. Eco-efficiency has been overwhelmed by over-consumption. Global resources go a little further, and there may be a little more time in which to resolve the dilemmas we face, but these are just palliatives. Business has been all too keen to embrace the agenda of innovating out of a crisis because this is the agenda of growth and added value, and it subsumes sustainability back into one dimension while neglecting the crucial economic and social issues.

Neither is the emergent environmental crisis simply reducible to the mantra that there are 'too many people'. Much of the world's poor live so minimally, and in such deprived conditions, that their environmental impact is miniscule. Rather than focus simply on how much is being consumed, the focus needs to be on who is consuming.

The last twenty five years have also been witness to the triumph of neo-liberal economics as a political ideology. The collapse of the former USSR and Comecon bloc, the integration of China into the global economic system, and the continued penetration of market capitalism into many other countries and aspects of life, orchestrated by entities such as the WTO, World Bank, IMF, and the OECD has been buttressed and exploited by financial institutions. The economic crisis that was initiated in the United States in 2007 and then spread

might have offered a chance for a fundamental re-appraisal, an opportunity for an alternative, sustainable agenda. Indeed, this crisis continues to unfold with an era of austerity threatening many previously 'advanced' economies. Yet if anything the crisis saw the aggressive re-assertion that the prescription of more economic growth, more production and more consumption was the answer. Narrowly monetarist agendas have been imposed, pushing more into poverty, while the elite sections of society continue to prosper. Governments and those on the political right assert that we can no longer afford sustainability, but have to concentrate on the basics of wealth creation.

All of which brings us to the key problem of the last twenty five years: Wealth distribution. Around the world, with some notable exceptions, there has been a polarisation of wealth. Not enough is known about the environmental burden imposed by the very rich. An interesting example is that of personal aeromobility. While attention is put on the growth of low-cost airlines, the hidden story is that of a dramatic rise in the use of personal aircraft, helicopters and charter flights to allow the very rich to avoid the everyday humiliations and tribulations of contemporary air travel. The wealthy can enjoy displaying their conspicuous minimalism should they wish, with solar panels on their mansions and electric sports cars on their drives but there is every reason to believe that the wealthy impose a disproportionately heavy environmental burden, with hugely profligate lifestyles. There are two other consequences associated with wealth: Their lifestyles are often portrayed as desirable, to be emulated by the whole population which, were it possible, would clearly be catastrophic for the planet; and those with wealth and power have a vested interest in maintaining their contemporary lifestyles. In other words, they may be the most important single reason why change does not happen.

In turn this means that the research agenda has to change. We understand the dimensions of a sustainable society, and in many cases of the transition pathways to help us towards such a sustopia. Yet we have a very under-developed understanding of how (beneficial) change is thwarted, delayed, deferred, diluted and reversed. An understanding of the barriers to change is

vital, so that these barriers may be confronted and overcome. In short, we need to put equity back at the heart of the sustainability agenda.

Wells, P. (2011) Sustainability and Equity: A research agenda to understand why change does not happen, **International Sustainable Development Research Society Newsletter**, 4, 22-23.