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THE AGE OF **SUSTAINABILITY**

Coined 20 years ago, 'sustainability' has become one of the most important ideas of our time. What does it mean precisely, and why has it taken so long for the idea to catch on? **Words: Monica Graaff**

The word 'sustainability' is bandied around everywhere at the moment, referring to anything from 'sustainable' marriages and lifestyles to 'sustainable' agriculture and economies. Yet although *Language Monitor* judged it the most used word in 2006, indicating that it represents a state we increasingly desire, its meaning is still vague. For example, what is 'sustainable' business? Most people realise that when you talk about it, you mean more than just staying in the game for 100 years. But the precise meaning of the

word 'sustainability' – and what it would take to achieve it – remains frustratingly elusive.

A number of lexicons and new-comers to the term still think of 'sustainability' as being essentially a 'green' term – “exploiting natural resources without destroying the ecological balance of the area”, or “able to be maintained”, or “self-generating, as in wind power” – but it is, and has for 20 years, been a lot more than that.

It owes its deeper meaning to the World Commission on Environment and Development of twenty years ago – 1987 – which produced a landmark report, *Our Common*

Future. Chaired by the Norwegian Prime-Minister Gro Harlem Brundlant, it coined the most used definition of the idea:

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

What is often forgotten is that Brundlant's definition specifically elaborates that while *ability* is based on “the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment”, *needs* refers in particular to “the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given”. (In 'sustainability-speak' – and without wanting to detract



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The ultimate in ecologically friendly travel...

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The first wave started in the early 60s with the emergence of the WWF, Friends of the Earth, and Green Peace; gathered momentum with disasters like Chernobyl; and peaked at the United Nations first environmental conference in Stockholm (1972). As it subsided, industry was left on the defensive, and

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from the complex inter-relationship between the two elements – the first bit is ‘green’, and the second [social] bit is ‘brown’.)

This is not to say that ‘brown’ issues have slipped off the global ‘sustainable development’ agenda. The ‘triple bottom line’ was formulated in 1994 specifically to remind business leaders there was a social agenda to be addressed alongside eco-efficiency. Today most corporate governance practices demonstrate a concern for both the environment and the poor, including The Global Compact, which has been adopted by more than two hundred of the most powerful large multinationals worldwide. (It enlists businesses to adopt ten ‘universal’ principles concerning human rights, labour, the environment, and corruption.) And at a political level, brown issues are part and parcel of the Millennium Development Goals, the initiative joined by most United Nations members to halve global

poverty by 2015.

Nonetheless, whenever you say ‘sustainability’, many people still tend to see ‘green’ and ‘longevity’ before they see ‘brown’.

The bleak conundrum of poverty, wealth and diminishing resources has long been debated - just look at the limits to growth theories of the 18th century clergyman Thomas Malthus, or Russian playwright Anton Chekhov’s poignant play about deforestation, *The Cherry Orchard*, written over 100 years ago. But in 1962, the idea found fertile ground with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which apart from influencing the banning of DDT, quite literally, to quote Al Gore, “changed the course of history”.

John Elkington, the man who invented the ‘triple bottom line’, describes the development as having taken shape in four waves, culminating in our current acute awareness of global warming which has given rise to a flurry of debate and action.



with a raft of new environmental laws.

The second wave – the period in which ‘sustainable development’ was actually defined – was majorly influenced by the world having to deal with the depleting ozone layer. It caught political leaders such as Margaret Thatcher,

George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev off balance and having to make their first 'green' speeches. And while previously industry could slow down or gut the new laws, now, under pressure from NGOs and consumers, they had to clean up their act. Lead went from petrol; mercury from batteries; phosphates from detergents; chlorine from paper.

Unhappily, says Elkington, the second wave petered out in the absence of sustained consumer and customer demand. The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro – of which the Johannesburg WSSD 2002 was the 10th anniversary – helped advance 'sustainability', as did controversies created by Shell, Nike and Monsanto. But generally, many companies delegated

ered into life in 1999 with a spurt of civil society protest, first in Seattle and then elsewhere, against the policies and actions of the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank and the World Economic Forum. Then 9/11 happened and the impetus ended abruptly as terrorism became the new focus.

The fourth wave is only just upon us, thanks to the UK's 2006 Stern Report on the economic impacts of global warming and Al Gore's book and movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Real concern about global warming is directing thoughts away from corporate compliance, green-wash marketing and short-term risk management, towards the more practical direction of busi-

ness to really expect more of at this stage.

Language develops over time. For example, the Inuit, who are so dependent on snow that they have many different words for it, would probably have taken a while to develop a shared meaning of each word. Initially they would have had to go through a rigmarole of explaining what snow X and snow Y meant, but after a while they wouldn't need to any more. They would just know. As Donella Mathews, a sociologist who worked among them says, "That's where we are right now ... (defining 'sustainability') is a mess. But social transformations are messy."

It is easy to use lack of agreement around the precise meaning of an

actions of government and business are meeting their mark. Elkington believes they are, but "the biggest shift now needed involves fundamental changes... in politics, government and public policy... as well as (post-9/11) definitions of security".

It is also fascinating to ask why, if 'sustainability' is the 'Big Issue', it has taken so long to take hold?

Michael Hopkins, the chair of the International Centre for Business Performance and Corporate Responsibility at Middlesex University, offers this: "...even key issues need long-term planning, patient organisation, hard work, and good (or bad) timing before they move onto the global

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Pollution on outskirts of Xianyang in northern China

ness 'survival', where 'sustainability' is inculcated into long-term strategic thinking. The new rule of the game, says Elkington, is about "creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial solutions (to an increasingly real problem at hand)".

While 'sustainability' is an idea that has been taking shape over the last 35 years, we are still haggling over its precise or 'right' meaning. Meanwhile the Earth's resources continue to decline more rapidly and the average quality of life for human beings and most other life forms continues to decrease. Perhaps it is best that we settle for confusion while we get on with some real action. 'Sustainability' is a concept far too vast and complex

excuse to limit practical action, but to me, 'sustainability' has a basic meaning and that in itself, is sufficient. We need a pragmatic approach that accommodates a multiplicity of meanings, opinions and implementation strategies in order to galvanise action. A state of total agreement would simply invite our western minds to do what we are trained to do so well – box things. And when we do this, we often come up with such a narrow vision of what needs to be done that we miss the point entirely. Indeed, that we don't agree is likely to give rise to more creativity and more widespread, possibly better solutions.

The more important question at the moment is whether the best-intentioned 'sustainable development'

agenda. It is regrettable, but true, that the process seems also to require a few disasters to help wake the world's population from its slumbers."

He adds, and here comes the 'brown' bit of 'sustainability': "By contrast, the catastrophe of endemic, routine underdevelopment (of the poor) wakes a few souls from time to time, but the urgency has never been there. Perhaps the new concern with global warming may spill over into sustainable development for all?"



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'sustainability' to corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments (or they paid lip service to the new buzzwords 'corporate citizenship' and 'stakeholder engagement', rather than putting sustainability on the main agendas of their board meetings).

The third wave was short-lived. It flick-