

Sustainable Development
PART II – Obstacles to Ecologically Sustainable Development
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(Reference as – *Business Magazine, Issue 635 (2004) pp.56-58*)

In Part I of this article we saw that “development” can be viewed either in terms of “economic growth” or more holistically from the viewpoint of “ecology” – i.e. ecologically sustainable development (ESD).¹ The ESD framework redefines a new interrelationship between Ecology, Equity and Economics (3 E’s). Readers may have been quick to recognise that ESD is not a widespread framework. The reasons for this are the myriad of psychological, ideological, political, institutional and structural obstacles to which ESD is confronted. These obstacles are mutually self-reinforcing (Figure 1),² and arise from the ways in which modern society (and thought) is constructed. This article is in no way comprehensive and is only an attempt to set the stage for the reader to undertake his/her own analysis.

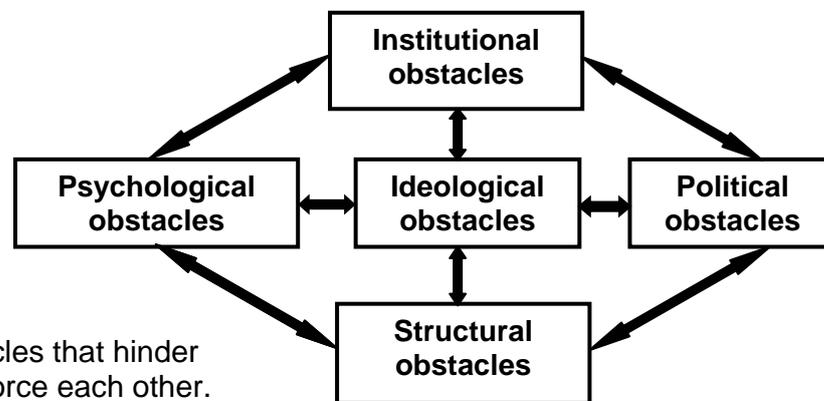


Figure 1 The obstacles that hinder ESD reinforce each other.

Psychological obstacles

Social systems are founded on paradigms, namely the overarching set of rules, values and beliefs held by most of their members. The mindsets or psychological makeup of people determine what is acceptable behaviour in society, including the views held about nature. Since paradigms are social constructs, it implies that human beings, either individually or collectively,³ have the capacity to change the ongoing paradigm. Assuming that ESD is ethically desirable,³ why then is it not upheld. Psychological denial of current unsustainable practices can be explained by the deep-seated forces that have shaped modern society.

Modernism – Refers to the broad aesthetic movements of the twentieth century, while modernity refers to a set of philosophical, political, and ethical ideas which provide the basis for the aesthetic aspect of modernism.⁴ Amongst other things, modernism stipulates that (1) there exists a rational self that makes the world intelligible through reason, or rationality, posited as the highest, and the only objective form, of mental processes, and (2) the mode of knowing produced by the objective rational self is science, which can provide objective universal truths about the world. The logical conclusion is that science stands as the paradigm for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge. But is this the case? (see *Progress* below).

¹ See Business Magazine, Issue 630, July 21 – July 28, pp.53-55.

² Figure 1 is only for illustrative purposes and could have included different relationships between obstacles.

³ This is a fair assumption on the balance of evidence about the state of the environment and the unprecedented level of poverty (and suffering) in the world. State-of-the-world reports are available from the Worldwatch Institute [www.worldwatch.org].

⁴ M. Klages, Postmodernism [www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Lkages/pomo.html] (August 10, 2004).

Duality – Modernity has extended the mind/body dualism pertinent to the post-Enlightenment era to the relationship between human beings and nature. Modernism is essentially about creating more order in society – i.e. creating more rationality is conducive to creating more order – and modern societies ought to be on guard constantly against "disorder". In order to legitimise its own belief, modernism has created sources of "disorder". Unfortunately, nature has fallen prey to our modernist attitude. Nature, equated to "unpredictability" and "hostile", needs to be tamed using science and technology. The engineering of nature to make it more docile, predictable and perfect has become a norm.

