

WHO WANTS TO GIVE FOREVER? GIVING MEANING TO SUSTAINABILITY IN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This paper argues strongly in favour of a re-examination of the term ‘sustainability’ in international development research, policy and practice. It demonstrates that the term is understood pluralistically, being both environmental and economic. Within economic interpretations, this paper identifies three clear understandings of ‘sustainability’, which effect programme design and, ultimately, their impact on poverty significantly. The paper argues that the ramifications of this definition go far beyond semantics and have a significant impact on the development outcomes realised by programmes that incorporate the term. Having evaluated these conceptions, the paper argues for sustainability in development as being interventions that alter the causes of poverty so that the process through which change occurs is improved in an adaptive and permanent way, *a permanent increase in adaptability*. Evidence is drawn from a review of the literature and policy documentation. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is a concept that has increasingly influenced development policy in the last two decades and yet the concept remains ill-defined. Although some find the term sustainability highly contentious, its multi-dimensionality is not well-understood by many who employ it (Kidd, 1992). Understanding is either too narrow considering only the environmental impact of development or, as in much development practice, too loose considering anything that continues to exist beyond the life of a programme.

This paper takes what some might argue to be a partisan standpoint of considering only the perspective of the poor people whose lives development aims to improve. The result is

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a two-part critique of the current use of the term 'sustainability' in development and more particularly development assistance programmes. The first part critiques practice in development, which is guided by the predominant discourse around sustainability, which foregrounds global environmental concerns. Having isolated these practices, the paper moves focus on to consider how development programming understands sustainability, what programmes hope to achieve.

In doing so, the first part of the paper synthesises world systems and dependency theories to offer a critique of current interpretations of environmental sustainability that has captured development assistance policy. The paper takes the view that sustainability need not to reproduce a snapshot of the present in the future. Rather, it must leave, in aggregate, equivalent opportunities for the population. In a complex dynamic system, it is impossible to state a goal that must be sustained with any degree of certainty, save for a goal that is, itself, adaptable (Lévai, 2011). Drawing on dependency theory, the paper problematises some existing conceptions of sustainability that have the effect of commoditising conservation and making this another flow from developing to advanced economies (Kohler & Tausch, 2002).

The second part of the paper, in line with other critiques of aid dependency, argues that a reconfigured conception of sustainability needs to consider how development programmes have altered the systems that underpin poverty rather than how the symptoms of that poverty have been alleviated in the short term (Catterson & Lindahl, 1999; Fowler, 2000; Easterly, 2008). After a development programme has ended, what's left behind? This paper conceives of sustainability as a metric of the impact of development programmes on the lives of poor people in the long term.

The importance of sustainability understood as post-programme impact has been recognised by practitioners and policy makers far more so than in academic literature. The recent inclusion of systemic change objectives in development policy, including in 'making markets work for the poor' (M4P) approaches, signifies this recognition, incorporating economic considerations into programme objectives, including in new areas such as health and education (Carpenter, 2003; Best *et al.*, 2005; Burra & Mahadevan, 2005; Miehlbradt *et al.*, 2005; Porteous, 2005; Elliot *et al.*, 2008). The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Development for International Development (DfID) operational guide for the M4P approach defines sustainability in exactly these terms (DFID & SDC, 2008). However, there persists a looseness in the broader understanding of what is sustainable rather than simply sustained – articulated by Anand and Sen's *danger of underspecification* (2000; 2037). If something is built in a development programme, it will remain built once the programme has ended, but is this truly sustainable without a consideration of the means through which new building might occur?

This paper aims to explore different concepts of sustainability in order to arrive at an understanding, which better represents the long-term interests of poor people. The paper is structured as follows. The first section is a broad overview of some of the important definitions in considering sustainability in development so as to narrow the scope of the paper. The scope is further narrowed in the following section of the paper, which presents the first of the paper's two major arguments, stating the case in favour of the reprioritisation of sustainability objectives in favour of the poor people whose lives development programmes aim to improve. It does so via engagement with the environmental conceptions of sustainability, which currently dominate the discourse.

Having narrowed the scope of the paper to the concerns of the poor, the second key argument is presented. It aims to categorise understandings of sustainability by what they hope to achieve.

