

Sustainable Development: Lost Meaning and Opportunity?

A. H. T. Fergus
J. I. A. Rowney

ABSTRACT. The term Sustainable Development has been used in many different contexts and consequently has come to represent many different ideas. The purpose of this paper was to explore the underlying meaning of the term Sustainable Development, and to assess the dominant ethic behind such meaning. Through this exploration, we uncovered a change in the semantic meaning of the term, and described what that meaning entails. The term Sustainable Development had the potential, we argue, to stimulate discursive engagement with respect to the future development of society within an ethical framework based around the values of inclusivity, diversity, and integration. The importance of philosophical context within which the term is used influences the definitional process of meaning, and has been simulated into the language of the dominant scientific-economic paradigm. We go on to explore how this meaning change has come about. In doing so we looked to the Enlightenment period and the resulting philosophies to explore the foundations of meaning, and then to the work of Jürgen Habermas to explain how the scientific-economic paradigm came to dominate the meaning of Sustainable Development.

KEY WORDS: Sustainable Development, Scientific-economic paradigm, philosophy, Habermas, Values, Relationships

Andrew Fergus is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Haskayne School of Business, with a double major in Organizational Dynamics (Organizational theory/behaviour) and Environmental Management/Sustainable Development. His research is focused towards the dynamic relationships found at the interface of organizations, society, and the environment.

Julie Rowney is a Professor, Human Resources and Organizational Dynamics, in the Haskayne School of Business at the University of Calgary. Dr. Rowney's research activities lie in the areas of diversity, gender, environmental organizational interactions, human resources (leadership, change, crisis issues) and international/cross-cultural comparisons.

Introduction

As a society, we are beginning to recognize and understand the detrimental effect of our actions on the natural environment. We are less aware however, of the harmful effect of those actions on each other. Through failing to recognize and understand the relationships among individuals, cultures, and environments, we are in the midst of both environmental and social crises. In today's world, development is exploiting the world's natural resource reserves at alarming rates. By many accounts, this exploitation is unsustainable (Worldwatch Institute, 2003). For example, the use of usable fresh water outstrips natural replenishment (Postel, 1992, p. 30). Approximately a quarter of the world's mammals are in danger of extinction, and the biodiversity of the planet is under intense pressure to survive (Worldwatch Institute, 2003, p. 8). Cultural languages are also disappearing, and at rates faster than the disappearance of living species (Davis, 2001). In other words, we are failing to understand the relational consequences of our actions.

A pertinent example of this failure was the plan from the Pentagon to assess the probabilities of terrorist attacks based on the market trading system (BBC, 2003). The plan failed once it became public knowledge. However, the failure is not the issue. What is of concern is the existence of such a proposal. The thinking behind the plan reflects an arrogant lack of social awareness and a blind reliance on the power of neo-classical market economics. It is a system of predication that is at best based on quasi-science and at worst an "application of formalistic methods and systems to conditions for which they were obviously quite unsuited" (Lawson, 1997, p. xiii).

Now more than ever it is time for us as academics, business managers, and members of society to develop ideas and philosophies that integrate the environment, society, government, and business organizations. Such integration would encourage discourse promoting the advancement of society based not on four individual entity groupings but on one integrative and inclusive whole.

Ideas about integration and inclusion as a philosophical base for societal advancement are not new. They were promoted during the 1980s and 1990s, along with the notions and initiatives of what was known at the time as Sustainable Development. The term suggested promise, promoting a framework that would integrate the four entities of society, environment, government, and business, in a common process of development, focusing on the present but respecting the needs of future generations as well as the memories and desires of past ones.

