



# Sustainability is not enough

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**SUMMARY:** *This paper critically reviews the concept of sustainability, especially as it has come to be applied outside of environmental goals. It suggests "sustainability" should not be considered as a goal for a housing or urban programme – many bad programmes are sustainable – but as a constraint whose absence may limit the usefulness of a good programme. It also discusses how the promotion of "sustainability" may simply encourage the sustaining of the unjust status quo and how the attempt to suggest that everyone has common interests in "sustainable urban development" masks very real conflicts of interest.*

"To think that their present circumstances and their present societal arrangements might be sustained – that is an unsustainable thought for the majority of the world's people."<sup>(1)</sup>

**PROGRAMMES AND POLICIES** can be sustainable and socially just but, unfortunately, they can also be sustainable and unjust. On the other hand, unsustainable programmes may be very just but, fortunately, some very unjust programmes are also unsustainable. Examples are easy: social security for the aged has proven to be both socially desirable and very sustainable; but free reign and legal protection for real estate speculation are, in the opinion of most urbanists, very detrimental to a socially desirable environment although they seem to be quite sustainable at present. On the other hand, publicly financed, owned and operated public housing is seen by many as very desirable but also appears unsustainable on any large scale in most countries; also, forcible evictions without due process of law seems a more and more unsustainable practice in most countries. Sustainability and social justice do not necessarily go hand in hand. Sustainable, at least in its literal meaning "capable of being upheld or defended",<sup>(2)</sup> requires careful examination if we are to use it meaningfully in the arena of housing and urban development policy.

In this paper I want to make several points:

1. The formulation is a reworking of an aphorism of the Berlin Institute for Critical Theory which, building on Walter Benjamin's "...the concept of progress should be grounded in the idea of catastrophe," adds: "...that things 'just keep on going' is the catastrophe." Inkrit, Conference Announcement, July 9, 1998.

2. Oxford English Dictionary (1971), Compact Edition, page 3191. The etymology derives the word from *tenire*, "to hold", thus capable of being held on to.

- sustainability is not a goal for a programme – many bad programmes are sustainable – but a constraint; its absence may limit the usefulness of a good programme;
- while sustainability may be a useful formulation of goals on environmental issues, it is a treacherous one for urban policy because it suggests the possibility of a conflict-free consensus on policies whereas, in fact, vital interests do conflict; it will take more than simply better knowledge and a clearer understanding to produce change;
- even in the environmental arena, sustainability cannot be the sole criterion by which programmes are judged except in the, not useful, very long term because environmental policies must also take into account considerations of, for example, social justice;
- if sustainability means the ability not only to formulate and operate a desirable urban programme but also to see it continue without detracting from other, also desirable, goals, then the concept may usefully emphasize the importance of long-term practicality to the consideration of such programmes.

3. For a brief history of its current usage, see Voula Mega, one of the leading researchers in the area, in "Fragments of an urban discourse" in *Utopias and Realities of Urban Sustainable Development*, Conference Proceedings, Turin, Barolo, September 1996, pages 66-67. David Satterthwaite, of the International Institute for Environment and Development, has pointed out to me Barbara Ward's use of the phrase, in very much the Brundtland Commission's sense (see below), in the early 1970s and its somewhat unthinking adoption as a catchword by many international development agencies to mean, simply, funded projects that could survive without falling apart in the medium to long term. Letter dated July 6, 1998.

4. David Satterthwaite comments on this phenomenon, and points to its potential as an escape from recognizing direct responsibilities, in an excellent article I saw subsequent to writing this paper: Satterthwaite, D. (1997), "Sustainable cities or cities that contribute to sustainable development?" in *Urban Studies* Vol.34, No.10, pages 1667-1691.

Sustainability is both an honourable goal for carefully defined purposes and a camouflaged trap for the well-intentioned unwary. As a concept and a slogan, it has an honourable pedigree<sup>(3)</sup> in the environmental movement which has, by and large, succeeded in its fight to have the standard of sustainability generally accepted by all sides, at least in principle, although, in practice, severe conflicts of interest still beset efforts to establish specific standards. Few, these days, would contest that sustainability is something desirable in environmental terms and that represents a substantial victory for the environmental cause.