First, the conception of *sustainability of programming* is identified whereby donors see development assistance as an ongoing commitment and a budgetary matter rather than a question of how change can be delivered.

Second, the conception of *sustainability of ends* is outlined and can be understood as programmes that approach development assistance as the direct delivery of assets to poor people, whether these are physical assets such as equipment or infrastructure or intangible assets such as skills development. There is no mechanism by which these asset transfers may be reproduced.

Finally, *sustainability as systemic change* conceives of a fundamental altering of the system in which poor people live and work. This view of sustainability necessitates an approach to development, which ensures local ownership of the change that occurs and the ability to respond to changes in external factors.

The final section of the paper then draws together the preceding sections, examining how these various interpretations of sustainability in development have impacted on development programming and, ultimately, on the lives of poor people. This is used to outline the importance of sustainability in development programming and thus the fundamental consideration of how it is defined.

2 KEY DEFINITIONS

It is important briefly to clarify the broader concept of sustainability and, in doing so, define the terms of this paper.

The roots of the term 'sustainability' are so deeply embedded in fundamentally different concepts, each of which has valid claims to validity, that a search for a single definition seems futile. The existence of multiple meaning is tolerable if each analyst describes clearly what he means by sustainability (Kidd, 1992; 2).

The broadest, simplest and perhaps most universally acceptable definition of sustainability is given by Charles Kidd who states that 'the wisdom of current policies and of proposed actions should be assessed in terms of their full long-range effects' (Kidd, 1992; 3). This allocates no time preference or specification of the nature of what is to be sustained.

For some (Solow, 1974, for example), sustainability is about intergenerational equity and 'nondeclining' of welfare, income, consumption, capital stocks, and so on. This would appear, however, to be targeting sustainability of the status quo. Development is a dynamic process. Sustainability in *development* should target an increase in aggregate measures of living standards incorporating a marked increase in these measures for those at the lower end of any given scale. International development as a public sector, an academic discipline or a policy area, sees this objective being achieved through a reduction in poverty, however, defined.

It should also be noted here that a separate paper could be written (and indeed many have, see Moss *et al.* (2006) for a review) on the sustainability of development assistance itself, with respect to the objectives of development assistance, the appropriate levels to bring about change and the incentives it creates for change to happen. Such papers suggest that there is a level beyond which development assistance itself perpetuates poverty by

preventing the formation of the robust local institutions which, most agree, are fundamental to its reduction. These conclusions exclude contributions towards international public goods such as peacekeeping, trading blocs and research into diseases.

Systemic approaches to development go further, taking the long-term view that development assistance itself is unsustainable if not destructive through by manufacturing dependency (Cassen, 1994; Smillie, 1995; Easterly, 2006; Easterly, 2008). Development assistance is only seen as useful in the short-medium term to facilitate the construction of robust national systems of provision (Moyo, 2009; Rogerson, 2011). This paper, however, focuses on the sustainability of the change in which current approaches to development assistance delivery aim to bring about.

More fundamental to the discussion that follows, however, is an understanding of the equally contested term ‘development’. Although it is accepted that there are a number of potential understandings of development, this paper is based around the ‘development sector’ wherein development incorporates any outside intervention that aims to improve the lives of poor people. This includes any programme funded by official development assistance (ODA) or charitable donations, which incorporate such objectives. It does not refer to the vast flows of trade and finance to and from developing countries, which contribute to their development, but does not see social and economic improvement as their primary objective. It is accepted too that this definition is far from incontestable, with the subjectivity of the ‘improvement’ aspect, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage fully with this debate (see Dwyer, 1977; Hirschman, 1958; Chambers, 1983 amongst others for a fuller discussion).

For clarity, then, this paper aims to examine how various understandings of ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ are realised in the development programmes of donors (national governments, bilateral and multi-lateral agencies and NGOs).

3 SUSTAINABILITY FOR WHOM? CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

The second point of clarification is necessary before the paper can address sustainability more directly. It is fair to say that sustainability in development is a discourse dominated by environmental concerns with the terms ‘sustainable development’ or ‘sustainability in development’ associated with conservation, ecology or the environment, particularly, energy and global climate disruption in the vast majority of cases (Klapper and Kranz; Lele, 1991; Eriksen & Juma, 2002; Victor, 2006; Kim, 2009; Åhman, 2013; Pugh, 2014).

