

Sustainability:

Critical Reflections on an Apparently Common-Sensical Term

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Introduction

In March 20223, the sixth synthesis report penned by the International Panel of Climate Change (Lee et al. 2023) was released. As earlier, the assessments are dire reading and yet again witness of trends going into the wrong direction on almost all important accounts; increase in CO2 emissions, underperforming attempts at cutbacks, rising temperatures on a global scale, missed targets, unpaid compensations, and more. Key politicians and decision-makers from Biden and Xi to Lula and Lagarde publicly lament lack of progress and issue new promises to implement decisive steps to change course. The numbers are clear. Apparently, *we* have to do something. *We* have to act, and act now, before it is too late. There is no second Earth – or, as the likes of Bezos and Musk would put it, at least not for all of us. So, what are *we* waiting for?

On the next UN Climate Change Conference suitably held in Expo City in the carbon-based sheikdom of Dubai in late 2023, new promises will be made, new goals will be declared, and new unprecedentedly ambitious and binding targets will be set. Then, everyone climbs into their comfy jets and flies off to reach the upcoming World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2024 to repeat their unflinching commitments. And like this the merry-go-around seems to continue with too little progress, too late. Meanwhile, I shrug my shoulders and rush off to catch an intercontinental flight bringing me to Australia to join a panel on the Anthropocene and, who knows, maybe glue myself to some important artwork. Because this is real. *We* have to do something.

In this short essay, I will offer some critical reflections on the term sustainability criticizing discourses of climate change and possible responses in politics and policies. I will trace the etymological roots of sustainability to uncover previously little discussed dimensions of meaning and connect these findings to a critique of the implied *we* in the sentences above. My argument is that, by pretending climate change just happens (the term does not imply agency of any kind) and by urging an implied *we* to act, responsibilities are blurred, and accountability is made impossible. Without naming a culprit, however, you can't assign blame, and without assigning

blame you can't enforce an actual solution that will make a measurable difference – you can only continue to lament lack of progress while touring the globe in search for a magic wand *we* can use to simply make the problem go away.

A Strategy for Global Change and Adaptation? Sustainability and Its Discontents

In light of the increasingly dire state of global climate, species, and life in general, sustainability has emerged as a concept promising to offer viable ways out of the current mess. Widely endorsed by various UN agencies, the World Bank, the OECD, and other regional and global institutions, the concept readily lends itself to policy makers, PR-agencies, and NGOs alike to focus activities and develop frames for international agreements and treaties. In the following, I will critically discuss this term and attempt to flesh out both potentials and pitfalls in its application.

Etymologically, the terms sustainability is derived from the Old French term 'sustenir' that again goes back to the Latin verb 'sustinere'. Both the Old French and Latin roots hold a variety of meanings including to maintain, support, nourish, keep up, bear, endure, and continue. One little discussed class of meaning emerges from the early 14th century French use of the term that circumscribed among other things the ability to 'endure pain, hardship, shock without failing or yielding'. This notion seems to have influenced the German equivalent of sustainability – 'Nachhaltigkeit' – that emerged during the 18th century as a term used in forestry to describe and quantify ways of exploiting timber without endangering long-term prospects for profit by depleting woodlands beyond repair (Pritz 2018: 81).

Two issues seem to emerge as key to the concept of sustainability then: 1) the ability to endure hardships and 2) a tight connection to economic thinking based on exploitation of natural resources. Given this background, does sustainability as a concept to guide policies in attempts to combat climate change simply ask us to endure the hardships to come, bear the inevitable burden, and try as best we can to continue as before? Or is it possible to hark back at other early meanings such as support or nourish that de-emphasize the dimension of supposedly inevitable endurances, hardships, and pain for the sake of enduring profits?

How has sustainability been used in discourses on climate change policies? As Purvis, Mao, and Robinson (2019: 681) write, "sustainability remains an open concept with myriad interpretations and context-specific understandings". This volatile nature of the concept, of course, makes its political implementation difficult as it can lend itself to a variety of politics and initiatives that not

necessarily serve similar or even reconcilable interests. When demanding the sustainability of a certain policy, project, investment, or idea, key questions in need of asking are: sustainable for whom or what? And in which contexts? Sustainability is a contingent term. It lacks fixed coordinates. And this makes its operationalization for political initiatives aimed at combating climate change difficult.

One important starting point for the use of terms derived from Latin *sustinere* in discourses about environmental threats at a global scale is the Club of Rome's by now seminal report *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972). Here, the authors outline the inevitable aporias of a dominating economic paradigm that is built upon the assumption of unlimited never-ending growth. They then put a "state of global equilibrium" up as an alternative where "the basic material needs of each person on earth are satisfied and each person has an equal opportunity to realize his individual human potential" (p. 24). The report summarizes this preferred state of global affairs as a "condition of ecological and economic stability that is *sustainable* far into the future" (ibid.; my emphasis), thus articulating an implicit meaning of the term that is reminiscent of the German 'Nachhaltigkeit' and its origins in the organization of economically viable resource exploitation in forestry.