Today most major business organizations include some aspects of Sustainable Development in their operations, usually relating to environmental and social concerns. However, they do not consistently implement Sustainable Development in all levels of the organization, in a holistic manner. These business organizations are institutional powers in their own right, influencing both private and public thinking at a level greater than ever before. This situation raises questions about the level of importance that Sustainable Development has for today's business organizations. Is Sustainable Development an inclusive epistemology founded on ethics and real value? Is it integrated into the culture of business organizations? Is it an add-on used to promote the generation of financial wealth? Or has it become a catchphrase used in the language of business without any real meaning? What is the current meaning of Sustainable Development for business organizations?

This paper addresses the current meaning of Sustainable Development. It attempts to answer these questions by developing a semantic understanding of the meaning of the term Sustainable Development, explaining how the meaning of Sustainable Development has changed, and exploring how this change in meaning has come about.

Sustainable Development

Overview

As a society, our goals should be looking at development that sustains values reflecting progress in our relationships with one another as human beings, our place in the natural environment, and consequently developments in what it means to be human (Stead and Stead, 2000). Although these notions of Sustainable Development have been recently acknowledged by Meadows, Meadows et al. (1974) and Daly (1996), in essence they are historically much older. For example, John Stuart Mill made the following argument in *Principles of Political Economy* (1848, IV.6.9):

It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and oral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living and much more likelihood of its being improved.

Before continuing, we must state a reservation. We are not arguing that the economic processes of the market are inappropriate to business organizations, or that they have no part to play in the advancement of human society. The neo-classical economic model for business is an important tool within the development of our societal relationships. However, we do argue that the neo-classical economic model is an instrumental device that should not dictate the content and context of society's actions, language, relationships, and philosophy. The use of such a model is likely to encourage debate as other perspectives offer different world views. For example, both the Dual Economy and Oligopolistic Competition models offer interesting alternative perspectives. Especially given the difficulties the economic rational model has in responding effectively to material and environmental consequences as well as to relational and spiritual issues. Recognizing the existence and importance of such a debate and the strength of the arguments from both perspectives is important for although neo-classical economic rationality is dominating human development it can be argued that it is not all encompassing (Natale, 1983). However, such a debate

although valuable, is beyond the scope of this paper's thesis.

The economic transaction of business is a useful device for improvement, but not for sustainability. If an integrated balance is the goal, advancement of the transaction of business cannot be the major driver in the sustained generation of values. What needs to be addressed, by academia, business, and society as a whole, is the loss of opportunity to engage in an inclusive discourse around the notion of developing values that lead to progress in all its varied facets. During the 1980s and 1990s there was opportunity for discourse with the high profile of Sustainable Development at international conferences and commissions. Since then, however, the opportunity for meaningful discourse has largely disappeared (Esty, 2001).

The term Sustainable Development has come into common use but has no clear meaning as applied (Daly, 1996; Redclift, 1992). The use of the term is institutional, yet its meaning has become vague, ambiguous, undefined, and often contradictory (O'Riorden, 1985). To some extent the term has become a cliché (Lélé, 1991; Mitcham, 1995) applied to almost anything remotely related to the business processes, the society in which those processes operate, and the environment in which both processes and society are embedded.

This definitional vagueness may be seen as a strength, offering a way for the opposing camps of continuing growth economics versus no-growth economics, a common philosophical crossroads, to move towards one another without sacrificing too much of their original positions (Lélé, 1991). However, the notion of Sustainable Development as a conflict resolution tool is likely to lead to a dogmatic cul-de-sac, with debate replacing discourse and progress crashing into the barriers of a dead end. A conflict resolution tool should generate discourse, agreement, and recognition of underlying interests with the goal of reconciling differences (Ury et al., 1988). The debate concerning growth and no-growth is a philosophical argument between two opposing worldviews that, in essence, are the antithesis of each other; resolution will not occur without a larger shared philosophical framework. To others, the ideas of Sustainable Development offer direction for society's progress, in a context that is less destructive socially and environmentally. How-

ever, questions remain about whether and how such ideals will be achieved.