Environmental, ecological and conservational definitions of sustainability (of which there are many) are predicated on the ‘do no harm’ mantra that has long been prevalent in philanthropic and humanitarian work (Uvin, 2002; Brown *et al.*, 2008). Although their origins lie much earlier, a key piece of literature in this area came with the Brundtland Report (Brundtland, 1987), which had a significant influence in unifying environmental and development goals, recognising environmental limits to growth. The report defined sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Brundtland, 1987; Chapter 2).

This conception of ‘sustainable development’ identified in the Brundtland report is represented as ‘the Theory’ in Figure 1.

Adams goes on to argue, contrary to the argument contained herein and argued elsewhere (Koning, 2001; Colantonio, 2009; Åhman, 2013) that environmental concerns

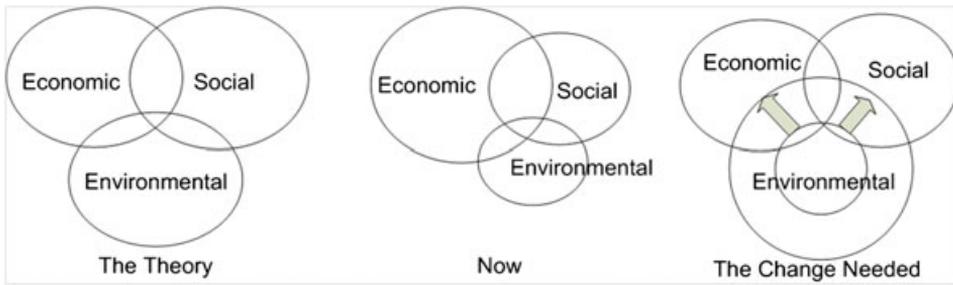


Figure 1. Adapted from (Adams, 2006; 2)

have been marginalised in the years since the Brundtland Report and there is a need for a reprioritisation of environmental concerns in development practice.

Both Brundtland and Adams conceive of sustainability as a tripartite concept, accounting for economic, environmental and social aspects. The central argument of this paper is that the perspective of the poor has to be the primary concern of sustainable development, and subsequently, what development from that perspective means. The clarification necessary here is the difference between sustainability of impact of development programmes in developing countries and 'sustainable development', a term that has been captured to refer to global environmental goods.

Historically, social, economic and environmental development policies have each been guilty of imperialism in the pursuit of ends that were not reflective of the direct interests of poor people; in fact, many have had a pernicious effect (Hayter, 1971; Richards, 1977; Smillie, 1999; Dunning, 2004; Veltmeyer & Petras, 2005; Whitfield, 2008; Milner & Tingley, 2010). In economic development, structural adjustment policies were pursued, in part, to open markets up for commerce with donor countries, ultimately leading to a range of economic crises, which impacted negatively on poor people (Dollar & Svensson, 2000; Oberdabernig, 2010). Much economic development today, although it may have the complimentary goals of security or future trading arrangements, is held accountable such that it reflects the interests of recipients more closely (exemplified by the Paris Declaration). Social development policy remains imbued with donor values. For example, ignorance of the realities in much of the developing world, many donors persist with a myopic perception that the state must provide in education or health, despite current failure and no realistic prospect of this occurring, and so only support efforts to achieve this outcome. Where does the interest of the poor lie? in improved educational outcomes or in a structure of state provision? Notwithstanding this bias, in social development, such policies remain guided by donors' belief in what is beneficial for poor people (Woods, 2008). With some environmental development policy, this is not the case, which, together with is cooptation of terminology, justifies its isolation for contrast here.

The conception of sustainability represented in this paper sees the environment as a critical consideration. However, in line with world systems theory, if the global environment is seen as a complex system, then the continued growth of the core cannot substitute its environmental impact for a mitigated form of growth in the periphery, particularly as this mitigation comes at the expense of poverty reduction. Synthesising dependency theory, it is possible to view the *development assistance-reduced but green growth* transaction as a flow of resources from the core to the periphery, reducing the growth capacity of the latter whilst buying political capital and licence to engage in more environmentally damaging activities for the former.