Ideological obstacles

Democracy - A "grand narrative" in modern culture is the story that democracy is the most enlightened form of government, and that democracy can and will lead to universal human happiness. Democracy may, as yet, be our best form of governance. But is it without question? Firstly, our ideas about democracy are imbued with "modernity". In modernist thought, science is the vehicle for "truth", and the logical extension is that "truth" is within reach of scientists only. By delegating decision-making power to an elitist group, the foundation of democracy, namely mass participation in decision-making, is undermined. Consequently, modern society becomes "ecologically unconscious". This idea takes us to a setting not dissimilar to that in Plato's Republic – i.e. "truth" is conceived only by *Philosopher Kings* who use *Nobel Lies* to rule. Decision-making is done by this handful of experts thereby leaving the populus out of the loop. Is this what democracy purports to be? Secondly, and equally damaging, democracy is being redefined (or confused) as "consumerism" in order to promote the ideals of free market liberalisation. In short, rational economic agents (that's us) reveal their preferences in the market place, and in so doing exhibit their free will, wishes and freedom. This consumerist ideology supports the economic growth paradigm.

Economic growth - Governments obsessively pursue economic growth as a panacea for poverty, unemployment, debt repayment, inflation, balance of payments deficits, pollution, depletion, population explosion, crime, divorce, and drug addiction, at the expense of ESD. The fallacies, myths and costs (environmental and social) of economic growth are well documented.⁵ A pertinent reason why current human activities are unsustainable lies in the fact that neo-classical economics treats natural resources and services as "income" rather than "capital". This is like eating the hen that lays golden eggs for supper!

Development and Progress – Our idea of human development is closely related to material progress, which is achieved through economic growth. Progress is measured by the growth of scientific knowledge and technological innovation (for the "conquest of nature"), while discounting the qualitative notions of quality of life. The following remarks are noteworthy (1) science as a social enterprise is subjective, (2) science deals with "convergent" problems, whereas environmental issues are "divergent" (i.e. requires decision between mutually exclusive solutions), and (3) technology has constructive and destructive sides. Our infatuation with technocentric solutions makes us underestimate their destructive consequences. This is not to say that science and technology are unnecessary evils, but that they should be used to inform decision-making while acknowledging their limitations.

Political obstacles

Political versus ecological time frames – Short political cycles (i.e. how often elections are held) drive politicians to muster power to be in office by focusing on short-term issues (e.g. economic cycles), while neglecting long-term ecological issues that are of the order of decades or centuries

⁵ See for example, E.J. Mishan, *Twenty-One Popular Economic Fallacies* (Allen Lane, London, 1969) and *The Costs of Economic Growth* (Westport, Praeger, 1993); E.H. Daly, *Ecological Economics* 5 (1992) pp.9-14.

(eg. reforestation, recovery of fisheries or dealing with global warming). Environmental issues do not generally decide the outcome of elections.

Inconsistencies between political and ecological boundaries – For example, governments may regulate logging or the exploitation of fisheries by corporations but disregard tree felling by individuals for housing development or overfishing by local fishermen. The latter practices may have severe stress on the natural environment.

Confusion between politics and economics – Most of politics today is concerned with economics. In this context, political leaders almost wilfully confuse the quantitative concept of material standard of living and the qualitative notion of quality of life. This is related to our idea of progress. Qualitative notions of quality of life would celebrate human relationships, the wisdom inherent to nature, and the grandeur of life.

Institutional obstacles

Education – For the most part, educational institutions (cons)train individuals who, although being well equipped for the job market (a narrow definition of “human capital”), are ill-equipped to assess the current paradigm critically. In fact, education is tailored to legitimise the paradigm typified by modernity. For instance, most students studying the sciences could quote the Laws of Thermodynamics, but how many of them understand its applicability to the economic system? Do those taking economics learn about biological systems, complexity theory, chaos and entropy? How can a “fragmented” education provide the platform for life-long learning? Or is it rather the case that education is “the mouse race that gets you ready for the rat race”.⁶

Mass media – The media is for most of us the main source of our information. Debates generated in mainstream (versus “alternative”) media largely shape our thoughts and ideas about the state of world affairs. Media organisations boast about their independence, objectivity and ethics in “informing” the public. On the contrary, the trend is for media organisations to be controlled by a handful (including governments and corporations). Mass media is often used as a propaganda machine to polarise social, environmental and political issues, and is a powerful tool through which prevailing ideas and ideals are reinforced or legitimised.⁷ The presupposed *raison d’être* of mass media is thus undermined. How actively does it participate in “dissent”?