But the situation is quite different when it comes to other causes where, I will contend, sustainability is not an appropriate goal; at best it is one criterion among others, not a goal. Its acceptance would not constitute an achievement in the cause of better housing or better cities. The acceptance of sustainability, at least in principle, in the environmental arena by virtually all actors<sup>(4)</sup> has led to the desire to use such a universally acceptable goal as a slogan also in campaigns that have nothing to do with the environment but where the lure of universal acceptance is a powerful attraction. Yet, in these other areas – and I focus on housing and urban development as examples – "sustainability" is a trap. It suggests all humanity has a similar interest in

5. I have in mind formulations such as: the goal is the "...development of a housing system that is sustainable for people and the planet." Bhatti, M., Brooke, J. and M. Gison (editors) (1994), "Housing and the environment: a new agenda", Chartered Institute of Housing, Coventry, quoted in review in *Housing Studies* Vol. 12, No. 4, page 579.

6. After this was written, I came across a discussion which raised some similar issues as raised here: "...the primary environmental concerns of the more disadvantaged urban dwellers are not issues of sustainability, narrowly defined. Should a broader definition of sustainability be adopted or should the pre-eminence of sustainability concerns be rejected? ... Should the definition be reworked or ... sustainability ... be only one objective or constraint, among many?" McGranahan, G., Songsore, J. and M. Kjellen (1996), "Sustainability, poverty and urban environmental transitions" in Pugh, Cedric (editor), *Sustainability, the Environment and Urbanization*, Earthscan, London, page 103. Without resolving the question as a theoretical one, the paper goes on to point out the differentiated views on the issue by class.

7. The earliest formal usage I have found is in UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme in the early 1970s, followed by explicit focus on the term in the World Conservation Strategy of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature although it was strictly limited to environmental aspects. See Lawrence, Roderick J. (1996), "Urban environment, health and the economy: cues for conceptual clarification and more effective policy implementation" in Price, C. and A. Tsouros (editors), *Our Cities, Our Future: Policies and Action Plans for Health and Sustainable Development*, WHO Healthy Cities Project Office, Copenhagen.

8. WCED (1987), *Our Common Future*, the Brundtland Report, Oxford University Press, page 43. This and the following discussion draws on European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (1998), *Redefining Concepts, Challenges and Practices of Urban Sustainability*, The Foundation, Dublin. For an alternative formulation, see the suggestion at the conclusion of this paper.

9. The same is true of William Rees' definition: "...positive socio-economic change that does not undermine the ecological and social systems upon which communities and societies are dependent" in Rees, William (1988), "A role for environmental impact as-

"sustainable housing" or "sustainable urban development"; that if we all simply recognized our common interests everything would be fine, we could end poverty, exploitation, segregation, inadequate housing, congestion, ugliness, abandonment and homelessness. Yet, in these areas, the idea of universal acceptance of meaningful goals is a chimera. Housing and urban development are conflict-laden arenas: what benefits one hurts another. A landlord's profits are at a tenant's expense; high-rise construction casts shadows on neighbouring land uses; accessibility for one is pollution for another; security for some is taken to mean exclusion of others; profit for business owners may mean layoffs for that business's workers. Even ideologically, the parallel with environmental issues is deceptive. It is hard to argue that a little short-term pollution contributes to a better long-term environment but the argument is heard constantly that a few layoffs now will lead to increased competitiveness and fewer layoffs later.

