Sustainable development 20 years after Brundtland: time for more patience and pragmatism

by

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October 2007
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What lessons should be drawn from the failure of the 15th Session of the UN’s Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-15) on 30 April–11 May 2007 to reach a negotiated conclusion 20 years after the Brundtland Report *Our Common Future*? This brief suggests that:

- We should not write off sustainable development as unjustified, unachievable or simply too difficult. Nor should we regard the Commission on Sustainable Development itself as a failed process that should be wound up.

- Rather, we should continue to pursue the aims and objectives of the Brundtland Report but with more patience and pragmatism. There should be more concentration on encouraging practical application and learning, especially at a local level. The focus should be on manageable steps with which individuals can identify: steps that support sustainability but need not necessarily be labelled as sustainable development. There should be less concentration on designing and promoting all-embracing theoretical frameworks and idealistic concepts. The CSD itself should concentrate on ‘applied’ rather than ‘pure’ sustainable development: concentrating on identifying and applying lessons from practical experience in implementing the principles and commitments that have already been agreed, rather than pushing out their boundaries.

1. INTRODUCTION

This brief considers broadly how sustainable development has developed and been managed as it has moved from new, through emerging to mature area of public policy over the last two decades. It considers this particularly from the point of view of the processes that have been introduced to handle the issues, and the concepts and techniques that have been developed to help analysis and to develop and implement solutions.

A lot of sustainability debates are about process failures: failures to engage and listen to the right people and organizations, to consider the long-term as well as immediate impacts; to take into account wider and less obvious upstream or downstream effects; to join up decision-making and penetrate narrow ‘silos’; and so on. Quite rightly there has been much attention on addressing these deficiencies. And progress has been made in many areas with commitment to open, transparent and participative decision-making accepted as the norm, and an essential underpinning of sustainable solutions. But after 20 years how are we doing on designing and refining the processes that are needed?

The breadth and depth of the sustainability agenda have also exposed many gaps in analytical and other tools to help understanding and awareness of the challenges as well as the means to frame objectives and monitor progress. In response there has been much intellectual effort and innovation in developing new concepts and tools. But are we achieving the right balance between consolidation and continuous revolution? How well have we done in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of particular tools and applying the right ones to the right purposes?
2. DOES SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REMAIN A VALID AND USEFUL CONCEPT?

In 1987 the Brundtland Report called for ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. While there have been numerous attempts at redefinition or elaboration, that description of sustainable development remains as useful and accessible as any of the alternatives. The spirit and ambitions of sustainable development are worthy and essential, and as a general idea and proposition it is rarely questioned in itself. But that is a weakness as well as a strength.

The broad Brundtland analysis and arguments for sustainable development are at the very least as persuasive and compelling now as ever. In increasing numbers of ways there is visible evidence of human activities that have gone beyond the ‘critical mass’ at which damage on a significant scale becomes inevitable, and in many cases, irrevocable on normal planning timescales. Just as visible is the knock-on damage to livelihoods, with the poorest and powerless the biggest actual and potential losers. Overexploitation of forests and fisheries provide many clear examples. Although the precise causal relationships are complex and subject to continuing debate, the frequency and scale of extreme weather events have been instrumental in climate change moving from the specialist periodicals and science sections to the front page of newspapers and lead stories of TV news.

Interconnectedness across the globe becomes ever more apparent, whether viewed from the perspective of the contribution of very local activities such as housing and transport to global climate change, from the increasingly complex economic and social relationships across global networks and supply chains; or from our improved scientific understanding of the webs of relationships within ecosystems. So too do the mutual benefits in collective action to protect shared and increasingly threatened resources such as fisheries and watercourses. It has never been less possible or sensible to define policy without reference to effects beyond national borders. Wider perspectives and horizons – in both time and space – are ever more essential. The holistic approach that sustainable development demands is as vital as ever. So is its potential as a platform for helping to give a voice to people and issues hitherto unrecognized or ignored: the physical environment, future generations, the powerless and poor. All in all sustainable development makes good common sense. In terms of policy-making, it emphasizes what should simply be good practice: ensuring that all relevant factors are taken into account and that longer-term as well as immediate needs and impacts are factored in. But it is also very ambitious and idealistic. Unfortunately too much attention continues to be focused on processes for defining and arguing about the ambitions and ideals and drawing up elaborate statements of commitment rather than taking actions that live up to them.

