

Introduction

There is a word for it: *Zeitgeist*. A German word meaning something like climate or spirit of the times. Today, the *Zeitgeist* is one that embraces a growing recognition that human actions have impacted seriously and negatively on our planet's ecosystems. Debates over climate change are now focusing on mitigation and adaptation rather than whether it is happening or what is causing it. The answer to this last question is fairly simple and generally agreed. Human action is the predominant cause of the massive and rapid acceleration of greenhouse gasses, global warming and climate turbulence. Our ways of doing business, of producing goods and services, have used the Earth's resources as if they were inexhaustible. The Earth itself has been treated simultaneously as a factory, pleasure park, garbage dump, larder, marketplace and war zone. It is self-evident that we, as a species, cannot continue as we are doing. Obscene poverty and fabulous wealth live side by side, and the natural world, for many, can not be accessed at all. Things are not what they used to be, although poverty, inequality, injustice, environmental degradation and war are not exactly modern phenomena. But now we cannot simply continue in the same old way without putting the future at risk of not happening at all. Hence the imperative of sustainable development – our evolving spirit of the times. It has been a long time coming and there have been many resistances and refusals along the way. For instance, we have

known about climate change for many years but refused to acknowledge that we were mainly responsible for it. Too big a responsibility for us to handle? Or just an inconvenient truth? It is as ridiculous to be a climate change denier as it is to believe the Earth is flat. Attitudinal and political change is happening slowly, too slowly perhaps; but it is happening.

Sustainable development is simple. It is the idea that the future should be a better, healthier, place than the present. The idea is not new, but the way it is understood, reflected upon, cultivated and implemented possibly is. Neither modern nor postmodern, sustainable development requires an understanding of the natural world and the human social world as being not so much 'connected' as one and the same. Sustainable development is a process that requires us to view our lives as elements of a larger entity. It requires a holistic way of looking at the world and human life. It requires a recognition that other people may not see things like this at all and will have different perceptions, values, philosophies, aims and ambitions. It requires an understanding that the world is multi-faceted, fragmented and complete. This may not be easy to grasp at first, but it is a way of looking at the world and one which increasingly makes sense. That, in any case, is my view.

There are other views. Sustainable development is the product of many stories, worldviews, values, actions and perspectives

which to be fully appreciated require a readiness to listen to others, respect differences, suspend established opinions, and see with others' eyes while allowing other voices to resonate and be heard. Sustainable development both requires dialogue and is a dialogue of values. That is the underpinning rationale of this book in offering a series of guides and signposts to a range of contributions to this dialogue. Of course, this view is both contestable and not particularly original, but if elements within the text motivate further thought, reflection and dialogue, then hopefully our understanding of sustainable development will have been advanced just a little bit further.

Many people are coming to sustainable development with little understanding of the key issues and debates. They may have a deep and detailed knowledge of one specific area, but only the vaguest of inklings of anything beyond. Others may have a general but confused understanding of the theories and perspectives because they are immersed in its practice. Some people see sustainable development as essentially about the environment, and indeed sustainable development has its

roots in ensuring that the planet's ecosystems are protected from the ravages of human civilization. Maybe the best way to view sustainable development is as a collage or a kaleidoscope of shapes, colours and patterns that change constantly as we ourselves change. It is for us, therefore, to make sense of the world in all its complexity. We must avoid imposing convenient conceptual frameworks which the world just does not fit but which we find comfortable or accessible. There is a need to acknowledge that we do not, and maybe cannot, understand everything, however hard we might try. Uncertainty and the incomplete nature of our knowledge do not require us to apply simple, or simplistic, solutions to problems. Complex problems require complex solutions. Sustainable development warrants an attitude of mind that welcomes change, difference, creativity, risk, uncertainty, a sense of wonder, and a desire and capacity to learn. It is a heuristic – a way of learning about life and through life. The importance of learning should never be forgotten. We can only grow, flourish and be sustainable if we learn.

Speaking Personally

Having just written about values, perspectives and sustainable development, it is perhaps only right to say a little about my own understanding of sustainable development and my own learning and journey towards it. Like so many other things, my values have evolved, taken on different hues, as I have learned more about the world, other people and myself. Having been a teacher in adult, further and higher education for about 25 years, learning is actually my business as well as my

passion. I have noticed my social, political and ethical values becoming slowly greener with the years. I have a strong commitment to social and environmental justice, and a number of writers and practitioners have been significant influences on my learning journey. I have been particularly open to the social ecology of Murray Bookchin, the bioregionalism and humanism of Lewis Mumford, and increasingly the ancient wisdom and spiritual engagement of indigenous peoples. The work

of Greg Buckman, Wolfgang Sachs and Vandana Shiva has been extremely important for me too. Finally, I have always been most at ease with an interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary approach to understanding the world around us. No one discipline can generate a holistic understanding of human beings and their relationship to the planet or each other. Having said this, I have nonetheless tried to be even handed in my selection and account of ideas, values, issues and actions discussed in this book. I have used a variety of sources and have learned a great deal from many people – friends, family, students and

colleagues. Teaching is the corollary of learning, but our learning must not simply be confined to abstract academic exercises or a playing with words. Learning must be married to change, and words to action. As the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (Ziff, 1982, p61) wrote in his famous 1836 essay *Nature*:

Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop and impoverish it. An action is the perfection and publication of thought. A right action seems to fill the eye, and be related to all nature.

Outline of the Book

The chapters of this book are relatively self-contained, but together make for an understanding of sustainable development that celebrates complexity and diversity. The various sections hopefully demonstrate why sustainable development is such a necessity. Theoretical discussions are interspersed with empirical case studies, and at the end of each chapter are some 'thinking questions' that may serve as guides for future and continuing reflection.