A summary of the critique on the *global environmental good* perspective is articulated by Anand and Sen

a universalist approach cannot ignore the deprived people today in trying to prevent deprivation in the future (2000; 2030).

This is not to say that environmental concerns are irrelevant to poor people today, even in the short term. Indeed, as convincingly argued by Dercon (2012), in accordance with the previous discussion, growth and environment are fundamentally interlinked, but environmental considerations should be made in development programmes only to the extent that they affect poor people:

...poverty reduction is likely to offer the poor most resilience to the increasing risks of climate change, and they should not be asked to pay the price for greening the planet (17)

Poor people are, in many cases, the most vulnerable to change in environmental conditions, given the proportions that are involved in agriculture. However, it is important to see environmental aspects of sustainability in this light, how they affect poor people.

This paper sees global environmental concern and development in the world's poorest countries as separate but related goals. Development is not a laboratory through which Northern donors can experiment with new models of environmentally sustainable routes to growth, displaying how they would achieve development if they were starting from a similar position. Whatever the domestic political considerations, poverty reduction has to be the target of development programmes—however, indirectly, it may be brought about (for example through health, financial reform, gender or ethnic inclusiveness programmes). A utilitarian interpretation of development sees no intrinsic value in population control, employment, or perhaps even education, except to the extent that they have an impact on poverty and suffering (Singer, 1972; Opeskin, 1996). The prioritisation of environmental conceptions of sustainability necessarily compromises the development imperatives of the present. The imposition on projects and programmes of stipulations which are viewed by Northern norms as environmentally progressive (as opposed to those which attempt to mitigate the negative consequences of growth on environmental degradation and subsequent growth at the local level) at the expense of those which offer the greatest opportunities for pro-poor growth are hypocritical and negligent towards the poverty reduction objectives explicitly pursued by donors (see DfID's Private Enterprise Programme Ethiopia (PEPE) US Agency for International Development's (USAID) Low Emissions Asian Development (LEAD) programme as examples). Donors require programmes to seek out investments, which reduce carbon emissions or utilise recycled materials while at the same time exploring for more fossil fuels and producing waste at hundreds of times the rate of the countries in which these 'environmentally sound' programmes are conducted.

This paper aims to recapture sustainability objectives for the benefit of the current generation through concentrating on the relatively undeveloped concepts of the sustainability of impact in development programmes. Although the importance of how local environmental conditions affects the lives of poor women and men in the short to medium term is recognised, the paper concentrates on other development considerations as it is these that have been ignored in the current discussions of sustainability in development programming.

4 SUSTAINED VERSUS SUSTAINABLE: THE GOALS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Having argued for the necessity of poverty being the guiding principle of development programming, this paper now goes on to make its second key contribution in differentiating

between understandings of sustainability and the implications for modes of delivery and programming of development assistance.

Despite the argument outlined earlier on the dominance of environmental concerns within sustainability discourse in development, other understandings of sustainability represent a concern of many involved in development programming albeit as one of an ever growing number of considerations. Within this, however, concepts of sustainability vary greatly.

The need to better understand what is meant by sustainability in development policy is made clear in one of the rare articles that tackle the issue. Kremer and Miguel (2007), in a paper entitled, *The Illusion of Sustainability* examine approaches to deworming for their 'effectiveness', and having demonstrated that free distribution of deworming drugs resulted in fewer infections than other approaches including financial contributions by recipients, education programmes and individual mobilisation, the authors conclude that

More generally, it is probably an illusion to think that a onetime infusion of external assistance will lead to the indefinitely sustainable voluntary provision of most local public goods (Kremer & Miguel, 2007; 1011)

There are numerous problems with the study and the conclusions derived from it. First, the construction of sustainability that the paper aims to dismiss is a simple one of direct donor input triggering lasting change. They do not address sustainability as the legacy from a development programme of a process through which change occurs, as explored in the remainder of this paper. Externally delivered and paid-for training programmes do not have at their core a logic that envisages a permanent change in the way the system functions to realise the greatest poverty impact.

The timeframe for the transmission of information was also short, and being constructed this way, many of the positive externalities, which develop over time as the result of an intervention, may have been missed. Further, the study fails to consider the broader system within which these goods and services are provided, which could have significant impacts on sustainability, considering as they do, just a single outcome variable. For example, in the training interventions the paper addresses, no consideration is made of who delivers the training, the impacts on incomes and the externalities and possible creations or distortions of interrelated markets.

