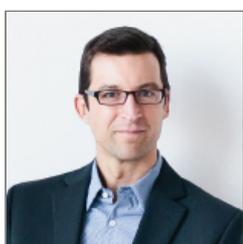


OPINION: WHAT DOES A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE?

If sustainability is going to succeed, it's time to talk specifics.



Illustration by Glen Lowry



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REPUBLISH

February 18, 2014 — “Roads? Where we’re going we don’t need ... roads.”

Wild-haired scientist Emmet “Doc” Brown famously uttered those words at the end of the 1985 classic *Back to the Future* — at the time, just the latest representation of a decades-long fantasy society has held of a future filled with servant robots, floating cities and a flying car in every spaceport.

In recent years among the environmental community, a parallel vision of the future has emerged. Everyone, from CEOs of progressively minded companies to activists on the street, is talking about “building a more sustainable future.” Often, though, it feels like we’re closer to the Jetsons’ version of the future than to a sustainable one. That’s because, unlike dinner in a pill and jet packs, sustainability still often feels like an amorphous topic discussed mostly in vague declarations. It’s like peace or hope. Everyone wants it, but no one really knows what it looks like.

The most common definition comes from 1987’s Brundtland Report:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

But this leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Whose “needs of the present” is this referring to? The needs of a family of four in a United States suburb are quite different than those of a similar-sized family in sub-Saharan Africa. And regarding the needs of future generations, a world with [10.8 billion people in 2100](#) is drastically different than our current world of 7 billion. Figuring out how to meet our needs while simultaneously considering the uncharted territory of such a large future population is a massive undertaking.

Most importantly, though, this definition doesn’t tell us what sustainability actually looks like in practice. How can we motivate people to move toward more sustainable lifestyles if they can’t envision what they’re moving toward?

The Many Faces of Sustainability

Further complicating the topic of sustainability are the myriad aliases it operates under — sustainable development, resilience, sustainable entrepreneurship, Triple Bottom Line, corporate social responsibility, etc. Looking closely at the last of these, Dutch researcher Marcel Van Marrewijk [wrote](#) back in 2003, “Too often, CSR is regarded as the panacea which will solve the global poverty gap, social exclusion and environmental degradation.”

That’s a lot to hang on one underdefined term, which Van Marrewijk recognized when he went on to write, “more specific definitions matching the development, awareness and ambition levels of organizations” should be developed.

And yet more than 10 years later we continue to speak in sustainability generalities.

Steps Forward

As communications expert Matthew Nisbet [previously suggested](#) in this magazine with regard to climate change, perhaps it's more effective to break the issue into smaller, more manageable chunks than to speak of sustainability in grand pronouncements.

To that end, here are four suggestions to help advance the “global sustainability” narrative.

1. Break sustainability down by sector

When throwing around phrases such as “building a sustainable future,” it's critical to identify the sector you're talking about. The sustainability of the transportation sector obviously presents a different range of challenges and opportunities than, say, the sustainability of global agriculture. And if one becomes more sustainable while the other becomes less sustainable, are we truly moving toward a more sustainable future overall?

Even within sectors there are challenges. If your goal is to create a more sustainable energy system, does that mean reducing carbon emissions — thus including nuclear energy — or are you referring to “clean” sources of renewable energy such as solar and wind? Once again, details matter greatly.

2. Speak in specifics

Ask a hundred people if they're interested in living in a “more sustainable world” and I bet the vast majority would respond, “Yes.” The trouble is, they'd probably all have a different idea in their heads of what that meant. We need to start talking about a sustainable future in specifics. Sustainability over what time frame? Where? For whom? Which brings me to my next point...

3. Clearly identify who benefits

We need to clarify who benefits from sustainability efforts. For example, does sustainable apparel benefit someone making dollars a day? If so, explain how. Does sustainable energy help the millions living without access to electricity? Are we talking about sustainability for humans, animals, plants and/or other natural systems? If humans are living “more sustainable lifestyles” while the extinction rate for plants and animals continues its upward trajectory, can we call that a success?

4. Paint a picture

What does sustainability look like in practice? How does it actually work? What's different from the world we live in today? And, perhaps most importantly, what are the trade-offs? Walking and biking might be the most sustainable forms of

transportation, but they're probably not the most time-efficient if you need to drive 10 miles across town for work or an appointment. No matter how different we want the future to be, we can't simply ignore the way people actually live today. We cannot simply wish for a world we want.

