

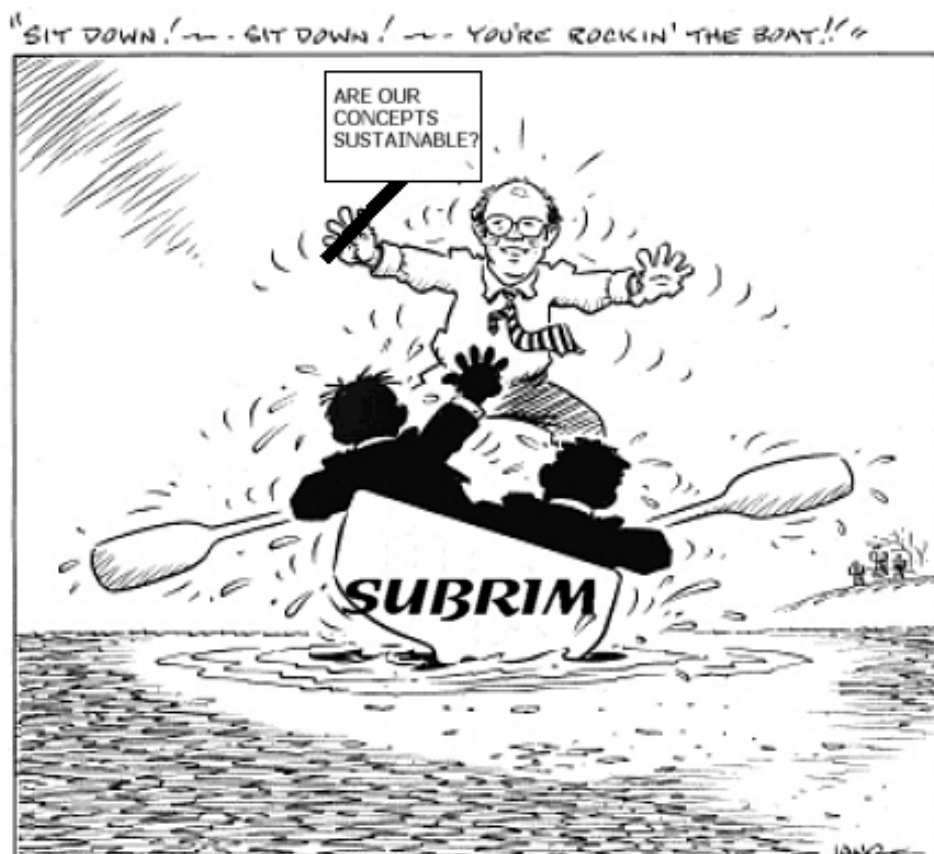
Captain SUBR:IM's Voyage of Discovery (Unpacking the Concept of Sustainability...A Little Bit)

*Joe Doak,
Centre of Planning Studies,
Department of Real estate and Planning,
The University of Reading*

'Sustainable' is the first word in the SUBR:IM acronym and it pervades all the work packages within the consortium. Yet, as we are increasingly noticing, there are differences of opinion and perspective about what this concept means. The biggest danger we face is that the concept is used without some debate and caution, in an uncritical and simplistic way. That is the stimulus for this short research note.

The term 'sustainable development' was created by people to encompass a set of ideas about the way that human beings should/could live their lives in relation to other human beings and the physical world. Although those ideas were created on the basis of people's **experience** of living with each other and the physical world, the term sustainable development is, at the end of the day, **socially constructed**. Furthermore, once a term like this comes into existence, it is then deployed and re-created on a daily basis. The social **re-construction** of the concept is an ongoing process, and we in SUBR:IM are indeed part of that process!

There are, at least, two warnings arising from this perspective. Firstly, that there can be **no one absolute** definition of sustainability and any attempt to impose one is doomed to perish on the rocks of social diversity and conflicting interpretations. The second warning is that, in trying to avoid the jagged reality of social constructivism, the sandbanks of **relativism** await Captain SUBR:IM as (s)he tries to sail through and navigate the contaminated waters of the Manchester Ship Canal and the Thames Estuary. If there are multiple definitions of sustainability, who's definition should we use to steer the ship? And where does it leave us, except stuck between the devil and the deep brown sea?



