



Understanding Sustainability: The Importance of Sustainable Development and Comprehensive Planning¹

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This paper is part of a series of discussions on sustainable development. This series includes specialized papers on sustainability, local planning, and comprehensive plans.

Introduction

Sustainability in a general sense can be seen as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Environmentalists have long warned that our current patterns of economic growth and resource consumption so severely threaten the earth's carrying capacity that ecological collapse is likely, if not inevitable. Traditionally, there have been two arguments against this view. First, there are those who deny that we are at a crisis point and claim that the alarmist rhetoric used by the environmental movement is not based on firm scientific facts. The second criticism, decidedly economic in tone, holds that high costs of environmental protection place too heavy a burden on business and industry, and stifle economic growth.

While both positions are both found in policy debates, there is now widespread recognition that

human actions threaten the long-term economic, social and environmental wellbeing. This shift in attitudes—among both the public and policymakers—has opened the way for new approaches to meeting the pressing resource needs of a rapidly growing population while minimizing environmental damage.

Throughout Florida many of our communities are threatened as population growth, land use pressure, and other conditions force out long-time residents or significantly alter ways of life for others. Similarly, many of our communities have become increasingly tied to outside corporate and development decisions. Such ties limit local autonomy and decision-making capacities. There is substantial potential that lays in the studying of local cultures and using their social norms as a tool for achieving sustainability. Local people are in a far better position than are outside entities to understand their needs, natural resource bases, and the limits to which development can extend. The creation of a viable sustainable community cannot focus narrowly on the environmental context, but must also address the social, economic, and cultural lives of its residents. In this light, a need exists for local, state,

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and federal policy makers to have a clear understanding of the larger picture that makes sustainability. Many long lasting cultures around the world have remained somewhat self-sufficient and live in a sustainable manner. As a result of their longevity, they clearly understand what sustainability is and how to achieve it. The study of local cultures provides possible new ideas and approaches for developing larger sustainable communities. By paying attention to and incorporating cultural values, traditions, and histories, sustainable development can become a reality.

Perspective on Sustainable Development: Two Traditional Views

The concept of sustainable development (also, sustainable community development) emerged as an issue in the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio. There, proposals to advance interests such as biodiversity conservation and control of greenhouse emissions were met with skepticism by many nations of the south. They believed that their economic development would be undermined if such proposals were implemented. The concept of sustainable development was incorporated into the treaties that emerged from the Earth Summit to reconcile tensions between desires for economic development and environmental protection.

Most definitions of sustainable development are based on intergenerational equity. This concept is well captured by the idea that "...the current generation must not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their material needs and enjoy a healthy environment."³ Advocates of sustainable development generally agree that the present use of natural resources should not result in a diminished standard of living for future generations. However, interpretations of how sustainability can be achieved fall into two distinct camps which naturally lead to different definitions of sustainable development.

Constrained Growth

Advocates of the constrained-growth position argue that sustainable development is "...the pursuit of growth subject to environmental constraints."⁴ Constrained growth involves two separate stages. First, contractual arrangements based on ecological criteria must be established. Following this, the standard utilitarian objective of maximizing economic returns is pursued. This definition differs little from standard, neoclassical approaches to economic development. It simply qualifies utility maximization by adding ecological considerations. Although pursued in a slower and more ecologically sensitive manner, growth is still the primary objective, and it is this definition that dominates official discourse. For instance, the influential 1987 report prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development,⁵ while extensively detailing the environmental consequences of unregulated growth, nevertheless concludes that sustainability depends on continued growth: "If large parts of the developing world are to avert economic, social, and environmental catastrophes, it is essential that global economic growth be revitalized."⁶ Such a conclusion, according to Korten, contradicts the Commission's own analysis, which concludes "... that growth and overconsumption are root causes of the problem."⁷ Continued growth, even if planned with ecological considerations in mind, ignores the mounting evidence which suggests that current demands now exceed what the ecosystem can sustain.⁸

Other critics of the constrained-growth approach argue that equating sustainable development with sustainable growth is contradictory and misleading.⁹ When sustainable development is used in such a context, it is often employed as a mechanism by which both governments and international aid agencies co-opt and placate opposition to growth.¹⁰ In short, critics of the constrained-growth approach to sustainable development see it as a smokescreen, which obscures the ecologically disruptive consequences of conventional development strategies.¹¹

Resource Maintenance

The resource-maintenance position is rooted in the above criticisms and emphasizes the maintenance of existing and future resources rather than continued growth. In the resource-maintenance approach, efforts are focused on minimizing the impact on the environment through limiting our use of natural resources while simultaneously meeting the material needs of people.¹² Development is not achieved by determining a sustainable level of growth and pursuing traditional economic objectives. Rather, the protection of natural resources is an explicit goal placed on equal footing with economic considerations.