The most cogent vision of the future I've seen actually comes from a work of fiction (let's hope it becomes nonfiction!) published last year by environmentalist and writer Jonathon Porritt. In [The World We Made](#) Porritt's lead character Alex McKay reports back from the year 2050 and explains how we managed to overcome the "wasted decades" of the early 2000s to arrive at the narrator's vision of a more sustainable future.

While the book at times paints a "green utopian" vision of the future, writing in the postscript Porritt himself acknowledges "the gap between what is actually happening [in terms of moving toward a more sustainable future] and what needs to happen remains deeply disturbing. Windows of opportunity don't stay open forever — and this one does seem to be closing fast."

Still, for anyone wishing to peek into the future and explore a hopeful vision of what sustainability in action might actually look like over the next 36 years, I highly recommend picking up a copy of *The World We Made*.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Sustainability

Part of the problem with designing a vision of sustainable future is that the future is so darn hard to predict or imagine. Raise your hand if you grew up in, say, the '70s or '80s thinking someday you'd walk around with a mini supercomputer in your pocket. See what I mean?

That's why it's good to know that people such as [Jamais Cascio](#) and organizations such as the Institute for the Future are busy [mapping out future scenarios](#) for the planet, while the U.K.-based [Forum for the Future](#) is working directly with businesses, governments and others to put sustainability into action today while outlining possible visions of tomorrow. Whether predictions from organizations such as these and others hold true is obviously to be determined, but at least they're providing a collection of possible road maps with time for course correction.

It's also good news that there's a movement afoot to get more specific about sustainability. For example, "[The Future We Want](#)," a road map for the future of sustainable development, was an official outcome of the 2012 Rio+20 U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development. And in 2015 the U.N. will convene member states to outline [Sustainable Development Goals](#) aimed at building upon the earlier Millennium Development Goals.

Meanwhile, the not-for-profit organization The Natural Step has long touted the concept of "[backcasting](#)," or imagining a more sustainable future, and then

asking, “What do we need to do today to reach that vision of success?” The organization has worked with thousands of companies, academic institutions, thought leaders and others to move sustainability from idea to implementation.

Looking ahead, we need to start an honest conversation about what sustainability actually looks like in day-to-day life today and in the future. So, why not get started right now: What does a sustainable future look like to you? And please be specific. 

Editor’s note: The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily of Ensia. We present them to further discussion around important topics. We encourage you to respond with a comment below, following our commenting guidelines, which can be found here. In addition, you might consider submitting a Voices piece of your own. See Ensia’s “Contact” page for submission guidelines.

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Add Your Comments

*Karlie
Feb. 19th, 2014*

It's simpler to see where we're headed if we just start from what would things be like if we stopped using all forms of petroleum and dropped coal and nuclear power.

In the transportation sector, we'd have vehicles powered by solar/wind generated electricity and by human power (bikes/walking).

In the agricultural sector, we'd continue to have land based farms using organic practices that do not require petroleum/chemical based fertilizers/herbicides and we'd have enclosed growing systems that reduce water use by 95% and utilize solar and other renewable energies to power LED grow lights so that fruits and vegetables could be grown locally (even in neighborhoods) year round reducing transportation distances

and boosting the nutritional value of the food.

In the energy for home and business area - we'd have solar, wind, etc - preferably cooperatively owned to democratize the economy.

Overall, much of our needs would be able to be met with greater efficiency.

Our sustainable future is fairly easy to envision and is actually quite luxurious. Clean air, clean water, healthy soils, healthy food all become easy when we remove fossil fuels and replace with renewable practices.

Though to do so, we have to embrace a major change in economic thinking (again not sacrifices) toward realizing that we can have our needs met without having to slave for the dollar.

This may be the greater challenge. There is already not enough work to employ everyone at what we have defined as full-time.

Staying with fossil fuel based technologies is like refusing to shift off the 8 track cassette player when we could have smartphones instead.

The sooner we can stop framing the vision of the future as apocalyptic requiring mass sacrifice and shift to marketing the benefits - the faster the shifts already in the works can occur.

Think of the days before we electrified the US and put running water in every home. We are metaphorically in the moments before a shift of an even greater magnitude than that to greater ease, health and sustainability and we have to stop being afraid.

Todd Reubold
(Writer)
Feb. 19th, 2014

Thanks for the excellent comment, Karlie. I think your comparison of the 8 track to fossil fuels is brilliant.