The study's principle conclusion is that

[T]here may simply be no alternative to ongoing subsidies financed by tax revenue raised either from local or national governments, or international donors.

If one perceives of sustainability as *systemic change*, however, then, despite the author's insistence that this demonstrates the 'illusion of sustainability', this is a situation that represents the ultimate goal of a development programme with objectives of sustainability.

This is symptomatic of how a failure to clearly define sustainability can lead to inaccurate conclusions being drawn. On the basis of a review of development programme design documents and literature, three different interpretations of sustainability based on their objectives are examined here (i) sustainability of programming; (ii) sustainability of ends; and (iii) sustainability as systemic change.

As clichéd as it may be, the hackneyed example of 'giving a man a fish' will be utilised owing to people's familiarity with the concept, which will allow for better communication of the subtleties of the definitional differences. The stylised example will be utilised to show how perceptions of sustainability can affect developmental outcomes substantially.

5 SUSTAINABILITY OF PROGRAMMING

This first definition of sustainability is the simplest that which is affordable is sustainable; however, the resources are acquired. Many donor programmes use the language of sustainability to assess the relative merits of programmes by their financial cost, that is, the sustainability of donor finance to the project, given finite resources. Evidently, in such assessments, cheaper is equivalent to better. More developed conceptions of this type begin to examine returns on investment, that is, the impact on poverty relative to the financial input from the donor, often referred to as 'value for money', as an example of the new public management system that has begun to dominate the public sectors in many major donor countries in the last decade. The increase in the total amount of ODA and the changing political economy around it has increased the focus on its achievements, which must be realised within a political cycle (Pollock *et al.*, 2002; Stoker, 2006; Nisar, 2007; Eyben, 2012). This conception implicitly assumes a finite number of people living in poverty and a consistent supply of donor finance.

A variant on this approach is to see sustainability as the continuation of the programme but with alternative funding sources. Although this conception does not envisage continuation of support from the original donor, the key to understanding how this differs from other understandings of sustainability lies in the fact that it is the programme and not its results that are to be sustained (Ostrom, 2002). The future of the project may lie in leveraging government or other donor funds, but what is seen as important is that the project continues, regardless of whether it was seen to have a genuine impact.

The fundamental principles of this approach do not necessarily envisage a future without development assistance. As countries develop economically, levels of development assistance may shift and some countries may be introduced as recipients, whereas others stop receiving development assistance. Proponents of this approach would not necessarily see giving a man a fish as being unsustainable, provided that there was a reliable source of fish that the donor's current level of financial support could provide.

This has become far less fashionable in recent years but remains in a number of development programmes terms of reference. Still, in order to control population and sexual transmitted diseases, in 2013, DfID announced the disbursement of 17 million female condoms and three million contraceptive implants, with a view to contributing to sustainable development (DfID, 2013). Current ODA programmes operating under this conception include several DfID, Irish Aid, UNICEF, GTZ and Care programmes (McCord, 2009). Other philanthropic money is also commonly used under this conception (see for example Proctor and Gamble's *Pampers Vaccination Program*). Often, donors will see the continued existence and direct delivery of programme impacts, such as vaccinations or education, as continuing to deliver sustainable impacts, in a similar way to the *sustainability of ends* conception. The ends are the vaccinated or educated people, who will continue to be so, which delivers the results the programme requires to continue to justify funding, that is, sustainability of programming.

6 SUSTAINABILITY OF ENDS

This second conception of the sustainability of development programmes aims to prioritise programmes, where capacities that have been transferred continue to exist once donor support has ceased. Capacities, here, refer to both physical assets, such as vehicles,

buildings or infrastructure, and intangible assets, such as knowledge or skills transferred through capacity building initiatives.

This represents the most common understanding of sustainability in development programming at present. The majority of programmes from bilateral and multi-lateral donors as well as NGOs which feature the word sustainability (in a non-environmental context) in their programme design documents understand the term in this way. *Capacity building* is the most frequently used description in programme documents.

In contrast to the previous conception, it is not possible for the donation of food or money to people to be considered sustainable. Although *sustainability of ends* does not necessarily mean the direct delivery of goods and services, they could be included under its definition.