In the *Limits to Growth* report, the authors acknowledge that they do not have solutions to the presented problems and aporias created by the currently dominating economic system based on exploitation and supposedly unlimited growth. They limit themselves to describing the dire departure point for a further development of human societies and a planetary ecosystem given the prevailing economic and political inequalities and idiosyncrasies. The report merely hints at sustainable development as a potential alternative but leaves it open how such a system might look like, how it can be organized, and how a transition to such a new economic paradigm might be achieved. The authors insinuate a necessity to look and move beyond capitalism but say nothing about how we might be able to get there.

Now, more than 50 years later and well into the climate apocalypse, we are still in this same situation. We can describe the global repercussions of overconsumption and exploitation with ever-increasing accuracy but remain incapable of implementing measures that can address the core of the problem and tell us how to realize the elevated goals set on climate conferences. Apparently, the concept of sustainability doesn't really help us to address the very material and economic contradictions that form core of the problem. Can the reason for this be the implied

we I criticized in the introduction? Our engrained incapability of naming the culprits and benefactors behind the current global mess? That we have forgotten that capitalism is not a god-given order but a willfully implemented political-economic system that implies the climate apocalypse in the name of sustaining profits and the wealth of a few powerful people and nations? And without this recognition, we cannot shape a solution effectuating real changes that matters.

Throughout the 1980s various green movements and parties gradually forming in the aftermath of the Club of Rome report took up demands for post-growth societies. At this time, ever more accurate descriptions of the rapidly deteriorating state of the planet's climate and ecosystems are accompanied by increased focus on sustainability as an alleged quick-fix and a solution that apparently allows us to combine the contradictory demands for economic growth and environmental responsibility (see e.g. Brundtland 1987 or Barbier 1987). The concept seemingly enabled *us* to maintain the fantasy of being able to bring together economic growth, increasing returns of investments, and soaring profits with ecological well-being and stable societies. One might ask, if the concept of sustainability at that time, indeed, was much more than a neoliberal PR-brand designed to undermine the far more radical demands of a green protest movement bent on changing the core parameters of Western capitalist societies or on removing capitalism altogether. No matter what, we all know where we stand today and therefore who prevailed in this unequal struggle between global responsibility and profits.

One reason for the ease with which sustainability can be instrumentalized for a variety of widely different purposes is the notorious undertheoretization of the concept. According to Purvis, Mao, and Robinson (2019: 682), discourses and models of sustainability have been characterized by a "lack of semantic clarity and confusion of competing terms". While being a disadvantage in academic procedure, precisely this ambiguity and unclarity made it possible to lend the term to a huge variety of different interests and policies. Resting on a fuzzy conceptual basis that allowed for various interpretations and uses, it was easy to insert the term into global consultancy, PR, and marketing without a proper problematization that could have drawn attention to inherent contradictions and underlying problems. The so-called pillar conception of sustainability - an accessible, easy-to-understand-and-use model digestible to global policy makers and mass audiences alike is indicative of this.

One description of the pillar-model of sustainability can be traced back to a keynote speech held by M. Adil Khan at an international sustainable development conference in Manchester, UK, in

1995. Here, Khan (1995) distinguishes between three dimensions or pillars of sustainability that, according to him, form the core of sustainable development – economic, environmental and social sustainability (for visualizations of Khan’s model and various spin-offs in Purvis, Mao, and Robinson (2019:682), see figure 1). Khan then subdivides each category into further variables that intersect in a center where sustainable development within the frames of the given socio-economic system becomes possible. The model seems to suggest a core of conflict-free common interests between widely opposing, if not outright contradictory, social and other forces that could enable tension-free global change to save the planet without imposing unbearable economic costs on anyone and without necessitating fundamental changes to the currently dominating economic system and its received power relations.

When looking more closely at Kahn’s proposal, it quickly becomes apparent that there, indeed, are severe tensions if not outright contradictions between the various subcategories brought together in his model. In essence, it runs the danger of reproducing a pure imaginary of neat inclusiveness and common interests between different constituencies be they classes, societies, nations or else. The model suggests that contradictions between interests of capital owners, stockholders and workers can be overcome without greater problems, that colonial legacies can be disregarded or overcome at little costs, and that contradictions between the environment and global economic growth can be reconciled. There it raises its ugly and politically debilitating head again – the big global *we* – and glosses over the fact that, to reach sustainability in one category one often has to undermine sustainability in another. To enable economic growth, the environment has to yield and to secure sustainable profits the working class will have to bleed. Who exactly is *we*? And who determines the interests that really count for this *we*?