And I also really like this statement: "The sooner we can stop framing the vision of the future as apocalyptic requiring mass sacrifice and shift to marketing the benefits - the faster the shifts already in the works can occur." I've felt that way for quite some time - let's stop talking about the things we'll give up and focus more on what we'll gain.

Thank you for such a thoughtful response.

Pingback,
Feb. 20th, 2014

*What Does a Sustainable Future Actually Look Like? | Organic
Social Media*

*Robin Fletcher
Feb. 24th, 2014*

Appreciate this article and the points made on the importance of specifics, vision, gap analysis etc....all crucial to a plan remaining relevant, useful now and into the future. I'd add that all solutions are only as good as the thinking from which they spring. And not individual thinking, but individuals thinking together. And not just intellectual thinking, but embodied, heart-centered active thought. Herein lies the core challenge. In C. Jung's terms, how to think as a collective with conscience...Perhaps the reason we can't visualize what a sustainable future really looks like is because we've yet not mastered ourselves. But in recognizing this, we find a first step toward a way of being that in and of itself is a glimpse into a future that is sustainable. Einstein once said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." This gives me hope.

*Karlie
Feb. 25th, 2014*

Here's some work done visioning the specifics of the energy mix post fossil and nuclear energy for Minnesota:
<http://thesolutionsproject.org/infographic/#mn>

Love the image in the middle with dark on the status quo side and bright on the renewable side. Also great look at how much money we save doing this and how it improves human health.

Also available for all 50 states.

Pingback,
Feb. 25th, 2014

*Tornado Quest Gee-O-Science Links Feb. 18 – 25th, 2014 |
Welcome To Tornado Quest*

*Emily Wahl
Mar. 4th, 2014*

First, a general summation of what I think the principles of a sustainable life are, then some specific examples.

A sustainable life is one that wastes little to nothing, one that depends upon renewable and renewed resources, one that is as self-sufficient as possible, one that shares its bounty to rid another's dearth and puts the needs of all before the greed of one -- in short, one that does not take more than it returns to its environment and its community. This looks different in

different places, as natural resources differ as well as population, but trade and co-operation can always supply the lack of one community with the surplus of another. One thing that is not sustainable is profit in the Capitalist sense of the word. We can sustainably profit (meaning gain what we lack) from nature and each other, but we can not sustainably profit *off* (meaning taking more than we give) others or the earth.

One very specific, simple, but powerful thing that my community could do to be more sustainable, and increasingly it is becoming more so in this way -- is to grow organic food in their yards, rather than resource sucking lawns and conventional landscaping. Others are installing solar panels and rain water systems. Still others are walking, biking, or taking public transportation rather than driving. If everyone made these choices, it would have a huge impact. To me, sustainability looks a lot like the way people lived when my grandfather was a boy, but without giving up our advantageous new technologies, and putting them to use to improve "the old ways" rather than replacing them with useless waste.

Two things that other people have written that I'd like to share on the topic of sustainability: my friend Ryan's vision of a sustainable future in West Bengal

ectastories.wordpress.com

And an article about the key to sustainable population size:

www.scientificamerican.com/article/population-and-sustainability/

Emily Wahl
Mar. 4th, 2014

I'd like to add that I live in an American city (Portland, OR) that is more sustainable than most.

Part of this is due to circumstance. Portland developed more slowly than other major cities on the west coast, probably because of its natural environment: our port is actually inland, making it less accessible, and we're flanked on the eastern side by some pretty impassable mountains. There was the Oregon Trail, however, and some major mistakes of unsustainable growth were made by early settlers, like chopping down ALL of the trees until our city got its nickname of Stumptown, and, of course, fishing the salmon to near extinction -- basically destroying our two best natural resources.

However, some of our present day sustainability is due to some very good choices. When Portland was experiencing out of control sprawl in the 70's, the city leaders had the foresight to create the urban growth boundary. This one public act saved a huge amount of farmland, natural habitat, and the inner city, and cut way down on commuting and pollution.

Some other great things that the city has done is to invest heavily in public transportation and city parks, and to zone neighborhoods wisely to maintain a good mix of business and residential areas and to keep big box stores and even billboards, for that matter, out of most of our town (not including the suburbs). The list goes on -- "mixed" low-income housing, which doesn't create "projects" that separate the poor from the rich. Installing bioswales on the street and creating bike lanes, bike avenues, and bike boxes. Promoting composting and recycling with weekly curbside pick-ups while only collecting garbage every other week. Our state has also done great things -- from creating lots of state parks to providing a comparatively higher level of food and health benefits to those in need, to enforcing a comparatively high minimum wage. Many, many things, because the political will has been present.