The Captain needs to steer a careful and sensitive course. (S)he needs to accept the diversity of definition and meaning underpinning the concept of sustainability and to build a broad definition that allows (encourages?) the exploration of this diversity in an explicit and critical way. In doing this (s)he should accept that terms (and whole discourses) like ‘sustainability’ are deployed by people in different ways to achieve different objectives. (S)he needs to unpack the concept so that the different ideas that are wrapped-up in the term are opened-up, problematised and researched. To keep the SUBR:IM boat afloat on it’s voyage of scientific discovery it is the Captain’s job, and the responsibility of the whole crew, to probe and critique the use of the concept on a regular basis. When we produce our charts (analytical frameworks and models), take a grip of the rudder (methodologies) and stop-off to explore new found lands (e.g. acid tar lagoons, redevelopment projects, etc.), we need to listen to the range of voices and languages we encounter: question the powerful who ‘define the terms’, understand the network-builders (including academics!) who re-construct the meanings and seek-out the marginalised who live with the outcomes.

Yes, that’s all fine and dandy, but what would this broad and sensitive concept of ‘sustainability’ look like if it suddenly floated in to view? Well, apart from being indistinct and fluid (a shape-shifter out of the X-files?), it probably has a few key ideas at it’s core. At the risk of imposing my own social construction of the term ¹, I would like to suggest that a review of the ‘theory’ and practice of sustainable development is likely to come-up with some mixture of the following principles.

Environmentalism

This is the idea that the full environmental costs and benefits should be considered in any decision-making process. It places the ‘stewardship’ and protection of the physical environment at the heart of the sustainability debate and asks humans to move towards an eco-centric perspective in their relationship with the physical environment. Of course, there are many different shades of green in this movement from an anthropocentric to eco-centric view of the world, and many forces working against it.

Futurity

This concept is at the centre of Gro Harlem Brundtland’s 1987 definition of sustainable development. It demands that people consider the long-term consequences of any decision or action taken today in relation to the needs of future generations. Environmental quality and the future of the planet are obviously important to this idea, but it has also been constructed with an eye on the quality of life of future (human) generations. It also emphasises a precautionary approach to decision-making in which action is taken in advance or scientific certainty (in the case of existing environmental harm) or held-back until scientific proof is available (in the case of potential environmental risk).

Development

The two words ‘sustainable’ and ‘development’ are put together to stress a process of change and improvement. It suggests that ‘staying still’ in a cocooned world of environmental protection is not an option. In doing this it re-introduces an anthropocentric spin on ‘environmentalism’ claiming that in order to provide for the needs of a growing world population, there is a requirement to undertake further economic and physical development to provide for those needs. In the same way that ‘environmentalism’ has many shades of green, so too does ‘development’, with the current UK government re-constructing it in terms of maintaining “high and stable levels of economic growth and employment”.

Equity

The Rio Earth Summit played a key role in re-constructing the concept of sustainability. A major NGO presence at the Summit (and during preparations for it) managed to give this principle more weight than it had hitherto achieved. It is based on the view that inequality in the distribution of the earth’s resources and wealth is a fundamental cause of unsustainable development and that, in order to address this, decision-makers at all levels should be required to consider the distributional consequences of their proposals and actions. By raising these issues, it opens-up clear links with a long history of socialist and social-reformist ideas and political/social movements. However, how this principle is operationalised in both general and specific cases will also reflect the continuum of thought that pervades the political spectrum of the people involved and the way they interact.



Participation

One of the main outcomes of the Rio Summit was Agenda 21. This document made the meaningful participation of individuals and groups in decision-making and implementation a touchstone of sustainability. Meaningful participation and involvement of citizens and 'stakeholder' groups is based on a number of rationales, including the need to:

- tackle environmental problems at all relevant levels (including the local);
- build consensus between all key interests (including those normally marginalised);
- spread ownership of sustainable development down to individual communities; and
- allow local solutions and decision-making, where appropriate (i.e. political and economic subsidiarity).

This view of the participation process is not without criticism and needs to be treated with caution given the clear inequalities in power and influence held by different stakeholder interests. However, it does emphasise the importance of this dimension to many people working with(in) the concept and practice of sustainable development.

Of course, there are other ideas, features² and tools that are part of the sustainable development debate/discourse so we will have to allocate storage room for further concepts to be 'quality-checked' and loaded on board. Furthermore, as noted above, these five principles will be regularly contested and re-created by the various actors involved, as they/we respond to the social, economic and political forces operating at any one time and in any one place. However, the above 'definition' does begin to map-out the main topographical features that Captain SUBR:IM and his/her crew will have to navigate as we sail on our voyage of scientific discovery.

Footnotes:

¹ These ideas were actually constructed on the basis of an early review of the concept (Shorten, 1993) and then deployed and negotiated through the work of the Sustainability Panel of the London and South East Regional Planning Conference (SERPLAN) during the preparation of the Sustainable Development Strategy for the South East, between 1994 and 2000 (see Doak et al, 1998; and Doak, 2004 forthcoming).

² Including the important one of 'holistic' thinking and action, which seeks to inter-link any set of principles in to an 'integrated' approach.

References

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