The range of activities that might be engaged in here varies greatly in both longevity and utility. Some, for example, would see the donation of a tractor as sustainable; once the initial investment has been made, no further donor input will be required and the tractor continues to exist. Whether the recipients have the knowledge or skills to maintain it or the fuel to power it are, of course, additional considerations. Over the longer term, there are still large numbers of infrastructure-focused projects, which have the same aim, installing water pumps or building roads.

At the other end of the scale, a market analysis may identify the key constraint on the growth of an industry as being the absence of trained horticulturalists, for example. The donor may therefore contract a team of consultants to travel to the country in question to train a range of horticulturalists. Once funding ceased and the consultants have left the country, the horticulturalists would remain trained and should help the industry to grow. Proponents of this approach would therefore see the intervention as sustainable.

Some of the flaws of this approach can be seen in this extract from a review of Swedish bilateral aid to Tanzania.

Donors, including Sweden, favoured the support of investments and building up organisations and structures, rather than support for operations and maintenance. Thus from the recipient organisation side, the investment phase was 'free' while the operation and maintenance phase was costly. From the recipient side it made more sense to let a road, power plant, a school deteriorate than to maintain the existing one with domestic resources (Lindahl & Catterson, 2005; 146)

First, the fact that an activity is 'free' to the recipient can, in some circumstances, distort local markets and lead to an undervaluing of the good or the service provided. Second, perverse incentives are created that actually detract from the sustainability of previous development interventions. With donors more willing to fund capital costs than recurring costs, there is no incentive for national governments to maintain a previous investment.

The paradigm of 'sustainable rural livelihoods' is conceptually far closer to incorporating elements of resilience and adaptability beyond simple capacity transfer (Chambers & Conway, 1992). However, when applied practically, the sustainable rural livelihoods approach is a characteristic of the conception of sustainability as capacity transfer. Sustainability is taken as a snapshot of the asset profile of an individual or household, without a consideration of the broader system within which that individual or household and their assets exist. Put more simply, no consideration is given to the relationship between the current assets and their future value.

The sustainability of a livelihood can be linked with its net assets. Of these, tangible assets are easier to identify and estimate. A useful and useable indicator of vulnerability and security, may be the net position of a household, defined as the value of its realisable tangible assets less liabilities such as debts (Chambers and Conway, 1992; 20)

The absence of a consideration of how assets might be sustained, let alone the means through which further assets might be produced demonstrates a key failing in this conception of sustainability.

Further, as argued by Dorward *et al.* (2003), such ends-based approaches are supplied and not demand led. One might ask farmers what they need to in order to increase their productivity and consequently supply tilling equipment to all of the farmers in the area. However, in isolation from analysis of broader dynamics outside of the farmers' cognition, this may result in a surplus production and a fall in prices for the target crop. Therefore, under this conception, ends may depreciate over time but may also fail to achieve their goal in the first instance, meaning that there is no impact to sustain.

To return to the fish example, those who see sustainable development as the continuation of interventions beyond donor input would not view 'giving a man a fish' as sustainable. Giving a man a fishing equipment, however, or training in more effective fishing methods or the provision of some kind of storage facility to account for fluctuations in the number of fish caught (insulation from asymmetric shocks) would be viewed as sustainable.

7 SUSTAINABILITY AS SYSTEMIC CHANGE

This final conception of sustainability takes a more overarching view of change and the role of 'development' within it. Fundamental to understanding sustainability in these terms is the concept of a system. Inequality is created and maintained through a system or rather a series of interconnected systems. For a change to be considered sustainable under this conception of sustainability, not only does the change has to persist beyond the period of outside engagement but the system through which that change was produced must also alter so that the overall system has the capacity to adapt to continue to produce positive developmental impacts for poor people.

This conception of sustainability is one that has been embraced, at least in principle, by a growing number of programmes in recent years, variously branded as M4P, systemic change, complexity-based, market systems development or value-chain systems approaches. The greatest in number amongst these are programmes funded by development agencies in the UK, USA, Sweden, Australia and Switzerland, whereas a number of NGOs and foundations are also utilising these approaches.