These two factors -- slower development and an early awareness of what is necessary to make our city sustainable, has made it much easier to develop sustainably in the present day.

The inner city has remained a place where people live as well as work, and it has developed up more than out. Our local farms provide us, as well as a large part of the nation, with organic food. Lots of people have started small local business that provide people with good markets and work close to home, and their profits go back into our local economy.

The biggest challenge to maintaining our present level of sustainability (and to improve upon it) is the large number of people who are attracted to our more sustainable lifestyle. Gentrification is pushing poorer people out of our inner city, and as our population grows, putting more pressure on our natural and economic resources.

We've been lucky, in a way, and we've been smart, but we have to stay ever mindful and keep trying to improve on what we already have. That being said, if other cities took a page out of Portland's book and instated their own urban growth boundaries, for example, they could reverse the trend of sprawl that is so detrimental and reap their own benefits, and less

people would be drawn to move here and put pressure on our resources and poorer citizens.

Chris Maynard
Mar. 7th, 2014

Thank you for your article. You raise a good question and provide helpful ideas. I also appreciate the links.

I agree with you completely that the more specific one can be, the more constructive, and that it's unhelpful to treat the following terms as synonyms: "sustainable development, resilience, sustainable entrepreneurship, Triple Bottom Line, corporate social responsibility, etc."

I like these variations on the definition of sustainability you provided from the Brundtland Report:

"A sustainable society is one that satisfies its needs without diminishing the prospects of future generations."

-Lester Brown, Earth Policy Institute

"How do we ensure a future where all people have the economic opportunities they need to reach their full potential without depleting the environment that sustains us all?"

Camilo Galvis, executive director of the abc* Foundation

These high-level definitions / questions / aspirations are necessary and helpful, but you are right, any actions toward fostering the ongoing sustainability of Earth's human civilization must be specific and targeted.

One level down the specificity hierarchy are survey-level discussions of civilization's sustainability challenge. I just read an article that provides a clear-eyed assessment of that: "Solving the Sustainability Crisis: Our Job and Technology's Job" <http://huff.to/1kV4XDA>.

I also find broad-in-scope books, such as Thomas Friedman's "Hot, Flat and Crowded" to be constructive at this level--especially when they offer specific suggestions.

Your four suggestions for becoming more specific are all good.

At the bottom and most-specific level of the specificity hierarchy are concrete, grassroots lifestyle changes like those suggested by the previous commenters. Paul Hawken refers to these collective social and environmental actions as "the movement" in his book "Blessed Unrest."

Finally, what are frustratingly absent from the sustainability dialogue are incontestable and actionable facts. It seems that in today's information-overloaded and politicized society, facts are like clothes, everyone has their own set. It would be extremely helpful to the goal of more sustainable business practices, government policies and lifestyle choices, if more truths existed that were generally accepted rather than hotly debated and upon which specific and constructive actions could be taken.

Todd Reubold
(Writer)
Mar. 7th, 2014

Thank you for the detailed and thoughtful response, Chris. I'll certainly have to look more into some of the experts and resources you mentioned. Thanks!

Emily Wahl
Mar. 8th, 2014

I have some criticism for the writer. You claim you want specifics about what sustainability really means, yet judging from your responses to people's comments, you seem more interested in generalities.

To achieve sustainability, people have to change how they consume resources, and that change has to be a part of a free and democratic process. Good public policy can have a great effect, but the political will to instate such policy comes from the people. A purely intellectual, one-size-fits all policy discussion that ignores the reality on the ground and thinks itself superior to the grassroots will not bring about sustainable consumption.

Here's something that one sustainability policy maker has to say:

"From your experience, what are three of the top actions that cities around the world can take in order to adapt their communities to a changing climate?"

"Sustainable transportation must be strongly promoted as a priority for Mayors and municipal governments. Private sector must make commitments to energy efficiency programs. And citizens should rethink and change their entire consumption patterns."

<http://www.eco-business.com/news/climate-leadership-mayors-world/>

Yoshi
Apr. 13th, 2014

Thanks for the good article.

I agree with the first comment by Karlie that a sustainable

future must involve a non-coal and petroleum-based future. I think we need to cut our dependency to internal combustion engine. Also, we need to reassess the pricing of negative externalities associated with any activity that generates GHG emissions. And we need to clean-up/protect/replenish the oceans that sustains life in most parts of the world.