To give just one example, Khan presupposes economic growth as one indicator of economic sustainability and treats it as a condition for trickle-down effects ensuring societal sustainability and development. However, he fails to interrogate how exactly economic growth and global development (presumably along the lines of ‘Western’ models) can be pursued without depleting the environment, how productivity can be increased without squeezing the workforce, or how relying upon technological innovation is possible without further pressuring global ecosystems. In his model, sustainability remains a postulate supposedly offering something to everyone by means of methods that resemble a magic wand rather than a critical assessment. However, irreconcilable material contradictions between different constituencies – or in current new speak *stakeholders* – exist and we need to identify and tackle them if want to retain the capability to act politically in

accordance with all the widely stated goals and commitments. The culprits profiting from the current situation need to be named and held accountable. Only then, the non-negotiable measures needed to save the planet can be enforced. The looming question, then, becomes: If there is no magic *we*, who is up to this task of enforcing lasting viable change at the costs of the main culprits?

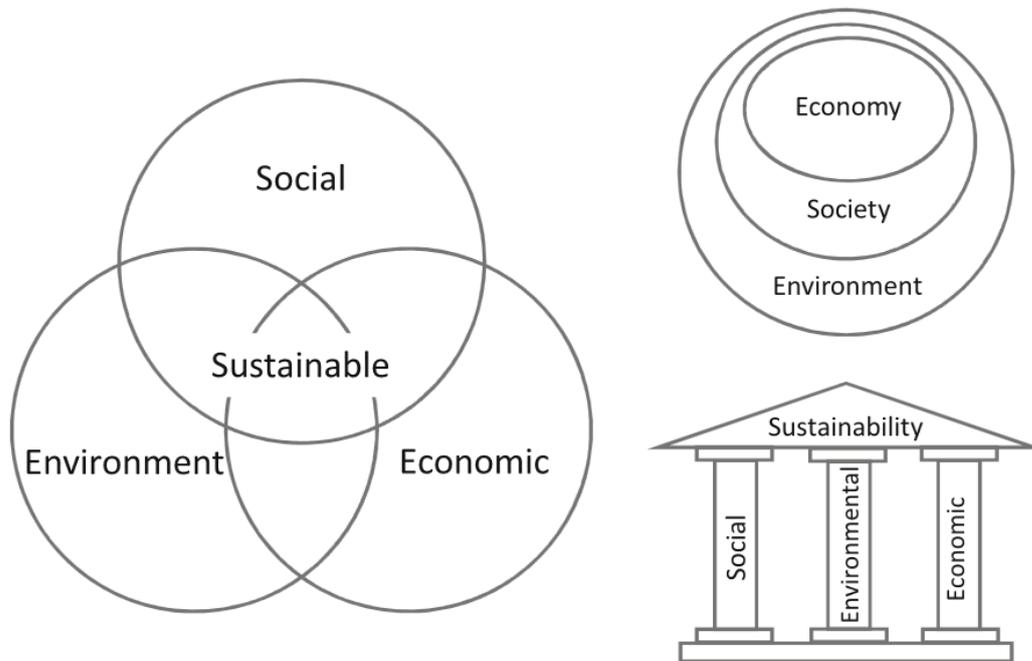


Figure 1: The circle/pillar model of sustainability (in Purvis, Mao, and Robinson (2019), p. 682)

Over the years, the pillar concept was taken up and further disseminated in research (e.g. Basiago 1999), policy, and consultancy. This process was based on the largely implied idea that the inherent contradictions between economic, ecological, and societal pillars, dimensions, or components of sustainability could somehow be reconciled in a mid-circle where key elements of each overlap and enable commonalities and a joint way forward. Given the massively diverging power and material interests of key global stakeholders, such common interests, of course, were merely illusory. Instead, what became possible was a use of sustainability to fake action, disperse responsibilities, and continue as before. The faulty logic driving such discourses and practices seems to be the opposite of a demand for accountability. It seems to suggest that without a culprit, no crime, and without a crime, no problem.

The work of the UN to develop concrete sustainability goals in a process from 2012 onwards distilled the logics enshrined in the model into a series of 17 explicit goals for global sustainable

development laid out in the UN document *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN 2015). Besides yet again attempting to reconcile essentially contradictory and often irreconcilable goals such as no poverty, clean energy, economic growth, industry and infrastructure, consumption and production, as well as climate action just to mention a few, the document also undermines accountability. Already in the title, the report replicates the infamous *we* that I already criticized above and thus makes invisible the differentiated degrees of responsibility and, more importantly, the concrete material interests behind the ongoing active destruction of the ecosphere. In reality, there is no *we*. Climate change does not simply happen. The destruction of the ecosphere is the result of cold business calculations and unequal global power relations. And, as everyone knows, declaring goals is cheap – yet great for PR.

