PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

Sustainability: Guiding Principle or Broken Compass?

Heather M. Farley,
Zachary A. Smith

Sustainability has become a guiding principle, a goal, and, in many cases, a standard for businesses, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), institutions of higher education, and environmental practitioners alike. Over the last quarter century, a widespread flurry of action in the name of sustainability has been burgeoning in a variety of settings and nations. A simple Internet news search reveals literally thousands of examples of different actors and organizations taking action in the name of sustainability. From the development of new university curricula to corporate sustainability reports, sustainability is invoked as a driving force for an ever-increasing number of organizations. The concept has become a rallying cry for a new way of operating and functioning. Like the environmental movement of the 1970s, the sustainability movement is marked by mobilization and an increased awareness of the challenges facing our current generation, as well as those who will come after us. Yet, it is not clear that actions taken in the name of creating a sustainable future are all based upon a consistent understanding of the concept of sustainability. In other words, are we all speaking the same language when it comes to the concept of sustainability and, similarly, sustainable development?

Hatch (1992) contends that sustainable development is the leading economic, environmental, and social issue of the 21st century, and Carruthers (2005) echoes this sentiment in stating that "[s]ustainable development now stands as the dominant discourse on the environment-development problematic." The concept of sustainability, however, is neither clearly nor consistently defined. That is to say, while different interests and actors now use the concept of sustainability widely, there is a good chance that we are not all using the concept according to a common understanding. Dryzek (2005) highlights this lack of consistency by noting that numerous organizations have spent millions of dollars to create a concise, agreed-upon definition of sustainability only to find that varying interests attempt to formulate the definition of sustainability in different and sometimes conflicting ways that bring us no closer to a common definition.

Part of the clarity issue is a symptom of the concept's origin. *Sustainable development* was defined in the 1987 Brundtland Report as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). While this broad definition includes the important criteria of both limits and needs, it does not sufficiently convey an ideal end state for a sustainable future nor the conditions necessary to meet that goal. A common vision helps to make concepts more operationally clear. In other words, *how* we go about meeting the needs of the present while remaining attuned to the needs of the future is unclear, resulting in co-optation and/or reshaping of the sustainability concept, depending upon the abilities and desires of the actor or organization.

Epstein (2008) offers that *discourse*, or the way we talk about concepts and ideas, confers meaning to physical and social phenomena. It is a way for people to make sense of their world through envisaging and talking about reality. A discourse is seen as "a cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations about a specific object that frame that object in a certain way and, therefore, delimit the possibilities for action in relation to it" (p. 2). What Epstein is highlighting is that the way we define, talk about, and frame concepts has consequences. The definition that we collectively assign to sustainability has policy implications, as well as implications for our daily actions and behaviors. In the policy arena, for example, the discourse around sustainability influences the types of policies that are formulated, and in turn the material results of the policy impact and enhance the discourse. Discourse and practice are mutually constitutive (Epstein, 2008) because of the close link between thoughts and actions (Bourdieu, 1990). If we take this characterization of the social construction of discourse as a point of departure in understanding the sustainability concept, the diverse way in which the concept is defined by different groups becomes problematic. Questions as to whether sustainability is an ethic of preservation or conservation, perpetuity or adaptation, or even status quo or improvement, emerge when our conceptions of sustainability differ.

A broad definition of sustainability certainly holds a universal appeal that has engaged a variety of actors. This widespread engagement may seem at first glance to be a real strength of the broad conception of sustainability. The risk inherent in the malleable characteristic of the concept, however, is that we simply continue to perpetuate the status quo of a progrowth, resource-intensive economy and lifestyle. Despite the revolutionary spirit of the sustainability concept, its broad nature has allowed for something closer to inertia than extraordinary change.

Unfortunately, it is radical change that is necessary. As a *New York Times* op-ed recently explained, we are currently experiencing a confluence of high energy prices, intense climatic-related disasters, increasing food prices, and rising global popula-

tions (Friedman, 2011). As we continue to strain the ecological and climatic systems of the earth, we realize greater impacts at the social and economic system levels, as well. Therefore, while it is a positive development to have activated so many actors interested in embracing sustainability, the concept now requires a stricter, more operationally concise definition to guide us toward the kind of change necessary to address our current crises.

In many instances, we can observe the term *sustainability* simply being used in place of the term *environmental*. For instance, it appears that some corporate sustainability plans avoid or completely ignore the social impacts of their operations but spend an inordinate amount of time and text describing the environmental improvements they have made within their companies. While this is to be commended and applauded, what they are producing often does not amount to a sustainability report but rather an environmental responsibility report. One method that we suggest would help to alleviate this tendency of simply substituting *sustainable* for *environmental* is to consider something sustainable only when it passes a systemic life-cycle analysis test: that is, if a product or process cannot be considered environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable from its origination to the point of its ultimate disposal, we cannot call that product or process *sustainable*. At best, it may be that what many of us are accomplishing is really closer to faux sustainability. This additional life-cycle criterion may begin to help shape a more clearly defined concept and perhaps move our policies and behaviors in a direction that is less consumptive. Whether a new, more clearly defined concept will retain as many subscribers as the broad definition did is unclear, but without question it is necessary that we draw more aggressive boundaries for the concept in order to address the converging crises that we now face internationally.

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Address correspondence to: Heather M. Farley, Department of Politics and International Affairs, Northern Arizona University, PO Box 15036, Flagstaff, AZ 86011; (phone) 928-523-3135; (fax) 928-523-6777; (e-mail) hmf23@nau.edu.