I suggest, then, that "sustainability" as a goal for housing or urban development just doesn't work.<sup>(5)</sup> In the first place, sustainability is not a goal; it is a constraint on the achievement of other goals.<sup>(6)</sup> Look at the early,<sup>(7)</sup> and still a standard, definition, that of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) in 1987:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>(8)</sup>

Clearly, here, the goal is "meeting the needs" and the remainder, "making it sustainable", is obviously a constraint on the appropriate means to be used.<sup>(9)</sup> Other formulations, defining sustainable development through a "rule of constant capital" in which the goal is to pass on to the future the same stock of "capital" as we have today, seem to drop the broad goal entirely and simply require that the human and natural capital (a perversion of the term?) of one generation be passed on unimpaired to the next. Others focus on the "carrying-capacity of supporting ecosystems",<sup>(10)</sup> a much more questionable concept from the outset.<sup>(11)</sup>

No one who is interested in justice wants to sustain things as they are now. Sustainability plays very differently in the environmental sphere, where the whole point is simply that conditions as they are *cannot* be sustained and the only question is how rapidly to ameliorate them. If the environmental status quo were sustainable, environmentalists would be without a cause.<sup>(12)</sup> That perception is hardly prevalent in urban affairs or housing – we would hardly be satisfied if

assessment in achieving sustainable development" *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* Vol. 8, page 279.

10. The World Conservation Union, UNEP and WWF; see contributions to Price, Charles and Agis Tsouros (editors) (1996), *Our Cities, Our Future: Policies and Action Plans for Health and Sustainable Development*, WHO, Copenhagen, 1996.

11. See Marcuse, Peter (1974), "Conservation for whom?" in Smith, James Noel (editor) (1974), *Environmental Quality and Social Justice in Urban America*, The Conservation Foundation, Washington DC, pages 17-36; reprinted in *California Today* Vol. 2, No. 6, June.

12. This does not apply, of course, to the environmental justice movement whose issue is the discriminatory impact of environmental degradation. The distribution of the costs and benefits of achieving a sustainable environment remain an issue even were the goal of sustainability to be achieved, but it then becomes an issue of justice, not of sustainability.

13. On the other hand, its meaning can be made elastic and it can be redefined to encompass many other goals; but then the usefulness of the term evaporates. "A sustainable city is one which succeeds in balancing economic, environmental and socio-cultural progress through processes of active citizen participation" quoted in Mega, Voula and Jorn Pedersen (1997), *Urban Sustainability Indicators*, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Dublin, page 2. A good formulation of a goal for city development but use of the word "sustainable" does not contribute much to its meaning. Or take the even more far-reaching use in AHURI's 1997 catalogue of publications: "Sustainable issues... are taken as a general umbrella term incorporating research into processes of urbanization, globalization and economic restructuring, their urban and regional impacts, urban metabolism as a framework for analyzing quality of life and evaluating the performance of cities and their regions, strategic frameworks for regional economic development, social polarization in cities and regions, and issues of urban and regional governance" page 25. Or: "The objective of [sustainable] development would be human welfare in balance with nature, based on the values of democracy, equality before the law and social justice, for present and future generations, in the absence of ethnic, economic, social, political or gender discrimination or that based on creed" quoted in Carion, Diego (1997) "Re-thinking housing pro-

only present conditions could be sustained. In terms of our focus here, "sustainability" taken as a goal in itself only benefits those who already have everything that they want. Indeed, even focusing on environmental concerns, the problem for most of the world's poor is not that their conditions **cannot** be sustained but that they **should not** be sustained.

Sustainability as a goal in itself, if we are to take the term's ordinary meaning, is the preservation of the status quo. It would, taken literally,<sup>(13)</sup> involve making only those changes that are required to maintain that status. Presumably, that is what the World Economic Forum, held in Davos, Switzerland in 1995, had in mind when it chose as its theme "sustaining globalization".<sup>(14)</sup> One might argue that the status quo is not sustainable **socially** because an unjust society will not endure. That is more a hope than a demonstrated fact. Indeed, the argument that the trouble with present urban conditions is that they are not sustainable opens the door to a fearsome debate of six decades ago in which the durability of some form of fascism was debated and indeed widely conceded on all sides. Unjust regimes have not always historically been the most short-lived ones. Teleological views of history are out of fashion and the "end of history" argument is, rather, that the present is so sustainable that basic change is no longer conceivable, even if it were desirable.