The initial ideas of Sustainable Development seem to have been, to some extent, forgotten. This may result from a specific cause, such as the euphoria following the collapse of communism, the self-interested financial gain of the dot.com boom, or the intense focus on terrorism. It may be a symptom of the dilution effect caused by the ambiguous meaning of the term. More likely, it results from a combination of factors. The term Sustainable Development, while institutionalized in usage, is not receiving the mainstream attention that was envisioned.

With research into the meaning of Sustainable Development it quickly becomes apparent that the term and its meaning create more questions than answers. To answer these questions and thus to develop the basis for the paper's argument, a more detailed, and historical look at the range of meanings is required. The analysis and establishment of meaning and the context behind the meaning are of importance, for it is through the careful reflective interpretation of those meanings that the foundations for creative thinking are built (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000).

Establishment of meaning

Semantic roots

Comprehending the meaning and structure of the term's semantic roots helps to explain the contradictory understandings of Sustainable Development. Lélé notes that the term is inconsistently interpreted either as "sustaining growth" or as "a form of societal change that, in addition to traditional development objectives, has the objective or constraint of ecological sustainability" (Lélé, 1991, p. 608). In Lélé's framework, the meaning of the word "sustainability" has a literal, an ecological, and a social sense. The literal meaning refers to the continuation of anything. The ecological meaning relates to maintaining the "ecological basis of human life" within a time-based structure, indicating concern for both the future and the present. In describing the social meaning of Sustainable Development, Lélé (1991, p. 610) uses Barbier's (1987) notion of social meaning, which focuses on maintaining desired "social values, institutions, cultures,

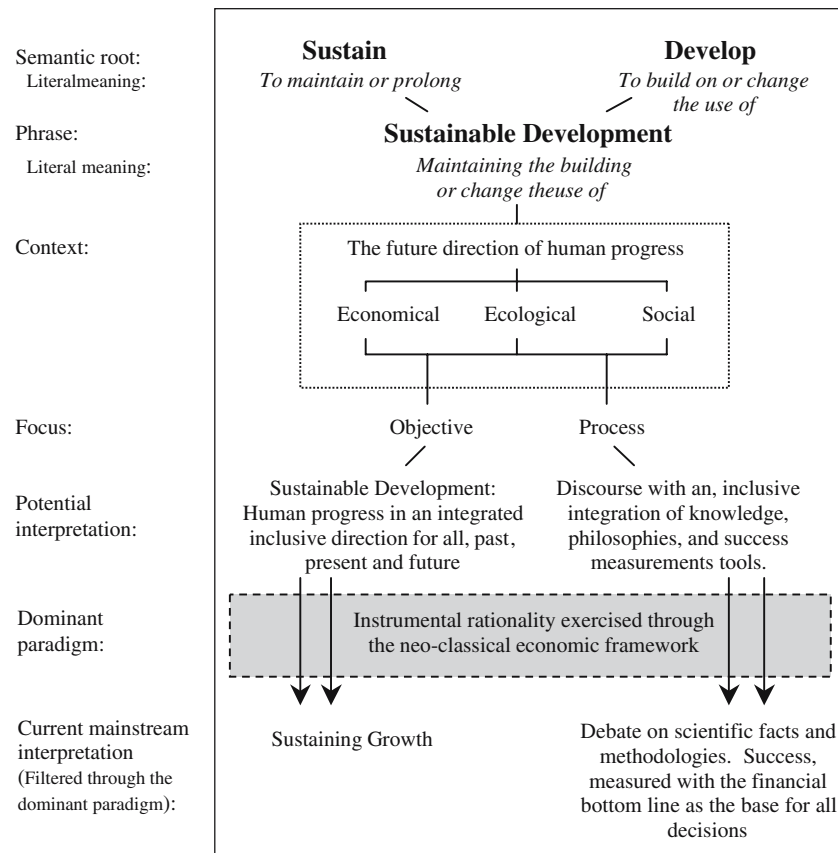


Figure 1. Semantic Framework of Sustainable Development

or other social characteristics.” The description of sustainability in a social sense resonates with the ideas of John Stuart Mill (1848). However, Barbier refers to maintenance of a desired social structure, while John Stuart Mill talks about a dynamic development of social structure. This is a fundamental philosophical difference with respect to the developmental objectives of society’s structure. The second part of the semantic deconstruction of Sustainable Development examines the word “development”, which when referring to a process means growth and change, and when referring to an objective means satisfying basic needs (Lélé, 1991).