International institutions – Poverty in the majority world is a serious cause of environmental degradation (more on *poverty* is given below). International institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have recently come under attack for exacerbating the situation of the masses in the majority world rather than improving it.⁸ Further, the World Trade Organisation is largely seen by the majority world as yet another monolith to stack the mechanisms of trade in favour of the minority world (or their transnational corporations).⁹ The emphasis on “free” rather than “fair” trade is rather damaging for the livelihood of the poor. These international institutions are setup and operate in ways that reinforce our modernist views of what constitute progress and development.

Structural obstacles

Global Management – In the wake of globalisation, there is a tendency to frame ecological unsustainability in a way that favours a top-down management approach. Although some form of international cooperation is necessary to combat global issues, such as global warming and

⁶ E. Aarons, *Philosophy for an Exploding World* (Brolga Books, Sydney, 1972), p.133.

⁷ *Understanding Power - The Indispensable Chomsky*, Eds. P.R. Mitchell and J. Schoeffel (Scribe Publications, Victoria, 2003).

⁸ Wayne Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization* (New Internationalist Publications, Oxford, 2001).

⁹ L. Wallach and P. Woodall, *Whose Trade Organization? A Comprehensive Guide to the WTO* (The New Press, NY, 2004).

ozone layer depletion, there are fears that the “global management” approach will be institutionalised and become the sole domain of experts (see *Democracy*).¹⁰ Quite often experts are in no better (rather worse) positions than local communities to make ecologically sound decisions regarding either the environment or community well-being (see *Development and Progress*). What is required is for the citizens of the world to partake in the debates about the environment and ecologically sustainable practices to development, and social welfare, thereby democratising the process.

Poverty – Poverty is a root cause of environmental degradation, which ought to be differentiated from environmental degradation resulting from an overconsumption of material goods. The former, dominant in the majority world, is associated with issues of livelihood, whereas the latter, dominant in the minority world, is associated with maintaining a standard of living that goes beyond “sufficiency”. In a world with limited natural resources, the creation of wealth by economic growth is also the cause of poverty. Hence, our ideals of modernism, development and progress do not help to alleviate poverty. In fact, they can only (and have) institutionalised poverty. Since the system is self-perpetuating, the solutions to the problem of poverty have to be found outside the current paradigm. No equity implies no ESD!

Sovereignty – Amidst increasing ecological stress and dwindling natural capital and life-support services we need debate on the notion of sovereignty of nation-states over the “global commons”. For instance, the major rain forests located in The Amazon, The Congo Bassin and West Papua, are like the lungs of nature. The countries owning these forests have decided to log the trees for revenue (increased GDP). But this has severe long-term implications for the rest of the world since biotic life requires oxygen for survival. Do we need a new approach to governance that views the “global commons” as belonging to all citizens rather than being marginalised to nation-states?

In brief, human behaviour is largely shaped by modernism, the principles of which serve to justify our prevailing social goals, cultural values, political possibilities and institutional objectives and practices (democracy, law, science, ethics, and aesthetics). The current paradigm is legitimised or universalised through institutions, values and norms congenial to it. The social setup depicted in Figure 1 tends to behave like a self-perpetuating machine. The obstacles discussed above cause the temporal and spatial scales of human affairs to become decoupled from those of nature. Signals of change are eliminated and the learning that such signals can generate is eroded, leading to ecological unsustainability.

*We rise or fall by the choice we make
It all depends on the road we take
And the choice and the road each depend
On the light that we have, the light we bend,
On the light we use
Or refuse
On the lies we live by
And from which we die.*

(extract from MENTAL FIGHT by BEN OKRI)

¹⁰ *Global Ecology – A New Arena of Political Conflict*, Ed. W. Sachs (Zed Books, Nova Scotia, 1995).