In the end, key questions remain unanswered despite tons of glossy brochures imagining commonalities where, in essence, there are few and declaring cheap and toothless ways to save *our* planet. All these words. Yes, *we* can! Das schaffen *wir*! Who is this *we*? Who speaks for it? What does *our* generation mean? Is there anything resembling a global *community*? What about the destructive, growth-dependent, and predatory logics of global capitalism? Or about the greed-based egotism of multinational corporation or the global North? What about the widely diverging degrees of responsibility for the catastrophe? What about colonial legacies of exploitation and oppression, and about current conditions of gross inequalities and massive exploitation? Again, we need to ask: Sustainable for whom? And for what? At whose costs?

Alternatives? Resilience and accountability

If sustainability appears problematic given the severe contradictions and diverging interests glossed over by the concept, the term resilience appears like a proper declaration of bankruptcy for global efforts to combat climate change by means of concerted political action. Derived from Latin *resilire* to rebound, recoil, resilience initially referred to the capacity of a system to return to its original state after disturbances. When used in present-day discourses on climate change, however, this idea of returning to an original state seems to have moved somewhat in the background. Otherwise, the concept would imply to not simply accept a 1 or 1.5-degree global warming target but would mean to actively reduce CO₂ levels in the atmosphere and return to a pre-industrial original state of affairs – and making the profiteers pay for the necessary adjustments.

Contrary to this, resilience today often implies the acceptance of human induced global warming as an inevitable fact and merely aims at preparing nations, societies, ecosystems, and individuals as much as possible to these apparently inevitable new conditions, so they won't break – or at least not entirely and not everywhere. Resilience appears like a neo-liberal buzzword – a properly post-political pseudo-response opted for by a merely imagined global *us* that has lost the capability to concerted action in the name of global responsibilities. Adaptation to seemingly unalterable new conditions seems to trump a (costly and conflict-heavy) rebuilding of societies along entirely new lines, a holding accountable of the forces profiting from the current relentless destruction, and a comprehensive addressing of global inequalities leading to redistribution. In other words, resilience undermines attempts to tackle capitalism and the interests behind its continuous global dominance and simply asks everyone to adapt or die (for a concise overview of the concept of resilience, see Chandler 2014).

Even though the 6th IPCC assessment report published between 2021 and 2023 attempts to give the term resilience a more proactive stance highlighting core meanings such as returning to an original state, it remains unclear how this is to be achieved and how resilience in economic or societal terms should be weighed against resilience in environmental, cultural, psychological, or political contexts. As Chandler (2014: 2) expresses it, “if resilience is the answer suggested by policy interventions in every area [...] what does this tell us about the questions we are asking of the world?” Adapt those who can without endangering profits, and forget about the rest?

Again, questions such as resilience for whom or for what and at whose costs remain unanswered. So, given the present situation of the planet, maybe yet another term can help drive policy into the right direction? Maybe accountability can help? This term might empower *someone* to determine who has profited from the relentless destruction of the ecosphere and how. And based on this knowledge, this *someone* could hold the profiteers to account – both financially and juridically, both individually and collectively – and can create systems that prevent such profiteering in the future. Given the gross and increasing inequalities in global distributions of power and capital, of course, the problem of how this can be achieved remains to be answered.

In the language of business, accountability is often used as a term subservient to sustainability. As a possible solution to climate change, we need a more radical conceptualization of the term as a way to fundamentally change the discourse on climate change from an imposed and imposturous *we* to an *us-and-them* that acknowledges different interests and different degrees of responsibility

and also aims at bringing to light the very profit-driven practices that continue the present destruction. The elephant in the room is capitalism and the very structures it creates and thrives on. *We* need to tackle this elephant. The alternative are glossy brochures and a way out of the mess for the affluent few.

Conclusion

Climate change does not simply *happen*. Climate change is the calculated effect of attempts to sustain a way of life in certain parts of the world that is characterized by massive overconsumption, relentless exploitation, greed, and discourses of green-washing instigating the belief more consumption can help save the planet if *we* only consume the right products such as so-called zero-emission cars (a nonsensical marketing tool brainlessly parroted by buyers, salesmen, and politicians alike).

The destruction of our planet's ecosphere is part and parcel of successful business models and profitable return-of-investment plans. The ensuing catastrophe is not the responsibility of a merely imagined global *we* and actual solutions will only be possible if the culprits are pointed out and held to account. Really addressing climate change will be very costly to the rich and powerful and their willing minions who have profited from exploitation and overconsumption for centuries and continue to do so. Not addressing climate change and doing nothing but talk, travel, and declare ever-new targets will cost others. There is no, and has never been any, common global *we*. Pretending there is, simply diffuses accountability and prevents us from seeing the culprit behind the planned and organized destruction of our planet for profit. It stands to hope that more critical approaches to terms such as sustainability, resilience, and accountability might help to move climate policies into a more radical direction. There really is no alternative.

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