These foundational meanings establish, according to Lélé (1991), two different interpretations of Sustainable Development: (1) sustaining growth, which Lélé describes as “contradictory and trivial,” and (2) achieving traditional objectives, described as “mainstream and meaningful” (Lélé, 1991, p. 608). Although in principle we agree with Lélé’s framework, integrating the literal and contextual meanings at the

same phase complicates the semantic process. Instead, we establish the literal roots and meaning first, then introduce the context in which meaning is embedded (Figure 1). From this perspective, the effect of the context is clearer. The way in which knowledge is understood within its context defines the characteristics of meaning for the term Sustainable Development.

In addition, we reinterpret the final meanings of the term Sustainable Development. In doing so, we do not disagree with Lélé’s (1991) original interpretations. In recognizing the second interpretation as mainstream, Lélé reflects the historical context of the argument. At that time, the term Sustainable Development received widespread media and public attention, partly as a result of the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development (known as the Brundtland Commission) and the anticipated Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Our reinterpretation of Sustainable Development as a debate on scientific facts and methodologies, with

success measured through the financial bottom line, is not contrary to Lélé. It supports and reinforces the argument of weaknesses in the then mainstream perspective. Lélé criticizes the mainstream view of Sustainable Development for its failure to develop a solid conceptual foundation that would produce clearly defined criteria and policies. Four broad weaknesses contributed to this failure (Lélé, 1991, p. 613):

- (1) The causal link between poverty and environmental degradation
- (2) The claim that economic growth is indispensable for reducing that environmental degradation
- (3) Failure to build objective conceptual foundations for development, sustainability, and participation
- (4) Strategic direction for combating partial knowledge and ambiguity.

Lélé suggests that, even in 1991, Sustainable Development was becoming a series of temporary fixes or add-ons and not an organizing principle. For example, some technological innovations aimed to improve pollution and reduce environmental resource usage but also to increase production and profit. Changes in policy encouraged protection of the environment and greater economic growth. Another example was the use, by the institutions of government, of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in procedural amendments to ensure “grassroots participation” (Lélé, 1991, p. 613). Sustainable Development was becoming a “meta-fix” whose ideas and philosophies had moved from an objective perspective to one of process. Over time, the semantics of the term Sustainable Development changed to a point where the concept became a supplement to the dominant paradigm of economic growth.

This change of meaning can be partially explained by the weaknesses noted by Lélé (1991). However, these weaknesses are symptoms of a larger fundamental separation between philosophical worldviews. We argue that the reason for this worldview differentiation and consequent meaning change is the dominance of thinking based on the rational logic of the scientific-industrial paradigm. The scientific-economic paradigm, manifested through the cognitive structure of the economic framework,

moved the meaning of Sustainable Development from an inclusive exploration of objectives to an instrumental debate about process, a process in which the measure of success was economic, allowing no room for alternative measurement criteria (Lawson, 1997).

Knowledge

The episteme

The search for meaning within the complex understandings of Sustainable Development does not end with uncovering semantic differentiations. Recognizing the existence of difference is important, but understanding how those differences come to be is significantly more valuable. As Michel Foucault suggests, determining how the context, motivations, and recording of specific understandings of knowledge come about is important for encouraging imaginative thought (cited in Eribon, 1992, p. 216). In uncovering the “how,” we follow Hamilton’s suggestion that there is a dualism of knowledge generation, one that denotes the strict division of two distinct cognitive processes, the objective and the subjective (Hamilton, 2002, p. 89).

