

Sustaining Sustainable Development

By

Thomas R. Cuba, Ph.D., CEP

In 1987 the United Nations adopted the phrase “Sustainable Development” (1) and spawned a new era of misinterpretation. While scientists clearly understood the term at the time, political forces have twisted the term to their own ends; undereducated activists have used the phrase as a hammer to defeat otherwise sound ideas through outright outshouting; the press has used it to label both men and ideas as “good” or “bad;” and lay people have simply replaced it with “green.” Now we have green jobs, green industries, green politicians, green television shows, green movies, green products, green economies, green stocks, and so on ad infinitum. The layman was not alone in this supplanting of “Sustainable Development” with “Green” as a label. The advertising and marketing industry played a major role.

So where are we now and why am I whining about it?

At its inception, and at its core, this concept which would “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (1) is utopian, highly desirable, and totally un-achievable. But it was rapidly recognized that attempting to reach this goal would be far better than the unrestricted waste of resources that was being practiced at the time.

In today’s world, where budgets are tight and emotions unbridled, today’s mantra of “Sustainable Development” as redefined through the past 20 years is often at odds with people seeking such mundane goals as a balanced budget. In Pinellas County, Florida, for example, 21 million dollars is being spent to build a bicycle path across Tampa Bay. Proponents say it promotes bicycle use and thereby is a “green” project while opponents say that it is clearly too expensive. Opponents concede it may generate bicycle traffic but refuse to concede that it will reduce automobile traffic. The bicycle riders will be recreational users. As it turns out, the opponents are the ones with all the data but the project is going ahead anyway.

Let’s take this tangent, as long as we are here. Walk with me through this exercise in logic. Conceding the point that the cyclists will be recreational and there is no benefit to be gained by reductions in automobile traffic, we can see that the trail will induce more people to buy more bicycles. Bicycles are made from steel, rubber, and petroleum derivatives (plastics). Increasing the demand for these raw materials will (albeit only in a very small manner) increase the need for chemical manufacturing of synthetic rubber, mining of iron ore, and drilling for oil. The conclusion is that the increased demand in bicycles is contrary to green philosophy because it increases consumption of materials needed by a future generation and does so for the absurdly selfish reason of personal recreation. The bike path is completely “unsustainable.”

Okay, so I cheated by using reason and logic. Here’s the point. The labels “green” and “sustainable” have become fluid in their meaning.

To review. Sustainable Development (SD) implies that there will be an effort or input during the life of the item being sustained. If not, it would be a self sustaining project. Yes, “project.”

Probably the first thing that most people forgot was that the “D” in SD could be a bridge but could also be a program to feed the poor. In the original context “development” meant any progress towards the future. There are no self sustaining developments. Period. The goal of SD has always been to simply reduce the cost (in whatever terms are being used) and maximize the life span or longevity of the development with minimal upkeep and maintenance.

There are other forgotten ideas as well. The phrase SD comes with categories represented by the adjectives “socially,” “ecologically,” “politically,” “economically” and so on. Some of these even have subsets such that a development which is ecologically sustainable in terms of a wetland project may in fact do harm to an upland project. More common is the project which is beneficial or sustainable ecologically, but not economically. A quick look around, no matter where you are, will reveal ecological projects which in our new economy are failing miserably. In fact, the level of sustainability which a SD may experience is fluid and reacts to other developments.

So What? Here’s the “what.” In some circles “Sustainable Development” has become the eleventh commandment and in others it is a bona fide curse word. We scientists, who are supposed to understand the real meaning, need to protect our phrase, which is simply the wise use of resources, from being bandied about by others in an inappropriate manner.

1. United Nations. 1987, Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. General Assembly Resolution 42/187.

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