Alternatively, one might argue, and with more evidence, that the status quo is not sustainable in strictly environmental terms; indeed, that is the origin of the "sustainability" slogan.<sup>(15)</sup> But changes within the present system may be targeted at problems of environmental degradation, global warming, etc., while leaving other key undesirable aspects, such as social injustice, intact.<sup>(16)</sup> Presumably, good planning calls for social justice as well as environmental sustainability, not just the one or the other.

The more logically defensible use of the concept of sustainability might be to consider it as a constraint: any measure, desirable on other grounds, to meet substantive goals must **also** be capable of being maintained and must contribute to the desired goal in the long run.<sup>(17)</sup> Here again, we run into problems if we are not careful to distinguish a constraint from a goal. If the sustainability of a measure is taken as a goal, the term can become either tautological or perverse. If a desired measure is socially just, the argument could go, then, and only then, is it sustainable.<sup>(18)</sup> (Any other argument would allow the conclusion that an unjust measure would be sustainable and, if that were so, would we want it or would we not reject the criterion of sustainability as validating it?) So, if justice is the standard by which sustainability is measured, why add the criterion of sustainability in judging the meas-

duction: time for responsible co-responsibility" in Habitat International Coalition (1997), *Building the City with the People*, The Coalition, San Rafael, Mexico, page 27. But a much better formulation is found on page 32 which speaks of humanizing the city. To quote Peter Hall: "The late Aaron Wildavsky once wrote a paper with the title 'If planning is everything, maybe it's nothing.' His argument could apply to sustainability as well; it could come to mean anything you think is OK and ought to be done..." in "Utopias and realities of urban sustainable development", conference proceedings, Turin, Barolo, September 1996. For one of the efforts to broaden the meaning of the term, yet give it a strongly critical meaning, see Hamm, Bernd (1992), "Introduction" in *Sustainable Development and the Future of Cities*, Trier, Centre for European Studies, page 9 onward.

14. Or, to go one step further, listen to the president and chief executive of the empowerment zone, Deborah C. Wright, who said that some of the concerns about the evolving economy of 125<sup>th</sup> Street are perhaps justified in the eyes of the community. But "...the fact is," she said, "...capitalism has no plan, except to go where money can be made. ...It's scary, frankly, because, as you know, one of the basic tenets of capitalism is that you can't control it. ...Nor do I think we want to. We want to prepare people to compete in a market based economy because that is the only thing thus far that has been shown to be *sustainable*." Or, "If a neighbourhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes. A change in social or racial occupancy generally contributes to instability and a decline in values" quoted in United States, Federal Housing Administration (1938), *Underwriting Manual: Underwriting and Valuation Procedure Under Title II of the National Housing Act*, US Government Printing Office, Section 937, Washington DC, quoted in McKenzie, Evan (1994), *Privatopia: Homeowners Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government*, Yale University Press, New Haven, page 57.

15. Actually, the term has mixed provenance. On the one hand, it is related to the "land ethic" of Aldo Leopold which is frequently cited in treatises on sustainability. See, for example, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Autumn 1997, page 513. On the other hand, it has been expanded frequently into a blanket slogan serving many purposes, as we argue at the end of this paper.

ure at all? Why not simply ask if it is just? Sustainability becomes tautological here. Presumably one does not want the perverse result that whatever can be kept up in the long run is good; the more effective the dictatorship, then, for instance, the better it would be.