The simplicity and generality of the sustainable development message are both strengths and weaknesses. The questions it deals with about the health of the planet and how we share its current and future potential are fundamental. Its ambitions to find answers are ones behind which everyone can line up. Its strong tones of urgency and worthiness are justified. But they have consequences. At the headline levels of ‘saving the planet’ (more accurately perhaps saving humanity’s place on the planet), ‘ending poverty’, ‘fairness and equity’, ‘human rights’, ‘the world we leave our children’, there is fertile ground for clarion calls and demands and high-level political rhetoric. But delivery is another matter, more complicated and demanding. The consensus at the level of general aspiration can mask significant differences about responsibilities as well as the detailed means of implementation. Sustainability
debates too often aggregate and magnify the obstacles rather than providing the means for securing compromise on all or any of them.

**Sustainable development is not a static state.** Just as valid 20 years later is the Brundtland observation that sustainable development is ‘not a fixed state of harmony but rather a process of change’. From the fall of the Berlin Wall, through the exponential growth of computers, to the emergence of China as a leading economic as well as political influence, there have been enormous changes over the last 20 years. While the rate of change increases exponentially, the policy response and institutional architecture, particularly within the UN system, are too often inflexible and locked in old debates. Although long outdated, the simplistic division between the two categories of developed and developing persists and acts as an increasingly serious obstacle to progress.

The daily evidence of the dynamic power of technological and other innovation should underline and emphasize the need for flexibility and a dynamic rather than static approach. Nevertheless too much attention and effort and too many sustainability debates are locked in disputes about the fine-tuning of long-term forecasts based on straight-line extrapolations of past patterns of, for example the process of industrial development. We know that as different countries and regions have industrialized they have not started from where Britain did. And yet too many of the debates in the sustainability context seem to assume either that this would be the case or even that it should be the case, and that whatever policies were pursued in Western Europe and North America should also be followed by newly industrializing countries. Human ingenuity can be a very double-edged sword and we may often be slow to adjust habits and behaviours even when the evidence of damage is clear. However, we can and do adjust, often very rapidly and in very radical ways. This is particularly the case when there are obvious benefits to counteract the costs or even just the inconvenience of changing existing patterns. Encouragingly, innovation has increasingly become a focus of sustainability debates. It is essential that it remains at the centre of the debates and its encouragement should be a constant factor running through sustainable development policy development. And it is important that innovation should be seen in its broadest meaning with social innovation at least as important as the traditional focus on innovation in science and technology.

**Handling the long-term perspective of sustainable development.** A key element of sustainable development is that it entails taking a longer-term view beyond the immediate here and now. However, one thing that all our experience should tell us is that we are unable to predict the future, and the longer the time-frame the less reliable are the predictions. Indeed magazine or television depictions of ‘how we will live in 20 years’ almost invariably tend to be endearingly comical. The impact and knock-on effects of innovations such as the mobile phone have been faster and more complex than even the forecasts of their most enthusiastic promoters. Whether it be regarded as human nature, inertia or something else, no matter how credible the evidence, our response to threats that demand big and unwelcome changes is almost always ‘too little too late’. The risk is that we compound this by focusing on the design of the total perfect solution to the exclusion of smaller ‘no regrets’ action that make sense and go in the right direction. Debates around the sustainable development agenda continue to provide too many examples of the best being the enemy of the good. Sustainable development does indeed require global cooperation on a scale never previously achieved. Yet the pace of change merely serves to underline and magnify the deficiencies of global institutions in their ability to adapt and change their structures and ways of working to reflect and address the realities of how the world is changing around them. The crude North/South divide that permeates the work of the UN family is a very clear example of the tendency for
policy debates to become increasingly outdated as they move from national through
to global. So too is the tendency to find it easier to invent new processes and bodies
than end old ones that have outlived their usefulness. The continuing international
work on improving international environmental governance, as well as the efforts
towards wider reform of the UN, are welcome. But although progress is being made it
continues to be painfully slow, with the risk that progress will always lag behind what
is needed.