The resource-maintenance approach requires a fundamental rethinking of our relationship to the environment, consumption patterns, and standards of living. It is most clearly (and some would say radically) articulated by proponents of the "deep ecology" movement, such as Arne Naess. Chief among the changes called for in the resource-maintenance approach are: an appreciation of the intrinsic value of the natural environment and all life forms; satisfaction of vital needs rather than desires; anti-consumerism and minimization of personal property; and, the use of simple and appropriate technology whenever possible.¹³

Above all, what distinguishes the resource-maintenance perspective from the constrained-growth model is the former's very different definition of development. From the resource-maintenance perspective, growth is defined as a "... quantitative expansion of the physical dimensions of the economic system, while development should refer to the qualitative change of a physically non-growing economic system in dynamic equilibrium with the environment."¹⁴ At the heart of this distinction is the idea that the earth is finite and non-growing, and that any physical subsystem must also eventually become non-growing. Hence, it makes no sense to speak of sustainable growth because the concept is contradictory.¹⁵ Sustainable development, however, focuses on resource maintenance and involves no such contradiction.

Where do we draw the line?

For clarity, we have described the constrained-growth approach and the resource-maintenance approach as if there were little common ground between them. However, in practice, the distinctions are less clear. For one thing, most proponents of both positions agree that intergenerational equity is central to any reasonable discussion of sustainability. Moreover, those who hold to the constrained-growth approach recognize the need for the affluent countries of the north to reduce their consumption of natural resources and consumer goods, and they agree that efforts to achieve sustainability "...must recognize ecological interdependence as well as the interdependence of humans and the natural environment."¹⁶

For their part, proponents of the resource-maintenance approach have difficulty maintaining a rigid distinction between growth and development. Some allow, for instance, that short-term economic growth in certain parts of the world may be a necessary prerequisite to sustainable development.¹⁷ In fact, given the extent to which the belief system associated with capitalism has penetrated nations of the south, it may be politically impossible for the north to demand that their less fortunate neighbors pursue policies which strictly adhere to the idea that development involves "...the qualitative change of a physically non-growing economic system in dynamic equilibrium with the environment."¹⁸

From Sustainable Development to Sustainable Communities

It is at the community level where the consequences of environmental degradation are most keenly felt and where successful intervention is most noticeable. There also often tends to be greater confidence in government and other local action at this level. The combination of these factors creates a climate that is conducive to the kind of long-term local coordination implicit in the term, "sustainable development." Equally important, sustainable development rooted in local communities has the advantage of flexibility. Communities differ in terms of environmental problems, natural and human

resource endowments, physical and climatic conditions, and levels of economic and social development. Adopting a "one-size-fits-all" approach is simply not possible in achieving sustainability. A community-level approach allows for the design of policies and practices that are sensitive to the opportunities, constraints, and uniqueness inherent to particular places. In more specific terms, the ideal sustainable community can be achieved along five dimensions.¹⁹

Local Economic Diversity

There is an emphasis on increasing local economic diversity. Included is a move away from the often standard interest in bringing in national "box stores" in order to encouraging locally-owned businesses. Support for entrepreneurial efforts and small business development/retention is the key here. Similarly, efforts to encourage local buying and patronage also facilitates this diversity. Both may seem like an idealistic vision for economic diversity, but in reality, recent trends toward and demands for organic farming, specialty businesses, and unique tourism ventures speak to the significant impact locally based businesses can have.

Self-reliance

Self-reliance, the second dimension, is closely related to economic diversity. Self-reliance entails the development of local markets, local production, local processing of previously imported goods, and greater cooperation among local economic entities. Self-reliant communities would still be linked to the larger economic system, but would have vibrant, locally administered economies that would better protect them from the whims of global markets and corporations. Again, efforts to promote entrepreneurial efforts and locally owned small businesses would contribute to sustainability in this area.

Efficiency

A third dimension involves a reduction in the use of energy coupled with the careful management and recycling of waste products. Ideally, this means that the use of energy and materials should be in balance with the locality's ability to absorb waste. However,

it also reflects an efficient use of available resources, as well as planning for long-term resource needs. The presence of local culture and familiarity with resources make local decision-making imperative for sustainable usage of these resources.

Stewardship

The fourth dimension focuses on the protection and enhancement of biological diversity and careful stewardship of natural resources. Sustainable communities recognize the local resources that historically have contributed to their survival. These resources, be they forests, coastal areas, or farmlands, are part of local culture and significant to local social and economic life. Careful management and extensive deliberation on their uses is essential to sustainable development. Usage should also be in accordance with long held techniques for sustainable use.