If, however, sustainability is a constraint rather than a goal, then it can be used as a criterion to evaluate measures that achieve otherwise defined desirable goals; a desirable measure that is not sustainable is not as good as an equally desirable measure that is.<sup>(19)</sup> This goes beyond the Brundtland Commission definition which simply requires no harm in the long run. It means that "sustainability" is used to ask, in effect, what will be the long-term consequences of a given action or proposal? "Sustainability" is not an independent goal, the contribution to which is to be weighed along with justice, etc. in evaluating a policy: a bad policy that is sustainable is not better than a bad policy that is unsustainable.<sup>(20)</sup> Sustainability is a limitation to be viewed in the context of an evaluation of the desirability, on substantive criteria, of other measures.<sup>(21)</sup> Balancing is required: a very good programme that is not sustainable may be more desirable than a minor one that is. It may be more desirable to build 1,000 houses for low-income people this year, even if the pace cannot be sustained, rather than ten a year for the indefinite future.<sup>(22)</sup>

Perhaps "sustainable" should only mean sustainable physically, environmentally, in the long run? That is a possible interpretation,<sup>(23)</sup> a modest one indeed, but perhaps a sustainable one? It would mean that our call for a sustainable living environment simply means focusing on the constraint of environmental sustainability? But even that limited use of "sustainable" as "environmentally sustainable" raises questions. For certainly, many desirable measures have an immediate adverse effect on the environment: building housing for low-income families on open land in a possible conservation area might be a classic example.<sup>(24)</sup> Or, the reverse situation, a short-term or limited measure protecting the environment may contribute to larger longer-term damage: saving electricity in a sprawling suburban development, for instance.<sup>(25)</sup> Indeed:

"There seems to be no place for cities in ecological design. If we look at each landscape separately, we are unable to ecologically justify plans for dense urban development. From a regional perspective, however, aggregation of urban and residential land uses may in fact be preferable."<sup>(26)</sup>

Two quite separate problems arise here, one social

16. The World Business Council certainly sees "eco-efficiency" as a profitable, market consistent and indeed market driven, aspect of international business. See De Simone, Livio D. and Frank Popoff with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (1998), *Eco-efficiency: the Business Link to Sustainable Development*, MIT Press, effectively reviewed by Gina Neff, "Greenwash," *The Nation*, November 1997, page 50. De Simone is CEO of 3M and Popoff Chairman of the Board of Dow Chemical. Joshua Karliner, in *The Corporate Planet: Ecology and Politics in the Age of Globalization*, Sierra Club (1998), points out, as cited by Neff, that Chevron spent US\$ 5,000 on a butterfly protection programme at its El Segundo refinery but spent more than US\$ 200,000 producing an ad boasting about it - and el Segundo is one of the largest single sources of pollution in the greater Los Angeles area.

17. What "long run" means is, of course, always a matter for debate. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) concluded that time frames should be extended from a few years to a few generations. Cited in Lawrence, page 46 (see reference 7). But any specific definition is necessarily arbitrary.

18. "...ecological stewardship, social equity, and economic prosperity are the essential ingredients for sustainable human progress" summarizes a review of four leading works on sustainable communities. The statement is more of a postulate than a conclusion. Lukerman, Barbara L. and Rolf Nordstrom (1997) "Sustainable communities" in *Journal of the American Planning Association* Vol. 63, Autumn, page 513.

19. An interesting logical question: is a measure that is not sustainable *ipso facto* undesirable? One argument against the worship of the capitalist system as "the end of history" is that capitalism is not sustainable in its present form and that there necessarily will be other forms of economic organization replacing it because it cannot continue as it is today. Is that a logical criticism of contemporary capitalism? I think not. It only becomes such if the further argument is made that the negatives of its end will outweigh the positives of its growth. It is, then, not the fact of unsustainability that matters but the consequences that flow from it, a quite different matter. A single person's life is not "sustainable" indefinitely but that is no reason not to value it.

and political, the other scientific.

Socially, the costs of moving towards environmental sustainability (like the costs of environmental degradation)<sup>(27)</sup> will not be borne equally by everyone. In conventional economic terms, different people have different discount rates for the same cost or benefit. Meeting higher environmental standards increases costs. Some will profit from supplying the wherewithal to meet those standards; others, not being able to pay for them, will have to do without. The effects of income inequality are likely to be aggravated by such raising of standards. We encounter the problem internationally in connection with issues such as atomic power plants in developing countries without other available sources of energy or in the rainforest disputes in South America. They are paralleled by issues raised in the environmental justice movement in the United States. Better environments for some will be at the expense of worse environments for others, as waste disposal sites, air pollution and water contamination are moved around. Even when there is a solution that improves conditions for some without hurting others, the benefits will be unevenly distributed; costs and benefits to different groups and individuals cannot be simply netted out in quantitative terms.<sup>(28)</sup> The balancing act is often difficult indeed. What is clear is that the simple criterion of sustainability does not get us far.<sup>(29)</sup>