In reference to the capacity of donor interventions to generate community level institutions, Kremer and Miguel (2007; 1009) recognise the limits of donor interventions in creating the correct incentives for these institutions to continue, or continue to be created, in their absence. This is one of the principle differences between understanding sustainability as *systemic change* and other conceptions, questioning why a change would persist in the absence of outside intervention and what the incentives are for this to happen.

To return once again to the fish analogy, this view of sustainability would not see giving a man a fish or giving a man the means to catch his own fish as sustainable—if the fishing rod was to break, how would the man replace it? Is there an infrastructure in place to provide a reliable supply of replacement parts and inputs, such as fishing line?

Although the systemic constraints affecting the poor in every system in every place differ, it might be the case that government import duties are too high to allow the import of affordable manufactured equipment for supply to poor people. In this case, a development programme might engage with government or preferably with local trade organisations such as chambers of commerce who would in turn engage with government, in order to bring about policy change. It might be the case that there is a lack of micro-credit facilities to allow poor people to buy the equipment which may constitute significant initial expenditure but which may be repaid through the additional income of selling surplus fish caught using the new equipment. Where these low levels of capital are not a key constraint, supply might be an issue, where manufacturers and retailers focus on urban areas, limiting poor people's access to markets. In such cases, the role of a development programme may be conducting research or working with a manufacturer to demonstrate the potential of low-income markets, potentially reconfiguring their offer to cater better to poorer people. These are just a small number of myriad ways that this particular development issue might be addressed in different contexts, but in each case, the change brought about by the intervention proposed is one that will continue and adapt in the absence of external involvement.

There are those that contend that no solution is sustainable in situations of extreme poverty, and indeed, no proponents of a systemic understanding of sustainability would claim that a systemic change will result from every intervention. One would not attempt to teach a drowning man to swim, let alone alter the state incentives for schools to offer swimming lessons as a public good to minimise the future need for emergency services. However, often, systemic change principles are more applicable than one might immediately assume.

Once this clause is highlighted, there is a tendency for every donor, NGO or programme to argue that their particular issue in their particular context constitutes the case of the drowning man, which can have a pernicious effect on the outcomes for sustainability. Once 'relief' and 'development' are dichotomised in such a way, the potential for more sustainability in relief is removed.

The US-based NGO Mercy Corps, whose remit is to work exclusively in crisis or conflict situations, recognised the unhelpful nature of this divide and have begun to work in less direct ways through partners in the private and public sectors, where possible, to increase the sustainability of the change that they affect (Mercy Corps, 2013). This concept is documented by Hitchins *et al.* (2004) who characterise that this not as a dichotomy but as a 'spectrum of economic weakness' with a 'viability void' on one side, where relief is more appropriate, to an enabling environment on the other, where there are greater opportunities for sustainable innovations.

Sustainability under this conception of the term commonly involves both public and private sector actors. In many cases, it is a question of the capacity of institutions, local, national or transnational, to perform functions adequately, and the incentives they have to do so. Many functions cannot be performed adequately by the private sector actors but it is a question of which level of institution has the capacity, remit or responsibility to intervene. Indeed, in the case of deworming drugs discussed by Kremer and Miguel (2007), if the local or state government can provide sufficient positive externalities through the free provision of deworming drugs in the form of a healthy workforce whose additional tax revenues pay for the treatment, then this is in fact the very definition of a sustainable solution. This is undoubtedly an oversimplification of a complex issue and it is far more likely that political decisions at a local and national level have to be taken as to what

spending priorities are, even if there is a positive cost to the provision of the treatment once all externalities have been considered. From a donor perspective, however, development as a concept cannot be the same as charity. The purpose of development is not to replace social welfare but to leverage investments made to improve the ability of poor people to meet their own needs and, therefore, reduce the need for social welfare.

Conceiving of sustainability in this way invokes thinking around *the industry of aid or development as a business*. However, one conceives of sustainability, there are few incentives for any of the actors involved at the levels of policy, design, implementation, evaluation or research around development assistance to bring about sustainable change, as is documented extensively elsewhere (Svensson, 2000; Paul, 2006; Van Brabant, 2010; Williamson, 2010; Font *et al.*, 2012). Rent-seeking behaviours are evident across the development assistance industry and while there is a clear recognition of the importance of ‘sustainability’, the ill-defined nature of the concept allows those with incentives to do so to perpetuate this behaviour. By conceiving of sustainability as *systemic change*, the incentive structure is changed, provided that the principle of sustainability being desirable remains intact. Programmes assessed by these criteria must be designed so as to deliver this change and those that are successful in doing so will be rewarded accordingly.