*Responsibilities to future generations.* Another key element of sustainable
development thinking is the need to take account of the interests of future
generations in any longer-term perspective. Promises framed in terms of caring
about and improving the prospects for future generations are among the easiest on
which to agree in any debate, or at least perhaps the most difficult to challenge
without appearing selfish or churlish. But too often the result is that promises are
made without adequate debate to test whether they are the right things to do or
whether they are practicable and realistic. The operation of democracy through the
ballot box focuses on the here and now and the near future – in effect up to the date
of the next election. Time and again we see governments sacrifice long-term and
essential investment in, for example infrastructure development and maintenance, in
favour of plans with paybacks that are more immediately visible. In principle
sustainable development should provide a basis for helping to overcome that
tendency. In practice, it too often just produces worthy rhetoric rather than
commitment to see through longer-term plans and accept short-term pain for future
gain.

*Governments are not the only actors.* The literature has always emphasized that
sustainable development is not just for governments to define or deliver.
Nevertheless governments and their actions have been and are still the main focus
for debate. We still look to governmental and political processes not just to provide
leadership but also to develop and exemplify the ‘state of the art’. From the global
‘Earth Summit’ in Rio (1992) through and beyond the World Summit on Sustainable
Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg (2002) to many activities at local level
around the world, there has been much debate and many commitments and
aspirations. It is perhaps more especially in such ‘official’ activities that sustainable
development language and awareness have penetrated most extensively. Arguably,
sustainability thinking is an inherent part of many day-to-day practices and attitudes,
but in terms of the big-picture challenges posed by Brundtland it is still a long way
from being the stuff of everyday conversation.

Governments, as well as other parts of society, have responded extensively to
Brundtland. The Rio conference confirmed the inclusion of environment on the
international agenda, albeit by reference to economic development. The WSSD in
Johannesburg confirmed inclusion of the third social ‘pillar’ (and arguably a fourth
pillar – governance) and gave the global community’s imprimatur to sustainable
development as a concept and overarching objective.

Accompanying that and reflected in the emphasis at WSSD on partnerships has
been increasing acceptance that progress is not all in the gift or power of
governments, individually or collectively. Engagement and change are required from
all parts of society. In particular, perceptions about business have changed, and
arguably matured. Concerns about corporate power and behaviour remain but there
is now as much or more attention to business as an agent to deliver desired
changes.
No matter how it is measured, however, there are big gaps between where we are and the many ambitious commitments that governments, and others, have made in response to Brundtland. And by any measure, those commitments in turn almost certainly fall short of the rate and scale of change required. We are still struggling to stem, let alone reverse, the irretrievable loss of biodiversity. Many serious adverse impacts of climate change have become inevitable; they cannot be stopped, no matter what we do today.

There has unarguably been progress in many areas. The Montreal Protocol stands out as an example of development of an international process to tackle an emerging environmental issue that has broadly worked. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has provided an essential platform and stimulus for pooling expertise from many disciplines around the world to improve knowledge and understanding of the mind-boggling complexities of climate change to patiently build consensus on solutions. The very rapid development of the major industrializing economies, chiefly China, has seen enormous numbers lifted out of the most extreme poverty. But as fast as we make progress, whether on food security, technology, or health care, there are rebound effects. In themselves these may be very welcome, such as extending life expectancy, but they may have inter-generational effects, storing up new challenges and demands to be met in the future. At best it may just be the rate of growth in demand that we seem able to reduce. That in itself is better than nothing and not to be just dismissed. But it is not enough.

Joining up the elements and issues. Some of the challenges come from the very nature of sustainable development. It is inherently complex, and also highly idealistic, in the best sense of the word. Handling it is a big management challenge at any level and there has rightly been a lot of time and effort spent on working out how to do it. That has included much innovation and creativity in developing new appraisal, measurement and assessment techniques and new procedures to be more holistic and inclusive: to bring in the full range of stakeholders; to make sure the whole spectrum of social and environmental impacts as well as economic ones are counted and count, to measure public goods; and to improve coherence across policy pigeonholes and silos.