Indeed, the very definition of "better environment" varies, in practice, by class and poverty level. As McGranahan, Songsore and Kjellen point out,<sup>(30)</sup> the issues tend to vary by scale and class. In the United States (and perhaps not only in the United States - certainly historically in South Africa, also I suspect increasingly in England and, to varying degrees, elsewhere) race plays a central role: the differential location of toxic waste sites by racial composition of surroundings is a classic example. For the poor, the issues tend to be immediate and very local: water supply and waste disposal are immediate environmental problems. The affluent can escape these problems by choice of neighbourhood or private market provision; their problems tend to be on a larger scale: automobile pollution at a city level, perhaps, global warming at a national or worldwide level. The agenda even for an environmentally limited definition of sustainability will be very different for different groups.

Scientifically, our knowledge is limited and the further into the future we wish to project it, the more the uncertainties grow. Malthus, who might uncharitably be called the grandfather (and the Club of Rome its father?) of the environmental sustainability movement, calculated with the best of the scientific knowledge of his day that food production would not sustain a world population much beyond its size at the time he wrote.

20. The point is the same as with the frequent debates about whether a given proposal is "practical" or not: if practicality becomes a goal rather than a constraint, the result is sheer opportunism.

21. In the interesting evaluation of projects undertaken by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (*Towards an Economic Evaluation of Urban Innovative Projects*, Dublin, November, 1996) the usefulness of such an approach can be seen. Issues such as "level of crime" are listed as a measure of social sustainability but no distinction is made between long and short-term impacts so that unsustainable measures might well be given a higher rating than sustainable ones, e.g. police crackdowns or long prison sentences vs job generation or rehabilitation.

22. That precise calculation is made when it is decided to finance housing construction through borrowing rather than all at once, up front; more gets built now, even if the certainty of as many being built next year is reduced by the on-going burden of repayment for past construction. The opposite calculation was made by the Austrian Social Democrats in the 1920s, in deciding to pay for new social housing projects all at once, hoping thereby to make it easier to fund new construction in following years. See Marcuse, Peter (1986), "A useful instalment of socialist work: housing in red Vienna in the 1920s" in Bratt, Rachel, Hartman, Chester and Ann Meyerson (editors) (1986), *Critical Perspectives on Housing*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.

23. Not only possible, but frequent. The Sustainable Cities Programme of UNCHS/UNEP, for instance, states flatly: "The SCP activities are primarily focused upon promoting more efficient and equitable use of natural resources, and control of environmental hazards in cities..." in *Sustainable City News* (1998), Vol. 1, No. 4, June, page 1.

24. I am aware that a conflict between the two principles of low-cost housing and environmental protection can generally be avoided and is often used as a cloak to oppose housing for poor people (see Mary Brooks' work, for instance); nevertheless, the possibility of a conflict is real.

25. "The Llujjazui International Consultative Process also perpetuated the contradictory approach to 'sustainable development' planning where a designer's concerns rest with reducing energy consumption within a small spatial area while ultimately supporting

Since then, it has increased more than five-fold, and is better nourished and lives longer. We know we need to deal with the problem of global warming and we know that relying on technological fixes is dangerous. Those two propositions should lead us to scale down certain activities linked to growth and to seek substitutes for others; they mandate adoption of a limited set of specific policies to achieve specific goals by specific actors in a specific timetable. But, apart from those specific policies, a great deal is uncertain. Valid long-range concerns do not help very much in reaching a conclusion on even medium-range questions.