Social Justice

Sustainable communities are committed to providing for the housing needs, social needs, and living needs of all residents, without the class- and race-based spatial separation of households and neighborhoods that is typical of many localities. The need for such social justice also ensures equality of access to public services, and contributes to an overall, greater community well-being in both the short- and long-term.

Perhaps most important to all of the above, sustainable communities should strive to create an empowered citizenry that can effectively participate in the decision-making process. Without locally controlled development, the chances of achieving sustainability are dim. To achieve such local empowerment, several conditions are vital.

So How Do We Get There from Here?

Increased community capacity building

Through Extension and other change agents, local capacity and broad-based civic engagement must be encouraged. This can take the form of community organizing and advanced training and

support for nonprofits and grassroots organizations (organizing, grant writing, management) to help achieve an active citizenry. Also, included is the development of structures where the young and others can learn skills and achieve ownership of sustainability building efforts. Such approaches should motivate and transfer skills to people who are involved.

Broad-based local representation inclusive of the diversity in the local population

For all local planning efforts to be effective and sustainable, local committees and planning efforts must be reflective of the local population. This includes long time residents, but also newcomers. Without such local representation, the potential for select groups to be excluded, ignored, and eliminated from decision-making exists. Broad-based representation is essential in that it maximizes local resources and skills for action, helps guard against local action being dominated by local elites, and ensures that the needs of all local groups are met. Furthermore, it ensures that the past experiences, traditions, and cultural behaviors that contribute to sustainability are not lost or ignored. Community input can be solicited through traditional methods as well as email, fax, or other avenues of communication.

Stronger promotion, input, and recognition of the uniqueness of local communities and their potential for unique, locally-based development and sustainability

Social, economic, and other development should build on the uniqueness of local culture, history, and community identity. All of our communities have uniqueness; focusing on these characteristics allows for local control over development rather than the common dependence on outside developers and corporations.

Sustainability and Comprehensive Planning: Florida's Future

Sustainability is a concept that recognizes that natural systems are essential to providing both economic needs and quality of life. Because sustainability has become an important topic

relatively only recently, very few local comprehensive plans have incorporated sustainability. Sustainability has the ability to positively affect almost all levels and departments in local government. Reduced energy and water consumption, waste reduction, and improved development standards are paramount to a sustainable government and should be incorporated into local comprehensive plans. As a result, this is the first article in a series that will provide a better understanding of sustainability, sample sustainability comprehensive plan language, and tips on how to begin the process in your local government.

Additional Notes:

3. S.S. BATIE, Sustainable Development: Challenges to the Profession of Agricultural Economics, *AM. J. AG. ECON.*, December, 1989, 1083–1084.
4. *Id.*
5. WCED, *supra*, n. 3. The World Commission on Environment and Development is also known as the Brundtland Commission. Both titles are used interchangeably.
6. WCED, *supra*, quoted in KORTEN, *supra*, n. 3, 9 *WORLD POL'Y J.* at 161.
7. KORTEN, *supra*, n. 3, 9 *WORLD POL'Y J.* at 161.
8. DEVAL & G. SESSIONS, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Peregrin Smith, Salt Lake City, UT 1985); KORTEN, *supra*, n. 3.
9. H.E. DALY & J.B. COBB, JR., *For the Common Good*, (Beacon Press, Boston, MA 1989); LELE, *supra*, n. 4.
10. F.H. BUTTEL & G.W. GILLESPIE, JR., *Agricultural Research and Development and the Appropriation of Progressive Symbols: Some Observations on the Politics of Ecological Agriculture* (Cornell U. Dept of Rural Soc. Bulletin No. 151, 1988).
11. D. WORSTER, *The Shaky Ground of Sustainability*, in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* 417 (George Sessions, ed., Shambhala, Boston, MA 1995).
12. S.S. BATIE, Sustainable Development: Challenges to the Profession of Agricultural Economics, *AM. J. AG. ECON.*, December, 1989 at 1083, 1085.
13. ARNE NAESS, *Deep Ecology and Lifestyle*, in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* 259 (George Sessions, ed., Shambhala, Boston, MA 1995).
14. H.E. DALY & J.B. COBB, JR., *For the Common Good*, (Beacon Press, Boston, MA 1989) at 71.
15. *Id.* at 72.

16. E.N. CASTLE, A Pluralistic, Pragmatic and Evolutionary Approach to Natural Resource Management, 56 FOREST ECOLOGY & MGT 279, 281 (1993).
17. S. LELE, *supra*, n. 4.
18. DALY & COBB, *supra*, n. 27 at 71.
19. A.E. LULOFF, J.C. BRIDGER & M.A. BRENNAN, Achieving Sustainable Communities, in Biodiversity Conservation Handbook (R.B. McKinstry, Jr., C.M. Ripp, E. Lisy, eds., Environmental Law Institute, Washington, DC, 2006).