Environmental/sustainability policy appraisal and impact assessment has been the focus of much argument and debate. Many commitments have been made at national, regional and international level. However, no matter how well-intentioned and necessary the promises, delivery has in general fallen short. Too often the exercises have been little more than box-ticking at best. This is disappointing but perhaps understandable as the promises have usually run well ahead of commitment to provide the resources necessary to follow through. Such appraisals and assessments are difficult and resource-intensive to do well. But too often all that is done is the minimum necessary to meet the bureaucratic requirement. Boilerplate text that will tick the right boxes is quickly developed and repeated. And despite there being increasing emphasis on ‘evidence-based policy-making’, particular exercises are too often framed to justify the chosen policy rather than to assess the full range of options and their consequences in an open-minded way. This is another area where the high-minded nature of sustainable development produces over-ambitious aspirations.

Does more ‘business planning’ help? Running alongside the development of sustainable development, over roughly the same 20 years, have been other important trends that in principle should have helped make the tasks more manageable. At the very broad political level, while large gulfs between different world-views remain and there is a wide range of ways in which they are put into
practice, there has been increasing convergence around some key success factors. These include increasing emphasis on market-based approaches, and policies based around more rather than less open and competitive markets, supported by good governance and elimination of corruption. Increasingly, managerial competence rather than ideological difference has become central to the appeal from politicians to voters. At the executive level, administrations from local authorities through to the UN have also increasingly looked to business for lessons on how to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The result has been major and often long overdue reform in strategic planning and budgetary processes, to improve effectiveness and efficiency, ensuring clear objectives and priorities with the right resources allocated and accounted for, and performance monitored and assessed.

However, this brief suggests that we are increasingly getting the wrong balance between process and substance. We are spending more and more time on the processes that are intended to aid progress at the expense of actually doing things that achieve substantive progress. The means too have often become an end in themselves. There has been more effort in the setting, promotion and tightening of targets than in working out and acting on the more difficult tasks involved in meeting them. In some cases that has been a deliberate tactic to resist change. But in most cases it seems to have just been a matter of drift. Concentrating on process can be more comfortable than gripping and resolving the dilemmas that so much of sustainable development is about.

As understanding of sustainable development has deepened and been actively taken up by different communities and organizations, new processes and techniques have been needed. And further development is certainly still needed. But the time is now ripe to draw lessons as to which processes, concepts and techniques have proved the most useful and valuable and which should be weeded out or reserved for particular applications. In particular, we need major efforts to streamline the many processes that have been created in governmental and other organizations to deal with sustainable development. This should be approached as an opportunity for sustainable development to be used as a framework to amalgamate and reduce the number of processes rather than to add new ones.

Sustainable development speeches and campaigns are full of calls for 'paradigm shifts'. Radical changes are certainly needed in many areas. But the all-encompassing changes that are usually associated with the term tend to happen rather than being planned. So we should be more pragmatic, putting more effort into encouraging moves in the right direction and less into designing the ideal template or destination. We should use sustainable development fora and processes as means of encouragement rather than direction. The focus of these fora should be on networking different perspectives and sharing experience rather than dictating to more focused policy and decision-making processes. Thus meetings of the Commission on Sustainable Development can usefully highlight the linkages and need for coherence between, for example, trade and poverty reduction policies, or industrial policy and biodiversity. But it is not the place to negotiate trade agreements or replicate or cut across the work of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Attempts to use it in that way not only lead to failure but also deflect from progress on its main business.

It might be hoped that setting these big questions in the holistic, forward-looking, perspective of sustainable development could encourage a wider perspective that would help bridge differences. However, partly perhaps because the sustainable development debate is so often expressed in high moral tones, issues seem more rapidly to escalate to become matters of principle and less susceptible to agreement.
Experience seems to be that when brought together under a sustainable development banner, ‘matters of principle’ and ‘red lines’ aggregate and accumulate rather than becoming subject to a ‘swings and roundabouts’ process and cancelling each other out.