In any event, environmental long-term considerations are not the only ones that need to be taken into account when making decisions.<sup>(31)</sup> Other goals weigh in and other constraints need to be brought into the balance. Matters of social justice, of economic development, of international relations, of democracy, of democratic control over technological change and globalization also have both short and long-term implications. For a given policy to be desirable, it must meet the constraints of sustainability in each of these dimensions; failure in any one is, in theory, sufficient cause for rejection. Environmental sustainability seems at first blush to be the most "objective," the most inescapable, of all these constraints: if humankind dies off, the game is over. But may that not ultimately be said also if freedom or democracy or tolerance disappeared? Since none of these events would be one-shot catastrophes, is the danger of environmental degradation greater today than that of war, fascism, poverty, hunger, disease or impoverishment for large numbers of people?

The problem of balancing differing goals and constraints is a well-recognized one. There is, for instance, an important debate on the relationship between growth and development,<sup>(32)</sup> a difficult issue and one viewed very differently in the developed as against the developing world. The discussion of sustainability has made a significant contribution to advancing the understanding of policy alternatives and their implications but it is not quite clear why using the concept "sustainable" in only half of the balancing equation clarifies the debate.

If we want to talk about sustainability as a constraint affecting all goals, we not only have to face the balancing problem but we have also to recognize the practical fact that sustainability in most usages is heavily focused on ecological concerns. That is not surprising, considering that "sustainability" had its origins in the environmental movement. But why, given limited resources and limited power to bring about change, are efforts in the real world thus focused; what are the politics of the environmental sustainability movement?

broader processes, such as the plundering of China's natural resources by financial institutions which use these urban spaces as bases for their 'command and control' activities." Quoted in Olds, Kris (1997), "Globalizing Shanghai: the 'global intelligence corps' and the Building of Pudong" in *Cities* Vol. 14, No.2, pages 109-123.

26. From a review by Kristin Kaul of van der Ryn, Sim and Stuart Cowan (1995), *Ecological Design*, Island Press, Washington DC.

27. The literature, by now, is extensive. See the citations in a recent excellent review, Collin, Robin Morris and Robert Collin (1994), "Where did all the blue skies go? Sustainability and equity: the new paradigm" in *Journal of Environmental Law and Litigation* Vol.9, pages 399-460.

28. Many have made the same point. For a recent comment in our specific context, see Albrechts, Louis (1997), "Genesis of a Western European spatial policy?" in *Journal of Planning Education and Research* Vol.17.

29. David Harvey has put forward this argument very eloquently in Harvey, David (1996), *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Blackwell, London; also, more recently and concisely, in Harvey, David (1998), "Marxism, metaphors and ecological politics" in *Monthly Review*, April, pages 17-31 in which he points out that a wing of capitalism is quite content to judge sustainability in terms of the continuity of capital accumulation, and calls for a "...more nuanced view of the interplay between environmental transformations and sociality" (page 30).

30. McGranahan, G., Songsore, J. and M. Kjellen (1996), "Sustainability, poverty and urban environmental transitions" in Pugh, Cedric (1996), *Sustainability, the Environment and Urbanization*, Earthscan, London, pages 103-133.

31. As many definitions do not. See, for instance, the formulation of the Commission of European Communities: "...sustainable... is intended to reflect a policy and strategy for continued economic and social development without detriment to the environment." Cited in Lawrence, page 64 (see reference 7).

32. See, for instance, the pieces collected in Hamm, Bernd et al., (editors) (1992), *Sustainable Development and the Future of Cities*, Trier Centre for European Studies, University of Trier.

I would suggest that it is not for reasons of logic, not because the difficult issues of balance have been faced and brought to that conclusion but because of much more pragmatic concerns: that the environmental movement is a multi-class, if not indeed upper and middle-class, movement in its leadership, financing and political weight. While the environmental justice movement is making a substantial contribution both to social justice and to environmental protection, the environmental movement as a whole often proclaims itself to be above party, above controversy, seeking solutions from which everyone will benefit, to which no one can object. Thus, we get the report of a two-day workshop of the Sustainable Cities Programme stating:

"One of the most important conclusions of the meeting was that implementation of concrete actions is often hampered by a variety of obstacles, and the meeting therefore recommended and agreed that the forthcoming annual meeting of the SCP be centered around this key theme."<sup>(33)</sup>

How nice it would be if the next meeting figured out how to get over this variety of obstacles so that we could go on to other things! Perhaps it will build on the "tool development activities" of the SCP and utilize its process.