Originating in the rational foundationalism of Descartes where the division of psyche and environment forms a philosophical base (Blackburn, 1999), the self is seen as an “isolated ego existing inside” the separate entity of our body, and extrapolating out from the body, the natural world as a whole (Capra, 1975, p. 45). This Cartesian division in philosophical worldviews is at the foundation of the “how” that we are trying to ascertain, for it separates the generation of knowledge into the two separate notions of deductive and intuitive knowledge (Hamilton, 2002, p. 89).

The separation of the self from the context, and the notions of rational knowledge that came with this philosophical framework, in particular instrumental rationality, were fundamental in the progress of the European Enlightenment and the resulting Industrial Revolution. Knowledge based on a deductive process of instrumentally measurable observation forms the basis of scientific knowledge and is the dominant cognitive structure of the scientific-industrial revolution. Cognition within this

knowledge framework is devoid of ideas such as “gut-feelings” or “moments of knowing.” The world is objective, measurable, and understandable. Truth is attainable through the established methodologies and communicated through formulated rules. There is no room for knowledge based on a subjective view of the world, where intuition and experience of the natural world play key roles in knowledge generation. As Hamilton suggests, concerning the post scientific-industrial revolution, “Intuitive knowledge has been trivialized and dismissed, yet only intuitively can we appreciate the numinous character of the natural environment” (2002, p. 89).

Through this one-sided dominance, instrumental rationality in the form of science was given an honored place as the only true form of knowledge generation (Midgley, 1992, p. 6). Consequently, the concept of the scientist as knowledgeable expert was formed and elevated to a position in society of great influence and power (Hamilton, 2002). A societal knowledge framework emerged based on scientific instrumental rationality, which views any thought outside that framework as alternative or on the fringe of what is needed or desired. Such was the scene when the notions of Sustainable Development were introduced on an international scale during the 1980s and 1990s.

Beyond an add-on

When introduced, the principles of Sustainable Development questioned the continued focus of the objectives and direction of society’s development (Brundtland, 1987, p. 4), in particular the development of Western society, which has now reached a point of drastic global consequences (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996). Sustainable Development intended to perform this critique through a cognitive process including understanding gained from the knowledge frameworks of other cultures and societies. It was intended to be international in scope and inclusive in thought stance (Brundtland, 1987, p. ix). The goal was to question the dominance of the instrumental rational paradigm and its influence on mainstream development processes to a point where other priorities would be included in the processes of planning and development. These other priorities would

form a richer base of values, knowledge learning, conceptual frameworks, and cognitive process.

We are not suggesting that there was direct opposition to this notion of Sustainable Development. Attendance at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro indicated a broad base of general support. However, when an increased level of commitment was needed, difficulties arose, manifesting themselves in a failure to come to agreement beyond a general acknowledgement that thinking about the future was a good idea (Strong, 2000, p. 286). These difficulties were a symptom of the fundamental disparity of cognitive knowledge creation. At the root of the disparity was the dogmatic power of the dominant scientific-industrial paradigm, where instrumental rationality and the cognitive framework of neo-classical economics dominated the validity and creation of new knowledge. In the materially developed world, the “science” of economics has such a stronghold in the cognition of knowledge creation that it is almost impossible to view any idea without the economic optic affecting understanding. Indeed, to some extent this authority can be forgiven, since economic rationality has become so prevalent in our society that it is difficult to use language in everyday life without referring to the dictionary of economics.