As an emerging area, sustainable development has also been subject to ‘bandwagon’ effects in its growth. On the one hand, many organizations have developed new programmes or units to work out what it means for them and to react. On the other, it has also provided opportunities to pursue familiar issues in a new way and from a novel angle, whether the objective be to pursue a policy objective, to bid for research funding or to develop a new market. It has also provided a rich breeding ground for new concepts and terminology, at the simplest just prefixing ‘sustainable’ to existing concepts or activities, e.g. sustainable tourism, sustainable chemistry and so on. That has been a necessary and inevitable process. Indeed, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the best examples of real progress in identifying and, most importantly, implementing necessary changes have been in areas with a narrower focus, and particularly when grounded in a particular location.

However, if sustainable development is to succeed it does truly need to be integrated in public and private decision-making. In other words it must become the norm and no longer require special processes, units, indicator sets and so on. That will not happen quickly. Insofar as governmental and intergovernmental organizations are concerned it will, in any event, be subject to the usual ‘ratchet and inertia’ effects that tend to make it easier to invent new processes and tasks than to end existing outmoded ones. And there will continue to be some need to start from scratch on sustainable development as it permeates new areas and therefore a need for new research, awareness and action programmes. But two decades on it does not seem unreasonable to expect sustainable development to have matured to a stage when there would be exploratory dead wood that can be cleared and, more importantly, more concentration on the practical steps to implement the model, principles and concepts rather than on their refinement.

As mentioned above, governance is often proposed as a fourth pillar of sustainable development. This is not surprising bearing in mind how often governance shortcomings are identified as a central cause of problems or obstacle to solutions, whether they relate to the breadth and integrity of the decision-making process or the reliability of legal protection. Nevertheless many of the measures and evidence of ‘progress’ on sustainable development are organizational ones, counted in additional processes and additional governance. More, but is it necessarily better governance? Almost certainly not, if only because the primary task of many additional processes was to introduce sustainable development and work out how to deal with it.

There has also been increasing convergence around promises of ‘smaller government’, with the consequence of capped or reducing resources, for national governments and international organizations. Nevertheless there has been considerable growth in international processes. And the process demands can multiply when the best intentions of better governance management (strategic planning, objective monitoring and so on) combine with those of the sustainable development governance ‘model’ (joined-up government, multi-stakeholder dialogue and so on). The risk is of spending too much attention on perfecting processes and servicing them. They take enormous amounts of time and energy from a limited and often declining resource of government ministers and officials. There is a big and growing burden on countries to try to keep track of – let alone contribute constructively to – so many multilateral processes. It is simply impossible for many developing countries.
Sustainable development requires innovation and change, neither of which comes easy to consensus-based multilateral processes. The series of major UN conferences (Beijing, Copenhagen etc.) since Brundtland were powerful builders of networks among policy professionals and activists. But by WSSD the appetite for such global events had diminished; one reason was the general frustrations about their limited ability to rise to the frequent calls to move from words to action. We need to beware of calls for further such mega-events.

As far as CSD is concerned, it can still play a valuable role. As one of the outputs of Rio it was an essential initiative both in providing a platform for the international community to build on and help turn the commitments made in Rio into reality; and a focus for pooling the contributions from across the UN family to promote and integrate sustainable development in all their activities. By ‘Rio+5’ in New York in 1997 its limitations were becoming all too evident: an all-permeating North/South split; a focus on negotiating texts with developing countries seeking in effect to pull back from the environmental elements of Rio and refocus on economic development and trade issues, while the EU and civil society tried to go further on the environment, and other OECD countries were variably placed. Some slow but useful progress was being made in areas such as sustainable development strategies and indicators, deepening analysis of the range of challenges and policy responses, and opening up debate beyond governments to include civil society and business. But to too large an extent meetings were a ritual dance based around North/South charge and counter-charge, producing almost unintelligible texts that in effect did little more than redraft elements of Agenda 21 and in many cases simply repeated large chunks verbatim because that was the only way of reaching a compromise.