The SCP process consists of a logically sequenced and interactive set of key activities whose systematic implementation and infusion into the existing institutions would bring about profound changes in management approaches, and improvements in information, decision-making and implementation. The process forms the basis of the Source Book series.<sup>(34)</sup>

Maybe the next workshop will find a programme we can all rally round and we could escape the unpleasant business of facing conflicting interests, having to deal with the unequal distribution of power, the necessities of redistribution, the defeats that accompany the victories. No wonder "sustainability" is an attractive slogan, with such a hope! But if the goal is redistribution of wealth or opportunity, or sharing power or reducing oppression, sustainability does not get us far.

To the extent that sustainability requires the review of policies designed today to meet the needs of today in such a way that they do not make things worse in the future, it is an important, if for planners not very new, concept. It might then be reformulated, to build on the words of the Brundtland Commission:

"Sustainable development is development that meets specific needs of the present, and can be maintained



33. *Sustainable City News* Vol.1, No.4, June 1998, page 2.

34. See reference 33, page 3.

35. See the innumerable calls for "us to re-think our priorities": "A new ethic must be put into practice. But this will remain impossible unless we stop thinking of our participation in the common good as a tax", Head of the Urban Affairs Division, OECD. Or: "The developed countries have to recognize that their urban lifestyles... are an important part of the global environment problem", Klaus Töpfer, UN Commission on Sustainable Development, quoted in page (iii) of Price and Tsouris (1996), see reference 10. The creation of a President's Council on "Sustainable Development" flows from the political belief that the formulation is a non-controversial, universally accepted one.

36. A point also eloquently made by Sandra Rodriguez in "Sustainable and environmentally just societies", *Planners' Network* No.129, May 1998, pages 4-7. To quote from this: "An underlying premise in discussions of sustainability is that 'we' are in this together. This generic 'we' assumes that all people are equally to blame for society's environmental problems and that 'we' all have a responsibility to change our lifestyles to 'save the planet.' As Catherine Lerza asks, 'Are the poor, the marginalized equally to blame for the waste and pollution that exists, when they are the people least benefiting from economic growth and they are bearing most of the environmental burden?' (page 5).

into the future, without detracting from the satisfaction of other needs in the present or future."

It then amounts to little more than a call for long-term planning, something that has always been planners' bread and butter but puts perhaps a little more emphasis on long-term implications.

But the pursuit of sustainability is a snare and a delusion to the extent that calling for "sustainable" activities in any sphere, be it housing, planning, infrastructure, economic development, etc., suggests that there are policies that are of universal benefit, that everyone, every group, every interest will or should or must accept in their own best interests. If the appeal for sustainability implies that only our ignorance or stupidity prevents us from seeing what we all need, and prevents us from doing it,<sup>(35)</sup> it can undercut real reform. Indeed, a just, humane and environmentally sensitive world will, in the long run, be better for all of us. But getting to the long run entails conflict and controversy, issues of power and the redistribution of wealth. The frequent calls for "us" to recognize "our" responsibility for the environment avoids the real questions of responsibility, the real causes of pollution and degradation.<sup>(36)</sup> The slogan of "sustainability" hides rather than reveals that unpleasant fact.

We should rescue sustainability as an honourable, indeed critically important, goal for environmental policy by confining its use only to where it is appropriate, recognizing its limitations and avoiding the temptation to take it over as an easy way out of facing the conflicts that beset us in other areas of policy. If we do feel called upon to use it in the area of social policy, it should be to emphasize the criterion of long-term political and social viability in the assessment of otherwise desirable programmes and not as a goal replacing social justice, which must remain the focal point for our efforts.