

## Talk to SAFAD: Cranfield University

### Sustainable Development: Where are We?

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Unlike most others concerned with sustainable development, SAFAD has always been down to the real grass roots of the problems which were laid out in the UN Millennium Development Goals. These Goals seem as far from achievement as ever. Today I want to say something about the background to them, and the differentiation of responsibility of dealing with them.

The Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development has been well described as “disaster averted: opportunity lost”. It is difficult sometimes to give a coherent account of what it was all about, or indeed what sustainable development really means. Many have tried, including me. But I think that the best definition is encapsulated in a sound bite: “treating the Earth as if we intended to stay”.

On that criterion Johannesburg was scarcely a success. Governments patched together a political declaration and a plan of implementation which, on careful scrutiny, contained little that had not been said or pledged before. Indeed both demonstrated how little progress, if any, had been made since the Rio Summit on Environment and Development ten years before. The attitude of the United States was positively negative throughout. No wonder that the Secretary of State, who represented President Bush, had such a hostile reception. Yet all was not a failure. The many alliances between business and industry on one hand and non governmental and regional organizations on the other were new and promising. The kind of things which SAFAD has been doing won recognition. Greater understanding of traditionally divergent points of view showed new appreciation of the hazards, environmental, economic and social, we all face.

But Johannesburg was a meeting which in no way responded to the many threats facing the good health of the Earth as a whole. Nor did it suggest rational ways of coping with them. For we are in a unique situation, well brought out in a recent book on the 20th century entitled **Something New Under the Sun**, and made specific in the Declaration made by over a thousand scientists from the four great global research programmes at Amsterdam in July 2001. There it was stated squarely that:

- “Human activities have the potential to switch the Earth’s System to alternative modes of operation that may prove irreversible and less hospitable to humans and other life... The nature of changes now occurring simultaneously in the Earth’s system, their magnitudes and rates of change are unprecedented. The Earth is currently operating in a no-analogue state”.
- “The accelerating human transformation of the Earth’s environment is not sustainable. Therefore the business-as-usual way of dealing with the

Earth's System is not an option. It has to be replaced as soon as possible by deliberate strategies of management that sustain the Earth's environment while meeting social and economic development objectives".

No wonder that Crutzen and Stoermer have labelled the present epoch since the beginning of the industrial revolution as the Anthropocene.

The growing division of humanity between rich and poor was the subject of much rhetoric. By contrast little was said about the continuing pressure of human population increase. Advocates of market forces have suggested that these will eventually bring their version of development to all. The trends suggest the opposite. In assessing progress on the Millennium Development Goals stated in July last year, the UN Secretary General well said:

“There is no autopilot, there is no magic of the market place, no rising tide of the global economy that will lift all boats, guaranteeing that all goals will be reached by 2015.”

Over the 1990s progress has been made in East Asia, but for the rest of the poorer countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, most indicators, especially key ones such as clean water supplies, poverty, lack of education, resistance to disease, and child mortality, remain stubbornly high. According to the UN, malnutrition in sub-Saharan Africa has increased.

At present about 20% of the world's people consume between 70% and 80% of its resources. That 20% enjoy about 45% of its meat and fish, and use 68% of electricity (most generated from fossil fuels), 84% of paper, and 87% of cars. The dividing line between rich and poor is not only between countries but also within them. Even in India and China, the rift is between globalized rich and the localized poor. There has been debate whether globalization has exacerbated this divide. The UNDP Human Development Reports, especially that of 1999, suggest that it has.

Before the Johannesburg Summit took place, there was a series of Round Tables of so-called Eminent Persons from the six major regions of the world. I chaired the first of them for Europe and North America. Our main conclusions were:

- Environmental problems went far beyond the remit of governments. Citizens and governments alike had to rethink what they meant by “development” in industrial just as much as in other countries.
- Consumer ideas and behaviour everywhere were simply unsustainable. Current models for society were dangerously obsolete.
- Likely impacts of climate change in an already overcrowded world were far more serious than had so far been recognized. The implications for energy policy were critical.
- We needed new international institutions to measure up to, and coordinate the human response to the problems human actions had created.

Other Round Tables came out with very similar conclusions. We put the points as best we could. But overall I am afraid there was very little result at the conference itself.

Where should we go next with sustainability? What should our priorities be?

Top of my list is to rethink a lot of economics. I hope there are some economists present. I do not think that anyone would disagree with the statement by a well-known economist that “the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment”. In short without a healthy environment, there can be no healthy economy. But there is a real difficulty on how to assess health. The ideologues of free trade like to suggest the price mechanism. But as another distinguished American once remarked: “Markets are superb at setting prices, but incapable of recognizing costs”. Prices are indicators. But we have to make sure that they tell the truth about costs. A pricing system should include not only the traditional costs, but also those involved in replacing the resource, and those of the damage that use of the resource may do.

In short current market economics will not do because it does not internalize costs. We need new systems of measurement and new definitions of wealth as well as of that phrase beloved of politicians “economic growth”. We should heed the words of Oystein Dahle, former Vice President of Esso for Norway and the North Sea who once said: " Socialism collapsed because it did not allow prices to tell the economic truth. Capitalism may collapse because it does not allow prices to tell the ecological truth."

There is indeed a phenomenon which has been called the “ecological overshoot” of the human economy. According to a paper in the Proceedings of the US National Academy of Science of July 2002, it is manifest in six main human activities that absorb natural resources and occupy productive biological space. They are growing crops (food, animal feed, fibre, oil and rubber); grazing animals (meat, hides, wool and milk); harvesting wood (timber, fibre and fuel); fishing (marine and freshwater); building (housing, transport, industry and hydroelectric power); and burning fossil fuel. The scale of such activities has created a demand which since the end of the 1970s exceeds the biocapacity of the Earth to supply. The ecological overshoot could have been as much as 20% of supply by the beginning of this century.

I do not want to sound apocalyptic. Many things are getting better for the human condition: slowing of population growth, higher living standards for more people, new and ingenious applications of science and technology. As was recently said by Jeff Sachs, now at Columbia University, “we are passing through a bottleneck, but not going over a cliff”. Somehow we must deal with the problems of excessive exploitation of resources, of energy generation, of global governance, and above all of abuse of the natural world, of which we are a small and immodest part.

Some history is there as a warning. Since the last ice age ended some 11,000 years ago, there have been around thirty urban societies. Some lasted longer than others. But nearly all crashed sooner or later, and the underlying cause was a mismatch between human demand and natural supply, in short unsustainability.

You may wonder how changes in direction ever take place. The power of inertia is immensely strong, especially in the functioning engine-room of society – the middle ranks – whether in government, business or elsewhere. It is all too easy to get lost in

the sheer mechanics of making things work. Such changes usually occur at a low and stately pace as new generations come of age. But this time the combination of the environmental and political agendas has urgency.

Change usually takes place for three main reasons. First through leadership from above by institutions or individuals; secondly through public pressure from below; and thirdly – however regrettably – through some useful catastrophes to jerk us out of our inertia into more sensible courses. These changes come in different combinations, and create unique sets of problems. Johannesburg did not find the answers to them, but answers must be found sooner rather than later. Over to you and me!