I am willing to put my money where my mouth is, and support any project that I believe will make a significant difference towards a sustainable future.

Some of my ideas are on my blog at:
<http://greenprojectmanage.wordpress.com/>

Pingback,
Jul. 1st, 2014

Science online, gold-star creationist edition | Jeremy Yoder

Richard Glover
Sep. 2nd, 2014

Think of aircraft carriers. People on board often talk of them being like living on a floating city and give the impression they are self-sufficient. They are not, they visit ports and restock. I don't know of any part of the world that does not need the rest of the world to satisfy its desires. But we could do with such to show just how it can be done.

This does not mean complete isolation but a high degree of self-reliance and a dogged determination to accept the criticism for its apparent or perceived selfishness.

A strict population policy. Virtually no imports and exports of food, raw materials and merchandise. In other words a complete go it alone existence but with free exchange of knowledge and non-tangible items with the rest of the world.

The sub-continent of Australia is my candidate.
But then I don't live there.

Cheryl Hills
Dec. 31st, 2014

5- counties in Central Minnesota has published a sustainable communities regional plan titled: The Resilient Region Plan, crafted from over 600 regional residents that align with your fore mentioned "steps forward".

The site is www.resilientregion.org shares this plan. What is most impressive is the Distributed Leadership Model deployed by over 50 regional Champions to implement the plan. Over the last 24 months with over 31 million NEW dollars leveraged to implement the strategies in a rural region with a modest population of only 162,000.

There were MANY lessons learned throughout this process, including how to get people with extremely diverse views to agree upon a strategic - sustainable direction. I am thankfully this region has a new way of doing business that dictates our future.

Thanks for the article and attention to this topic.

Peter D. Capen
Dec. 31st, 2014

It's hard to reconcile "finite" resources with with "unlimited" demands. And a human population that is still growing on a planet not getting any bigger or richer in resources. What our species refuses to recognize is that we have already exceeded our carrying capacity. Until we begin to recognize that we share this planet with a myriad other creatures increasingly struggling just to survive in the face of the onslaught of human demands, modern civilization will not be "sustainable" and even a serious discussion of the topic is unlikely to be entertained.

Aidan Ward
Jan. 3rd, 2015

It is possible to be specific about features of the modern world that are not sustainable. And it is possible to look at the mechanisms that make the world modern.

People treat the money system as a neutral facility we all use and need, but the way it is constructed means that no society that uses it in its current form can be sustainable. Money is created as debt and therefore there is not enough money to repay both the debt and the interest.

I find it more convincing to look at experiments that reject mechanisms and the thinking behind them that drive non-sustainable behaviour than to tell everyone they need to change. What is more when you study and promote such experiments you find vehement opposition because people don't want their understanding of the world undermined. This is not so much vested interest and selfishness and existential terror.

Adrian
Oct. 14th, 2015

Backcasting is the way.

Krisztián Hetey
Feb. 13th, 2016

Thanks for this great article. I agree with the author, the definition of sustainable can differ from whose point we are looking at it. To me, it is lessening our negative impact on the environment, giving more space to animals and reducing our consumer behaviour. Recycling, using environment friendly transport, reusing things and not buying irrelevant things in the first place.

Maribell
Sep. 30th, 2018

The first thing to me is to educate ourselves to make the transition from "no sustainable habits" to positive ones, easy rather than difficult; "keep it simple". Most importantly, focus on the new generations by doing and teaching, so good environmental practices become second nature when they grow up.

Paul Ahearn
Nov. 11th, 2018

Human nature, inalienable rights and old fashioned common sense with serious insight towards a peaceful future is remarkably elusive with most of this discussion . The "saleability" of these ideas from our United Nations, et al is mostly understood; yet practical enactment with our American Constitution has serious failure points

I admire and celebrate our 1860's Homestead Act AND the Land Grant University system across our country !! Adapting THIS FANTastic quality of our American society will lift UP children and families across our great country (modern current adaptation is key ? !!) Being a sheeplike follower of "Sustainable" legislation (Agenda 21, etc) will result in more refugee migrations, starvations, Wars, genocides, and tragic unnecessary suffering!!!

PS,, the Portland booster contribution mentioned "poorer" citizens (?) ; of whom we ALL will become in a "Sustainable Future" !?!? . The Rothschild's et al will NOT "lift up" human society ; they never have .