Despite efforts at change in the following five years with some initiatives such as increased time and attention given to multi-stakeholder discussion, by the time WSSD it was clear that the process was not adding sufficient value to justify the significant human and other resources involved. The revised approach post-WSSD of two-year cycles with more focus on practical experience and learning from showcasing success stories held promise which has not really been fulfilled. It culminated in the failure of CSD-15 even to produce an agreed outcome.

But it would be premature simply to give up on the task, leaving aside the practicalities of securing consensus to do so. Rather, there should be renewed efforts to switch the focus from unrealistic ambitions for CSD to be a forum for resolving disagreements in areas such as trade policy or climate change which cannot even be resolved in the relevant specialized fora. Even assuming that it is appropriate for CSD to have such ambitions, by now it must be clear to all that it is simply incapable of doing so. What CSD can do, and has done, is provide a place where governments, civil society and business can meet and network to exchange ideas and experience of what works and what does not in putting sustainable development into practice. CSD should exploit those strengths and comparative advantages and not try to be a place to sort out all current global problems or design the plan for doing so.

3. CONCEPTS

There has also been a growth in the number of conceptual approaches. Some, such as life-cycle analysis, have been vital in providing a structure for analysis, identification of priorities and monitoring of progress. But it is important to keep in mind that such techniques are tools to help decision-making. They do not make the decisions for us. They can help ensure that all the economic, social and
environmental factors are identified and their broad scale identified. But assessing the trade-offs between, say, jobs, social cohesion and environmental damage will always be a political decision, not a technocratic equation with a clear and defined net cost/benefit conclusion. The following paragraphs consider a few of the more prominent concepts and suggest some broad conclusions about their respective strengths and weaknesses – where they can add value but equally where they can be counter-productive if taken too literally or in isolation.

‘One Planet Living’. The latest UK Sustainable Development Strategy gives some prominence to this idea. Arguably as we do only have the one planet, it could be seen as merely stating the obvious. However, it does provide a clear and simple image and idea that signals global interdependence and self-sufficiency. It can help steer us towards thinking about how the way we live, what we eat and so on has impacts and connections across the globe. However, it does have important limitations with regard to risks if taken too literally. For example, once it is applied below the global level its usefulness is more questionable, and its self-sufficiency message risks encouraging a more selfish than communal mind-set. It may encourage a ‘fortress’ mentality rather than one of community and cooperation, for example encouraging protectionism in trade rather than an open market approach.

Ecological footprinting. At the technical level, techniques such as ecological footprint and environmental space continue to develop. But although they are powerful as presentational and awareness-raising tools, there is often a lot of devil in their detail that limits their reliability at an operational level. They can work well at either the global level or, say, at the level of the company to help identify the full range and broad magnitude of impacts arising from its activities. That can be very helpful in identifying the key impacts and priorities for action. But the methodological problems in the metrics of these techniques limit the reliability of the precise numbers produced. Moreover, at the more general political level, there is a risk, as with One Planet Living, of over-emphasizing the self-sufficiency element and encouraging a ‘fortress’ version of localism.

Food miles. Another useful presentational tool, and if done in sufficient detail can be helpful in identifying an impact trail. But because it is only focused on part of picture, usually carbon, it can be misleading in assessing the overall contribution to sustainability. This is especially the case when applied to trade in food if an estimate of the food miles involved in, say, UK imports of vegetables or flowers from Africa is used as a basis for arguing for an end to such trade, without taking into account the economic and social benefits to the exporting country.

