Sustainability

The Need to Bridge Disciplinary Silos and the Theory-Practice Divide

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The Big Question

• We have stunning resources…

• We are living beyond the carrying capacity of our planet …

• There are issues and problems we need to individually and collectively address to ensure a sustainable future…

SO HOW DO WE BECOME SUSTAINABLE?
Intellectual Concepts

• Sustainability  the capacity to endure
  • an aspirational goal,
  • a dynamic systems state of environmental, social and economic prosperity that can keep going indefinitely to the benefit of all

• Sustainable development
  • a process defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development - which may / may not lead to such a state
Sustainable Development

“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

The concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and

The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs” (WCED, 1987, p 43).
Needs?
Limits?
Philosophical Explanations

• Emphasising intergenerational equity
• Emphasising social justice
• Emphasising limits to growth
• Emphasising ecosystems
• Emphasising morality

• Fundamentally querying the bases of capitalism
Political Economy of Capitalism

- Private actors allowed to own and control the use of property and resources in accord with their own interests
- Invisible hand of pricing mechanism coordinates supply and demand in markets in a way that is presumed to be in the best interests of society
- Limited role for government in terms of responsibility for ‘peace, justice and tolerable taxes’
Owners of capital take risks and reap benefits
Others suffer through any externalities
Recent Research
MIT Sloan Management Review and Boston Consulting Research

• Survey of 2,874 managers/executives from 113 countries
• 70% of companies that have placed sustainability on their management agendas have done so in the past six years; 20% have done so in just the past two years
• Two-thirds of respondents said that sustainability was critically important to being competitive in today’s marketplace, up from 55% in the 2010 survey
• Most companies are struggling to define sustainability in a way that is relevant for their businesses
• 31% of respondents say their companies are currently profiting from sustainable business practices
The Business Case for Sustainable Development

• *Sustainable development is good for business and business is good for sustainable development* (WBCSD)

• Effective design can yield resource productivity improvements

• Enabling technologies now exist to provide for eco-innovations

• Improving resource productivity can lead to higher economic growth than business-as-usual, while at the same time reducing pressures on the environment and enhancing employment
Against the Business Case

• Capitalism privileges privatisation of profits over socialisation of losses

• There is often a trade-off between sustainability and competitiveness

• Values do not readily translate into behaviours

• Business engagement may be more rhetorical than substantive

• Sustainable development is made up of different often incompatible elements that are seen as beyond the mandate of business
What is needed to promote sustainability?

• Leaders, champions, and change agents
• Regulation and/or voluntarism
• Disasters, shocks, shortages
• Creative solutions
• More advanced technologies
• Education, knowledge and skills
• Collaboration and team work
• A different consumption ethic
What can we do as individuals?

• Experts from a range of disciplines can develop the skills to work together
• We can work to define problems and get others to assist us to develop and implement solutions
• We can seek to engage with people
  – who care about where they live, work and play
  – who are prepared to take decisions with a view to the long-term
  – who do not substitute talking for action when action is really what is needed
  – who are prepared to embrace change
What kind of enterprises will contribute to sustainability? (1)

- Organisations that do not seek profit at all costs
- Organisations that do not take undue risks as they appreciate their connections to and responsibilities for the environment
- Organisations that take a long term ‘glocal’ view
- Organisations that conserve resources, and ‘look after’ products across their lifecycle
What kind of **enterprises** will contribute to sustainability? (2)

- Organisations that take social equity seriously

- Organisations that work with rather than against the interests of diverse stakeholders

- Organisations who work within the spirit of international conventions and frameworks to **co-operate** rather than **compete** on matters of fundamental importance
What sort of academics will make a difference?

• Academics who engage with non-trivial issues, who ask the big questions and encourage reflexivity, critique and social action on the part of their students

• Academics who are theoretically promiscuous, whose work is practice focused – not just practice-based – and whose work celebrates good practice and decries bad practice, and also offers a realistic prescription for enhanced performance
What hope?

Concluding Thoughts

• Move beyond talk to taking substantive action

• Take people with you

• Work with the prescripts of positive psychology

• Hail and be part of honest and substantive efforts to address needs (especially of the world’s poor) AND limits (especially ecological ones)

• Work for the biggest prize – life itself