

## The sustainable and sustainability paradox

This article is about 'sustainability' as opposed to 'sustainable', and how integrated sustainability offers a strategy for long-term thriving for all.

When Julia Gillard stepped into the Prime Minister's shoes in June, the word 'sustainable' stepped into the spotlight. For Gillard, this meant 'sustainable population' - and so the debates around a 'big' or 'small' Australia become framed as 'sustainable' or 'unsustainable'. With the population debates already so highly charged, this only muddies our understanding of 'sustainable'.

More importantly, it adds to the growing confusion between *sustainable* and *sustainability*. True sustainability is a valuable concept which should not be politically hijacked. To lead in the national interest, leaders need to frame issues thoughtfully, not just for political gain. The hung Parliament shows the need for real leadership into a challenging future, and sustainability offers us a positive way.

Many Australians, like the Gillard Government, confuse *sustainable* and *sustainability*. This is mostly because we speak of sustainability on its own and think sustainability equals green, green equals good. However, sustainable and sustainability are not interchangeable. Sustainable is ongoing business for the long term, rather than short-term profits and boom-and-bust. Sustainability is more than just being 'green': it does include environmental concerns, but also social, economic, and cultural issues. Yet over a decade since the sustainability movement started in Australia, we still aren't connecting the dots. This crucial misunderstanding disconnects us from the essence of the bigger sustainability picture.

A better way to think sustainability is with the acronym **SEEC: Social, Environmental, Economic, and Cultural** (which includes governance). These four issues overlap and their interrelationship makes up sustainability. In this way, the sustainability of a business, a society, or a nation is about thriving in perpetuity - not just ongoing 'business'. It is bigger than a publicity stunt. It is more than a green product line or initiative which ignores adverse effects, such as the 'cash for clunkers' program. It goes beyond even the symbolic 'saving the planet'. If sustainability is fully planned and implemented, it drives a bottom-line strategy to save costs and a top-line strategy to reach new consumers while creating employment. It also drives a talent strategy to get, keep, and develop both employees and network partnerships with the community and stakeholders. It protects nature, without compromising people's welfare. Combining the SEEC principles can lead any situation positively, because it looks at the whole picture. This is the challenge and the power of sustainability: to consider every aspect - social, environmental, economic, and cultural.

**The social aspect means *acting as if other people matter*.** All members of society can be affected by our actions and conditions - for instance, drought, poverty, injustice, lack of education, public health, and loss of livelihood and human rights. We cannot ignore these or pretend they don't matter. For example, the historical over-allocation of water rights to some states, at the expense of others, has caused major problems across the whole Murray Darling system for years, with the Lower Lakes affected especially badly. True sustainability takes this into account from the start.

**The economic aspect means *operating profitably*.** Our actions affect how people and businesses meet their economic needs. We need to secure food, water, shelter, and comforts for people and businesses to operate profitably on an ongoing basis. That means all decisions have to take that into account. Taking water from the Murray River, for example, has supported the citrus groves, orchards, olive and almond groves upstream. But this has also meant that Lake Alexandrina's levels have dropped dangerously and people in the area have lost their livelihoods.

**The environmental aspect means *protecting and restoring the ecosystem*.** We need to consider how our actions affect the Earth's ecology - in terms of climate change, preserving national resources, and preventing toxic wastes. In the long term, social and economic concerns cannot override environmental concerns: they need to be considered together.

**Finally, the cultural aspect means *protecting and valuing cultural diversity through tolerance*.**

Through our actions, communities manifest their identity and cultivate traditions, from generation to generation. Australia has had a healthy multiculturalism and our challenge now is to examine the population issue strategically. That isn't just about the 'big' or 'small' Australia that pre-election rhetoric talked about, but includes total births, deaths, population replenishment, immigration, and asylum seekers - not just as numbers, but as part of our cultural diversity.

The SEEC principles can link together the interrelated strands of global changes and how they affect all of us in Australia. The 2007 climate change mandate was squandered; the hung Parliament shows our lack of faith in party politics and its lack of vision. Here is a way to progress our nation.

Let's have a national strategic dialogue on how to embed sustainability and make it valuable for us all. We do not need another 2020 summit, featuring celebrities, elites, and a citizen assembly which listens to experts only after the event. We need something dynamic and solution-oriented, which builds buy-in progressively and tests the foundations as they are created. This creates trust and transparency - unlike the surprise mining tax announcement, which proposed a 40 per cent super-profit tax in May, causing miners to threaten to pull future projects. Only if we engage people from the beginning and co-create solutions can we reframe the population issue, which has finally surfaced.

All organisations can rethink and challenge their own assumptions and their resulting practical implications for strategy. Within government, a sustainable population minister, or a silo issue on sustaining population, is not enough. An integrated sustainability department is well overdue. An overreaching national overview could end the blame game and enable better accountability. A sustainability strategy plan for Australia should measure the effects of each strategic alternative on the social, economic, environmental and cultural systems. Instead of narrow considerations which can damage every other aspect, sustainable strategy means a different set of what-ifs and multi-dimensional set of outputs.

A comprehensive sustainability strategy needs to integrate a range of considerations. Nature, business and our way of life need to cohabitate, without further destroying nature. Our human population is diverse, dispersed and increasing: all parts of society need to form a whole to collaborate successfully and sustainably for our nation. All organisations - in business, government, and civil society - must increase their internal and external transparency. We need to engage our vast repository of knowledge and talent by helping people expand their worldviews, rather than being held hostage to fears, irrational or otherwise. We need to move from understanding our own perspectives, to our greater society and world.

The notion of sustainability is one of hope and optimism, if we view it in the right light. In overcoming oppression, deprivation, predators, hunger, and disease we gave birth to a new world. Today's challenge is to turn all our ingenuity and creativity to make our future without compromising our present. The world remains beautiful and challenging, and we can find the common ground.

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