



# Effective Sustainable Development

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## **Effective Sustainable Development**

*By Barry Buzan*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*How can we make the concept of sustainable development more effective? Finding a pathway towards effective sustainable development (ESD) becomes more urgent as global warming specifically, and the Anthropocene crisis generally, intensify. It helps to take a long view of development and its role in global society (the anthroposphere) before focusing on what characteristics ESD needs to have.*

### **COMMENTARY**

The concept of development emerged with decolonisation, and the obligation of former metropolitan powers to give assistance to those newly independent states still far from the leading edge of modernity. Yet it also applies to those states already at, or close to, the leading edge, who are just as keen to continue expanding their wealth, power, and knowledge.

For the leading edge, the driver is that in capitalist societies, growth allows sufficient distribution of gains to offset the political instability that otherwise arises from inequality. For those playing catch-up, the driver is a potent combination of envy, historical grievance, status seeking, fear of weakness, and a sense of entitlement to have what others have.

The pursuit of development is thus a near-universal human aspiration. Yet only in the last few decades has it risen into the consciousness and knowledge of humankind that continuing down this path is rapidly generating a major contradiction with the planet's carrying capacity.

In a long view of the anthroposphere, development has been driven by five basic forms of expansion: human numbers, social complexity, wealth, power, and

knowledge. These five have been built up over millennia of practice and have huge momentum.

For most of human history, development in these terms operated without threatening the planet's physical systems. Earth systems remained largely driven by their own orbital and spin dynamics, solar intensities, and suchlike.

But with the global onset of modernity in the nineteenth century, all the processes of development accelerated sharply. The anthroposphere's insatiable demand for "progress" made ever-stronger impacts on Earth systems.

This challenge is unprecedented in human history. Never before have the deeply embedded social and biological imperatives to increase and grow run up against absolute planetary constraints. The Anthropocene crisis has come to a peak quickly, leaving the anthroposphere little time to adapt.

Yet a case can be made that one of the five imperatives for continuous growth built into the anthroposphere, one, increasing population, is solving itself, while the other four can be sustained without necessarily contradicting planetary carrying capacity. Human numbers will soon peak and possibly begin to shrink. There is no obvious reason why the increasing complexity of human societies, such as rising urbanisation, or increases in human knowledge, should be in necessary contradiction to Earth systems.

The main problem with the growth imperatives embedded in the anthroposphere hinges on the unrestrained pursuit of wealth and power. "Business as usual" in these two respects will quite quickly result in damaging, and then extremely damaging, consequences for human civilisations.

Given the powerful social momentum behind development, any attempt to confront the Anthropocene crisis by reducing or eliminating development, or requiring massive redistribution between rich and poor, will face insurmountable political opposition.

The obvious, and perhaps only, way of reconciling the developmental dynamics of the anthroposphere with Earth systems is to redefine development in terms that make it sustainable, and to get that redefinition widely accepted as the basis for confronting the Anthropocene crisis. This new understanding of development has to be presented as a plausible, fair, and engaging story that meets the needs of both the leading edge and those catching up.

The contemporary understanding of development is rooted in the nineteenth century experience of the first round of modernising societies.

A small group of mostly Western states (plus Japan and Russia) latched onto the idea of permanent progress and opened a massive gap in wealth and power between themselves and the rest. That gap was difficult to close because doing so required a social revolution. Since this core was the only model for development, they

established the myth that development (modernisation) required Westernisation. This myth was widely accepted.

Driven by both a rapidly-expanding population and the technologically innovative political economy of industrial capitalism, the pursuit of wealth and power during this era was rapacious in its use of materials and energy. The global distribution of development remained highly uneven, though some catch-up occurred from the 1980s after a second round of modernisation began in East Asia.

This unrestrained model of development is the one that the Anthropocene crisis is making unsustainable. What might a development model look like that both retained the commitments to progress, and increasing wealth and power, while being sustainable in relation to planetary carrying capacity?

The idea of sustainable development has been around for decades but the mainstream pursuit of it has been flawed. An understanding of development that clings to a measure of rising GDP, as in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), will not work. Demand for energy and resources continues to rise, putting increasing pressure on Earth's systems.

An effective and politically sellable sustainable development would have to meet four requirements.

1. Easiest is a rapid transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy and electrification. There is no shortage of technologies to achieve this, and there has already been substantial progress with wind and solar.

2. More difficult is becoming much leaner in using material resources. The energy transition itself requires substantial new resources, and the mining and processing of material resources are a source of greenhouse gases. Achieving leanness will take longer than the energy transition and will require multiple pathways: new technologies, higher efficiency, more recycling, and lower consumption of material things. Complex calculations will need to be made to determine priorities in the pursuit of leanness in relation to the threats that material extraction and pollution pose to Earth systems – and those in turn pose to the anthroposphere.

The pursuit of material leanness means that the understanding of “progress” will have to be redefined. Material progress is a key feature of contemporary development. The idea that progress is mainly about the accumulation of material things will have to give way to the consumption of services and experiences that require less materials and generate less waste.

3. To this end, ESD will need to be smart. Societies will have to collect and use big data in a major way, deploy AI to analyse it and use the results across society. Since AI is in its infancy, and its development is being pushed hard by military, economic, governmental, and scientific interests, the characteristics of “smartness” in this sense will continue to unfold rapidly.

There are risks to smartness. Cybercrime and cyberwar are already well in play. Unpredictable behaviour by AIs is emergent, and its consequences will depend on the balance between its (un)reliability on the one hand, and the responsibilities it is given on the other. Societies will need to be able to prevent cybercriminals and cyberwarriors from overwhelming the networks and analytics, and prevent rogue AIs from causing major social disruption.

A key question for smartness is whether societies will choose to network themselves mainly internally, by erecting barriers to global networks, or will opt for wider networks, regionally or globally. China is currently the exemplar for closure, and the now-defunct liberal international order was the model for open networking. The current political dominance of the far right suggests that the closure model will dominate at least in the short term. Which model will produce the best balance between connectivity and risk will be determined as practices and capabilities unfold.

4. ESD will require a meaningful degree of global coordination to stop “business as usual” from pushing the planet beyond its carrying capacity. This will not revive the economic globalisation that brought down the neoliberal project in the early twenty-first century. Globalisation will rest on shared stewardship of the planetary environment. The balance between the necessary regulatory regime and the operation of the market could, in principle, be done under either authoritarian or democratic governments.

Authoritarians would have to open themselves much more to global perspectives than they currently do and accept that climate change is the top priority. Democrats would have to put a leash on capitalism in relation to both national and planetary goals. Civilisationalism, currently fashionable on the far right, might be one possible framing, but it would have to include the idea that all civilisations depend on having planetary conditions that support them.

These requirements may sound like a tall order, but none pose obstacles that cannot be overcome with creative political thinking.

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