Ecological debt. This is an effective and graphic way of presenting moral arguments about the unfair mismatch between those who suffer the consequences of environmental damage and those who activities caused the damage and who benefited from those activities. Put most broadly at the global level, the wealth generated by industrialization in developed countries was often at the expense of pollution and resource depletion or damage in developing countries – frequently former colonies. And that is reflected in the Rio principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ and acceptance by the global community that developed countries have greater responsibilities and should take the lead in tackling global environmental problems. However, like calls for reparation for slavery, it is not a concept that seems capable of implementation. It is difficult to see who would owe what to whom, covering what period. But of more concern, it puts more emphasis on attributing blame and seeking retribution than on encouraging cooperation for mutual benefit. It risks encouraging the sort of circular tit-for-tat settling of scores that has made conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Middle East and the Balkans, among other
places, so difficult to resolve. The idea could probably only become useful through following a similar model and mind-set to that of the South African ‘Peace and Reconciliation Commission’.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The call from the Brundtland Commission for sustainable development remains as or more valid and urgent as ever 20 years on. But we need some changes in emphasis and priorities for the next two decades. In contrast to the approach of the grassroots activists and individual thinkers who were central to the genesis of sustainability thinking, a lot of energy since Brundtland has in practice been spent on UN-centred processes to turn sustainable development into an all-embracing concept covering everything else and infiltrating it into all other processes. Similar processes have been applied to other organizations including business. These have to some extent helped encourage the real progress that has been made.

But we are a long way from making the changes necessary to achieve the Brundtland goal of sustainable development. In big areas such as climate change and biodiversity loss, improved understanding has tended to magnify the scale of the threats and urgency of at least reversing adverse trends. It is easy to overlook that there has been progress and we should now be concentrating on replicating and spreading that progress. Big set piece UN events such as Rio or WSSD have had their value in providing windows to attract attention and finance, and encouraging the development of multi-stakeholder networks that have produced real results and action to implement the many commitments that have been made.

The twenty years since Brundtland have seen all the processes associated with globalization develop at a bewildering pace. Fewer places are out of the reach of rolling news and instant global communication. That has increased the pace at which the whole planet hears about disasters, whether natural or man-made. This, in turn, has helped encourage much greater awareness and understanding of the economic, environmental and social challenges across the world – albeit at the risk, perhaps, that attention spans have become proportionately shorter undermining commitment to the long-term sustained action necessary to find and implement solutions. At times the problems can seem overwhelming and make the possibility and value of individual action too insignificant to be worthwhile. That can produce calls for political leadership and vision to force through fundamental change. Fundamental change is needed in many of our habits and behaviours but we should be wary of looking to political leaders to force the change, especially if the challenges are framed in terms of blame and retribution. The world has seen leaders who fit the bill – Mao, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot.

The focus should increasingly be based on bottom-up learning with more emphasis on pragmatic local application of universal principles and less on framing universally applicable rules of practice. We need to spend less time on refining a global constitution and business plan that will deliver sustainable development. Efforts should concentrate on identifying what works and extending and scaling it up.

Sustainable development thinking needs to be integrated and ingrained in policy- and decision-making at all levels. That has required the development of processes and procedures from the UN through all levels of government and individual businesses and other organizations. But after twenty years the time is ripe to start weeding out those that have outlived their initial purpose.
Over the next twenty years the aim should be for ‘sustainable development’ processes progressively to do themselves out of a job. Sustainability thinking needs to be the norm that does not require special units, procedures or processes. The same applies to Corporate Social Responsibility which has rapidly become a self-promoting and sustaining end in itself, rather than a broad framework and means for business to maximize the positive contribution it makes to society. That contribution will vary over time and place and according to the nature of particular businesses. One size certainly does not fit all and there are major limitations on the value and practicability of devising universal templates, or debating or doing ‘CSR’ – as opposed, for example, to tackling corruption or reducing waste and emissions.

Similarly, more attention should be paid to applying existing techniques, concepts and tools where experience shows they can add most value, and less on devising new ones.

We need to build on and exploit the core competencies of different players rather than expecting governments to do everything. Governments should set the broad policy framework and through the fiscal, regulatory and other incentives and disincentives in their control aim to catalyse and stimulate action that supports sustainability. This will often mean getting out of the way rather than trying to control everything.

At the multilateral level, we should not give up on CSD, tempting though that might be. Instead we should exploit what it can do, and has done, well in providing a platform and focus for exchanging experience and learning between governments, civil society and business, encouraging networking and the scaling up of successes in practical progress in making sustainable development work.

There is more value and importance in focusing on capacity-building than on building global architecture – because progress must inevitably mainly rely on local and national action to put global principles and standards into action. Subsidiarity should be a key criterion, taking decisions and action at the most local possible level.