Ultimately, the perception of sustainability as systemic change—or the capacity of people, firms and institutions to innovate technologically, socially, politically and organisationally—is the only approach that can lead to long-term growth, independent of outside involvement. The global financial crisis has led to public sector cuts, which have been seen in many countries cut development assistance budgets; an economy, and the livelihoods of the poor people within it, cannot be dependent on the external whims of a foreign government, making the perception of sustainability of programming a precarious and vulnerable position. The world is a complex and dynamic place. Climate, markets and governments, amongst a plethora of other dimensions, change and a one-off involvement that does not leave behind the capacity to adapt to these changes is doomed to failure in the long term.

From an environmental perspective, multiple studies have shown that the capacity to adapt to climatic changes in terms of impact on growth, amongst other things, is far lower in less developed countries (Dell *et al.*, 2008; Dell *et al.*, 2009; Noy, 2009; Raddatz, 2009). The perception of sustainability as systemic change is the only way in which development can contribute to the building of complex adaptive systems, and conceiving of sustainability in other ways has the potential to negative impact on poor people as documented in the concluding section.

8 CONSEQUENCES OF INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The issues raised by this co-optation of the term ‘sustainability’ by multiple development academics, policy makers and practitioners, each with their own distinct set of priorities, have had consequences that reach far beyond semantics. Sustainability is now almost universal in the terms of reference for development programmes from a wide range of donors (see various USAID, DfID, UN, IFAD and AUSAID programmes for examples). However, as outlined earlier, interpretations of the term vary between donors, between programmes and amongst personnel within donors.

A programme whose primary objective is poverty alleviation, as it is either directly or indirectly with the vast majority of programmes, is now likely to be tasked with sustainability (often phrased as ‘green growth’ in a contemporary setting under environmental conceptions of sustainability) as a secondary or parallel objective. Although programmes, and their designers, utilising market systems development frameworks might interpret this as the likelihood of benefits persisting beyond the period of donor intervention, other departments or individuals within the donor organisation or evaluator might interpret this as a requirement that interventions are climate neutral or have a secure source of donor funding.

Poor people in recipient countries are often negatively impacted by these different interpretations of sustainability. As included in the earlier extract, where the incentives are in favour of building new infrastructure rather than maintaining the existing infrastructure, access becomes unreliable and displacement of people from homes and land is increased. Moreover, where temporary solutions are introduced to address a problem, markets are distorted and poor people lose the opportunity to develop sustainable solutions to improve their lives. Very few people in the world are entirely destitute. Giving every man a fish denies the fisherman who catches an extra fish the chance to trade with the farmer who has a higher maize yield in one season. Take this to a national level and markets are not created, which otherwise would have been. Markets may be ‘thin’ but they exist, and the distortion that some interpretations of sustainability necessitate can have negative consequences for poor people.

From an environmental perspective consider, as an example, a programme, the design of which is geared towards increasing the use of fertiliser by poor farmers in order to increase yields and subsequently increase incomes. They might work through a local producer of fertiliser to create a product geared more appropriately to poor consumers with little access to credit. Despite achieving these goals successfully and helping to raise the incomes of hundreds of thousands of people, the programme might be deemed a failure for having increased the use of chemical rather than organic fertiliser. Similarly, a programme, which intervenes in a system in a number of ways so as to grow a particular export market from a poor country and improve the position of poor people within that system, might be criticised by those who interpret sustainability from an environmental perspective for the increased carbon emissions that exports are creating.

Sustainability in development, then, must be re-evaluated so that the long-term interests of poor people are prioritised. This entails an appraisal of the most effective way to ensure that changes made to poor people’s capacity to address their needs are carried out by donors, rather than employing conceptions that serve domestic political, individual or firm-level goals. Conceiving of sustainability as systemic change is the only way to ensure that development programmes’ objectives are aligned to the achievement of lasting pro-poor benefits.

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