Chapter One focuses on issues of globalization and sustainable development by exploring four specific worldviews and then moving on to examine how the language of economics has shaped much of the discourse. The human experience of economic growth and development offers many salutary lessons – poverty, sweatshops, debt, slums and crime. The work of renowned economists Jeffrey Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz and the more radical critiques of globalization articulated by Greg Buckman and George Monbiot are also discussed. Frequently, the story of sustainable

development is told through the establishment and work of major institutions, and this chapter does that too with sections on the World Bank, the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the major international milestones that encompass Stockholm, Rio, Kyoto, Johannesburg, Seattle and other iconic place names. Towards the end of the chapter the focus narrows to show how sustainable development policy has been articulated in a national context, and, using the example of the ongoing struggles to conserve the ancient temperate forests of British Columbia in Clayoquot Sound, the relationship between the local and the global is analysed. Finally, the idea of sustainable development constituting a 'dialogue of values' is outlined.

Chapter Two explores some of the major philosophical, theoretical and ethical contributions to the evolving process of sustainable development. Each section is connected so that the reader may detect similarities and differences between the various perspectives

and may gain the opportunity to learn new things or perhaps revisit previously discounted points of view. From 'deep ecology' to 'actor network theory' to 'environmental modernization', this chapter maps sustainable development's intellectual terrain. Chapter Three extends these earlier excursions by reviewing some of the major controversies, disputes and conflicts which sustainable development has stimulated. The ideas and priorities of the Danish statistician Bjørn Lomborg, whose view on climate change and much else is hotly contested, shows how energetic the debate can be and how a certain contrariness can motivate others to develop, refine and rearticulate their own views. The role and meaning of 'sound science' is also explored using genetic modification as an example. Some space is also dedicated to outlining the concept of the risk society and its relevance to understanding the idea that ultimately sustainability is a political act.

Chapter Four moves towards the social and environmental spheres by discussing the growing significance of the environmental justice movement. The reality of the poor, the disadvantaged and the exploited always seeming to be the victims of corporate greed, government corruption or history demonstrates that at the core of sustainable development is a moral imperative. Given the unavoidable and mesmerizing advances of new media technologies throughout the globe, the significance of information and communication technology (ICT) is also explored as a means towards fashioning a more just and healthy world. Chapter Five shifts the focus onto the political, looking at human agency, ecological democratization, environmental campaigning, civic action, the politics of place and community empowerment. The idea that sustainable development

is not just environmentalism is reinforced throughout by demonstrating the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues, actions, challenges and hopes of many sustainability practitioners. Human beings have the capacity, and the capability, to right the wrongs and repair the damage they have done if they have the collective will to do so. Chapter Six examines the central importance of economics and business, which have been frequently viewed as a major cause of the problem but are now increasingly seen as a necessary part of the solution. How could it be otherwise, given their overwhelming importance in fashioning everyone's ways of life, material wellbeing and life opportunities? Views of course differ, ranging from the revolutionary dismantling of the global economic system to its restructuring and reshaping through processes of localization, eco-efficiency and corporate responsibility as exemplified by such companies as Interface and such practices as fair trade. A discussion of economic growth and the hegemony of gross domestic product (GDP) frames these explorations.

Now to the future. Chapter Seven looks at how the future has been and is being conceived, by addressing the value of utopian thinking and some practical attempts to establish prefigurative ecovillages. What humans can dream, they can also create in their physical lives on Earth. Much attention is devoted to urban development and environmental design, because today over half the world's population live in urban settlements and because the origins of our present crises can often be traced back to problems with urban design and planning. Techniques and examples of backcasting and scenario analysis are also discussed. Chapter Eight moves the focus on to the resolutely practical by exploring the connectivity between means and ends,

tools and practices, indices and the nature of human wellbeing and human flourishing. Ecological footprinting and environmental space, the Natural Step Framework and the Global Reporting Initiative, and eco-labelling and consumption have as their aim to enable us to live on the only planet we have. Chapter Nine links communication, marketing, new media, education and learning as both vehicles for, and integral aspects of, sustainable development. This immensely important field is central to fashioning a sustainable world, although here, as with so much else, there are debates and disputes as well as dialogue. Combined with action, communication and learning are ways through which many peoples, groups and communities can find their true voice and if necessary invite themselves to the high table of policy formulation and practical action. The final chapter, Chapter Ten, explores leadership and management, with practical case-study examples and by rooting the idea and need for leadership in some of the key values and philosophies informing the dialogue on sustainability and sustainable development. The management system Project SIGMA is rooted in the idea of environmental modernization, and the maverick businessman Ricardo Semler's leadership achievements are rooted in corporate creativity, knowledge innovation and self-organization. The practicalities of dialogue, the significance of emotional intelligence, and the capacity for understanding, being and working with others are presented as key

ingredients for community development and personal engagement. The chapter ends with a reference to the culture of aboriginal peoples, suggesting that leaders are less important than developing wisdom and respect for nature and, by implication, each other.

Sustainable development encompasses far more than can be covered in one book, so accompanying *Understanding Sustainable Development* is a website providing illustrative and complementary material, resources and links which will enable the reader to further explore subjects, ideas and actions – see www.people.ex.ac.uk/jdblewit/. But beware, there are no magic bullets. No one way of squaring the circle. Sustainable development is, and probably always will be, work in progress. What we do and how we understand what we do is key to making fewer mistakes, to learning better ways and to nurturing the hope that our future will be a better place than the past for the Earth and all that lives and relies upon it.

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