

# **The Rise and Fall of the Concept Sustainability**

**By Károly Kiss**

**Corvinus University**

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### *Abstract*

#### Semantics

Twenty years ago the concept sustainability was known only by ecologists and environmental economists and its meaning was quite unambiguous: human population and activity should not surpass the carrying capacity of the biosphere, its renewing and sink capacity. Nowadays sustainability is one of the most frequently used words by economists and politicians. You can hardly read a text or an interview by a leading economist or politician where sustainability is not used several times. By now its original meaning has been faded and forgotten. It simply means „good”, a synonym for everything what is positive. The expression has been inflated, overused, misused and abused. At the same time it crowds out decent nouns and adjectives like permanent, steady, balanced, just, continuous, etc. And what is the worst; it is used completely unrelated to the natural environment.

My paper discusses the meaning and interpretation of sustainability on different levels: global, national, sectoral and corporate, as I see it, then, I shall explain the process and causes of the misuse of the concept.

#### Levels

As the global ecosystem is one, highly complex system which has a self-regulating capacity and is even capable of optimizing living conditions for its components (see the Gaia hypothesis by Lovelock), we should speak of sustainability, first of all, as a global concept, as it is really the case. The interpretation of sustainability on national levels is only justified by the fact that there exist sovereign countries and therefore the responsibility for the use and load of the biosphere is shared within them. Are there countries which are ecologically sustainable? Only the poorest ones. Thinking in global ecological footprints, developed and emerging countries all surpass the carrying capacity.

We frequently hear expressions as sustainable transport, sustainable energy industry, sustainable agriculture, sustainable consumption, etc., referring to the sectoral levels of sustainability. If sustainability is used as an alternative to the environmentally unfriendly practices, it is completely acceptable. But if it is interpreted as a requirement vis-à-vis the whole sector, the idea is not right. Countries have different natural endowments and economic structures and they can achieve a balance on the national level. (Meaning that the activity of one sector, which is unsustainable, might be balanced by an environmental friendly sector.) In this sense we can disregard of sectoral sustainability. The requirement that each sector and field should be ecologically sustainable is unrealistic. But still, interpretation of sustainability on the sectoral level (e.g. transportation) may have sense: it shows the individual environmental load of that

sector. To strive for a sector by sector observation of the concept of sustainability would not be rational. E.g., transportation would be sustainable only if it used exclusively renewable fuels.

### Corporate sustainability

Even more intriguing is the use of sustainability on the corporate level. I wonder whether firms other than operating in the alternative activities (producing renewables, organic farming, alternative sewage treatment, etc.) could be sustainable. In the overwhelming majority of the cases when it is written sustainable firm, it should be read as environmental friendly firm.

Recently, a great emphasis has been put on the social responsibility and environmental sustainability of the firms. Besides the misuse of the concept of sustainability, I do not believe in the voluntary achievement of these goals on the firm level. I think that all this is the consequence of the liberal economic policies. In the past three decades government intervention to the economy was not „fashionable”. In such cases there is not enough pressure from above on the firms to take care of the environment. As a result, corporate sustainability is a second best solution and of course, this is an extreme exaggeration. A former statement holds true here as well: we should speak about environmental friendly corporate management but by no means sustainable corporations.

### Misuse and abuse

The origin of the misuse of the concept sustainability could be traced back to the 2002 Johannesburg world summit. It was raised that the „economic” and „social” pillars or components of sustainability are equally important, beside the ecological sustainability. In a world summit where four fifths of the 200 and some countries are poor, underdeveloped states, one rightly argues that in their case economic growth and basic social rights are equally important. But this argument should not be extended to countries of abundance and consumer societies. When this has been done, and the three „pillars” have been equalized, ecological sustainability sharply loses its importance.

The equal importance of the three „legs” supposes that a trade off could be done among them in the sense that economic success of a country may mitigate the damage done to the environment. This concept does not comply with the conditions of the so called „strong sustainability” which excludes trade off between man made and natural capitals.

This diminishing of the concept of sustainability leads to its unlimited use, misuse and abuse. During the past years all European countries developed their so called SDSs (Sustainable Development Strategies). But a short review of these strategies reveals that they are ecologically unsustainable and the expression is a mere lip service to the environmental expectations. The proper title for these strategies should be environment friendly development strategies. One could argue that in the final resort this does not make any harm because it stresses the importance of the environmental issue. Nonetheless, this is untrue. These national development strategies suggest that if the economy and the society are all right, so it is with the environment. They pretend as if we were in the right direction. But we are not.

With all these national sustainable strategies, sustainable sectoral concepts and sustainable corporations we are heading for an unsustainable world.

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Dr. Károly Kiss  
Covinus University of Budapest