

RETHINKING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

BY JOHN B. ROBINSON

It is now well understood that there exist important ecological constraints on human activity at various levels, ranging from the local to the global. Extending the rates of consumption and production characteristic of industrialized countries to the rest of the globe is simply not feasible. If we are approaching the limits of global ecological carrying capacity and "business-as-usual" futures are literally unsustainable, we have no choice but to change significantly the way we do things.

But how is a sustainable society to be created? Any attempt to achieve sustainability must address a number of social and economic issues regarding what is produced and consumed in such a society, and how wealth and prosperity are generated and distributed. Yet, here we run into a problem. A common view of the values and concerns discussed above is that they exist in opposition to a conflicting set of economic priorities, which drive our societies towards ever greater levels of environmentally destructive production and consumption.

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On this view, ecological and economic priorities are locked

in conflict and each can be satisfied only at the expense of the other: more economic growth and environmental collapse, or no economic growth and economic collapse.

THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In this context, both sides have been suspicious of the concept of sustainable development, as formulated by the World Commission on Environment and Development, which seemed to imply that the world could have both growth and ecological sustainability. From one side, this concept is seen as providing a veneer of environmental respectability in a process of continuing unsustainable growth. From the other, it is seen as imposing a particular elitist view about environmental issues on the world and blocking progress and human development. If we are to escape from this deadlock, we need to forge imaginative new approaches that recognize and integrate ecological, social, and economic conditions and goals. Merely imposing ecologically based constraints on economic behaviour is certain to be insufficient. Not only would such constraints continue to be resisted by powerful interests, but they represent an "end-of-the-pipe" approach to environmental concerns which treats them as an add-on, to be incorporated after the fact and only insofar as they are required. What is clearly preferable is the integration of environmental concerns at a deeper level, in

which what is desirable for ecological reasons is also desirable economically and socially. Such an integration would truly represent sustainable development.

THE THREE IMPERATIVES

This line of thinking suggests that it may be fruitful to think of sustainable development as a process of reconciliation of three imperatives: (i) the ecological imperative to live within global biophysical carrying capacity; (ii) the economic imperative to ensure a decent material standard of living for all; and (iii) the social imperative to ensure the development of systems of governance that have "cultural sustainability"—the propagation of values that are supported by the populace concerned and give rise to a common sense of the collective good. All three of these imperatives must be achieved, since failure in any one will lead to some form of collapse of the society in question.

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This approach to sustainable development indicates a possible way to integrate economic and ecological factors.

It can be summed up in a question: to what extent are the measures required to live within our ecological carrying capacity compatible with, or even necessary to, the measures required to meet the challenge of economic restructuring driven by global economic integration? If, for ecological reasons, we need to "dematerialize" the economy (i.e., to decouple human welfare from the throughput of matter and energy in our society), then this requires the development of technologies based on the principles of eco-efficiency: the substitution of knowledge and efficient design for resource-intensive technologies. Conversely, if, for economic reasons, we have to develop in Canada high value-added, information-based industries that maintain our ability to compete, then we need industries characterized by high levels of innovation and principles of advanced design, management, and control. The growing literature on such concepts as "industrial ecology" or "business strategies for sustainable development" suggests that there is an opportunity for Canada to develop policies and make decisions that will enhance both sustainability and competitiveness.

Of course, posing the issue in this fashion begs important questions, many of which are connected with the social imperative discussed above. We need to consider, for example, whether the growth in economic activity implied in such economic restructuring is not itself a major contributor in increasing ecological impacts (i.e., whether growth in activity levels in such a future would more than offset increases in efficiency). Perhaps changes in lifestyle and con-

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sumption patterns might be a more effective and appropriate approach to staying within our ecological carrying capacity. Another important set of questions has to do with the distributional and equity issues raised by the strategy proposed here, and the ethical and practical issues raised by the fact that a large and growing fraction of the globe's human population exists in a state of extreme poverty. It also seems clear that the rise of various forms of ethnic nationalism, tribalism, sovereignty movements, and problems of governance across the world is connected in complex ways with the ongoing globalization of the world's economies.

DEMATERIALIZATION STRATEGIES

If dematerialization strategies do not incorporate measures designed to address the social imperative directly, it therefore seems likely that they are likely to fail, in part because the degree of social coherence required for such strategies to work will be unavailable. This suggests a need to consider strategies that address the linkage between ecological and economic issues and social well-being in new ways. The almost universal tendency in modern political decision making is to maximize economic growth in the expectation that such growth will lead to increases in human well-being; an alternative approach may be to develop policies that increase human well-being per unit of economic activity (e.g., per dollar of GDP). In other words, dematerialization strategies which uncouple matter-energy throughput from economic activity need to be complemented by "resocialization" strategies, which build social capi-

tal and uncouple economic activity from human well-being, for example, through the substitution of informal economy activities for consumption in industrialized countries. Such a double uncoupling recognizes that social well-being, economic activity, and environmental impact, though closely connected historically, are not identical, and that fostering a separation among them may allow human well-being to increase and adverse environmental impact to decline. This allows the explicit consideration of the issue of "overconsumption" introduced to the political agenda at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

The approach to sustainable development sketched out here implies a linkage among ecological, economic, and social issues that is not customary in current public policy. It offers the potential of going beyond the current rhetoric (let alone the practice) of integrating environmental concerns into economic decision-making, because it suggests the need for a deeper level of integration and adds social and distributional issues to the mix. Whether such integration is feasible is another question. It seems clear, however, that it should be explored. The alternative is continuing incremental reforms on smaller, more manageable problems, combined with deadlock and inaction on the larger issues that will actually decide the outcome. 

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that identifies economically and socially feasible basic-income alternatives. Resources distributed more equally are investments in a socially sustainable — and desirable — Canadian future.

As Rifkin suggests in *The End of Work* (1995), social income paid out through non-profits for societally needed work, and at least partially government-provided, could be financed by closing down many welfare bureaucracies,

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discontinuing billions in subsidies to corporations, and levying an earmarked value-added tax (VAT) on non-essential goods and services, or at least on "the goods and services of the high technology revolution"; a Tobin-type tax on unproductive financial speculation is a feasible option of the latter type. Like others

who envision the future similarly, Rifkin sees almost no paths to positive alternatives other than institution of a social income. It is clear to an increasing number of thoughtful analysts that there may be some extremely negative outcomes globally if those with power and wealth refuse to act in their own best interests by distributing resources so that individual dignity, community stability, and a sound consumer base are renewed and preserved.

The other major challenge in adapting to the new realities, of course, is to rethink the purposes and structure of formal education, so as to enable people to play a richer variety of roles in a society that has less need for "employees" and more for parents, artists, environmental stewards, community caretakers, and many other self-motivated makers and doers. The sooner instituting basic economic security for all allows us to turn our attention to this challenge, the sooner we will be back on course creating the kind of society we want to sustain in Canada. 

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