EDITORIAL

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On social sustainability in a world of limits facing prolonged austerity

I applaud Magnus Boström and his colleague authors for addressing the still hugely neglected topic of social sustainability in its broad context.

We are entering a decade without precedent for human well-being. One-fifth of people alive today have experienced wealth creation, technological supremacy, longer lifespan, international outreach, more leisure, greater comfort, and an ambiguous sensitivity to the plight of the remaining four-fifths of global population that are losing on all fronts.

These achievements can no longer be guaranteed for the majority of this minority. Unemployment among young adults below 25 in the European Union is approaching one in seven. Throughout Europe, five workforce entrants are chasing every job opening. Entrenched unions continue to demand jobs for life for those already employed, and resist attempts critically to evaluate declining productivity among their members. The economic turbulence of the past three years is rooted in deep economic and social inequalities and working safeguards which shield uncompetitive wage structures at both the top and the bottom of the pay scales. Protecting currencies and banks adds to these injustices. The social “floor” is being excavated throughout the globe.

In an age of austerity, it is deemed convenient to jettison much, if not all, of sustainability. The term is so abused and so mishandled that it no longer has political meaning. Essentially it is regarded as “continuous”: more of the same for as long as we can see. Yet its real meaning is “self-reliance”: recycling and reconstituting materials and energy, creating wellbeing for everyone and ensuring that everything we do is everlasting, mimicking the enduring materials and energy cycles of the planet. But in recession, such bold concepts are deemed fanciful.

Yet we dismiss sustainability at our peril. We do indeed live in a world of planetary boundaries. Rockström and his colleagues (2009) in the Resilience Alliance chart eight fluxes of life-giving chemicals and the all important ninth of biodiversity and ecosystem functioning. They contend—drawing on the best evidence available—that in three of these cycles, nitrogen, phosphorus, and carbon, the “hand of man” has exceeded natural tolerances and that for biodiversity the game is almost up. We have no idea of what might happen to the rest, or what might be the consequences. These boundaries may be unmappable, but they provide a “ceiling” for our future extraction and manipulation.

Kate Raworth (2011) offers the phrase “social floor” to this zone of potential human use of our planet. These are irreducible platforms of human well-being which should not be lowered without causing morally unacceptable injustice. She posits poverty, lack of basic human rights, illiteracy and ill-education, ill-health, personal insecurity, lack of community, unemployability, and loss of self-esteem as constituting this platform.

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This coupling of planetary boundaries and social floor gives us a “space” in which it is safe to operate so as to create wealth and enable secure and equitable well-being. This collection of articles provides the basis for the social protection floor. It mirrors the United Nations Social Protection Report (Bachelet & Somavia, 2011) specially prepared for the forthcoming Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development due to be held in Rio de Janeiro in June, 2012. This document also introduces the notion of a “social protection floor” which, it claims, should form the basis for a re-evaluation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

This combination of planetary boundaries and a social floor is leading to coherent calls for a new set of world sustainability goals for 2020. This could be the first time that the unifying concepts of ecological resilience and social well-being are coupled into definable and achievable targets. This may well prove to be the legacy of Rio+20. It would involve redefining the MDGs into Millennium Sustainability Goals, placing the purposes of human betterment and fairness of treatment at the heart of the sustainability agenda for the forthcoming, much-troubled decade.
But let us not kid ourselves. Part of Rio+20 is to reassess the institutions that currently guide the paths to sustainability. Yet none is presently designed to do so. This is the case for two reasons. One is that sustainability is simply not “designed in” to any political, economic, or social governing process at present. Indeed, only “nonsustainability” drivers enable these mechanisms to survive the suspicious frowns of markets and electoral democracies (to say nothing of corrupt governments and dictatorships). The other is that the human condition cannot foresee far-off danger that affects future generations, and which, if addressed, could result in real “losers” without clearly defined “beneficiaries.” So the ceiling is heightened and the floor is lowered.

This important collection of articles offers the beginning of the much-needed redress of this dysfunctional sustainability deficit. It is likely that prolonged suffering from human-induced hazards (e.g., floods, storms, drought, fires, disease, exotic migrations of pests and parasites) and dangerously increased inequality (e.g., migration, chronic indebtedness, wage reduction, household poverty, inflation, insecurity) will lead to social strife, to profound physical and mental-health crises, to deepening violence and criminality, and to a whole “lost generation.” This last factor is already in place over large parts of the globe. As it seeps into the nooks and crannies of formerly contented families, social unsustainability will surely be noticed.

There is no precedent in our lifetimes for such wholesale calamity across so much of the human race. Identifying, measuring, monitoring, and safeguarding this critical planetary “safe operating and socially fair space” will surely become the driving force for sustainability. This is the real agenda for Rio+20. Sadly, more suffering may have to afflict us all before we confront that ultimate reality.

References


About the Author

Tim O’Riordan OBE is Emeritus Professor of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia, a Fellow of the British Academy, and a Deputy Lieutenant of Norfolk. He actively engages in creating citizenship schemes for young people unable to find employment and who wish to create social enterprises for sustainable futures. He can be contacted at t.oriordan@uea.ac.uk.