An unintentional catalyst in the domination of the neo-classical economic framework was the definition of Sustainable Development by the World Commission on Environment and Development. This commonly used definition established what Ralston Saul calls a “crutch for certainty and ideology” (2001, p. 12). In 1992 the Rio Summit offered an inclusive forum to establish a discourse with respect to honing the detail and understanding of meaning behind the term Sustainable Development. The meaning of Sustainable Development was, however, constructed within an instrumental rational framework, where the focus of the discourse moved quickly to the strengths of that framework, such as problem solving or understanding specific processes. This refocusing ignored the development of a discourse on the meaning of the objectives (Habermas, 1984). The definition was seen as a given, and the focus moved to the technical problems of process development. As Ralston Saul states, “A definition is therefore intended to clarify things, to free us for action. But what we have seen in our society is that a definition can just as easily become a means of control, a pro-

foundly reactionary force” (2001, p. 12). This, we argue, was the case with Sustainable Development. The definition stated by the Bruntland Commission was accepted (Bruntland, 1987, p. 43), thus moving the focus away from what was needed, an inclusive discourse on meaning towards debate on the processes of achieving the defined objective. A problem ensued, however, as the definition as stated by the Bruntland Commission was ambiguous, and thus the debate about how to proceed has continued to embed itself in a quagmire of dogmatic technocracy and political power struggles.

To a certain level, some good has come about with the incorporation of Sustainable Development into the economic paradigm. Significant work has been achieved towards pollution control, the development of alternative non-fossil-fuel energy sources, and awareness by the business community of the benefits of working together with NGOs, interest groups and non-value chain stakeholders. Although these are positive processes, the meaning of Sustainable Development has changed. In the examples noted, the processes are first all part of a larger economic response and unlikely to happen without a financial incentive. Other benefits resulting from a move to a so-called Sustainable Development focus, such as finding a niche market, are however, only available to the first movers (Hart, 1995, p. 1006). While these are certainly positive effects, they hardly represent an inclusive shift in thinking about the relationship of the business organization to society. In reality, the meaning of Sustainable Development has changed beyond Lélé’s (1991, p. 613) notion of an add-on. An add-on implies that the original possibilities and intentions are still intact, but just added onto the mainstream paradigm. In actuality, the meaning has changed completely. A business may adopt a “green” facade behind which it conducts business as usual, driving for sustained growth. The “greening” of business will not reconcile the inclusive, diverse understanding of Sustainable Development with the non-inclusive dominance of the economic ethic (Gladwin et al., 1995, p. 890).

A change in meaning has come about, not just a change of semantics but also a change in the cognitive underpinnings of the context in which that meaning is formed. The change in meaning is determined by the dominant paradigm of knowledge

generation. It is easy to see how, in contemporary society, the seduction of instrumental rationality and the economic framework can be very powerful. Indeed, this cognitive thought stance has brought about many admirable and essential contributions to human progress. However, progress has consequences, and as we continue in the current direction, these consequences seem to be increasing in severity. Sustainable Development as a proposition came about in response to a need for lesser consequences, with the intention of finding a way forward using a broader base of integrated cognitive frameworks. The difficulty is that integration and broadening in an inclusive manner are always more difficult than debating an alternative. There is always fear in the integration process, fear of dominance in perspectives, influence, ideas, voice, and so on. Democracy is hard (Kingwell, 2000; Ralston Saul, 2001). We argue that this dominance lies behind the change in meaning of Sustainable Development. The change of meaning came about with the authority of instrumental rationality and, in particular, the neo-classical economic framework that forms the structure of contemporary business practices.

An explanation

Habermas

Recognizing the change in meaning of the term Sustainable Development is important. However understanding how the changes have come about is arguably more important. In order to understand the dominative characteristics of the authoritative paradigm, we now turn to the work of the rationalist philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermas, although a strong believer in the ideals of the enlightenment, strongly criticizes the dominance of technocracy and the authoritative rule of the expert (Alvesson, 1993, p. 139). Described as a critical modernist, Habermas believes in emancipation from dominance through open contemplative critical dialogue. The notion of a communicative action (1984, 1987) forms the principal ethic in his thesis, and communicative action is centralized in the body of society. Habermas goes beyond the first order of critical theory, the illumination of domination, to a second order, the

exposition of the possibility of reasoned critical evaluative thought in the everyday life of the citizen. As Alvesson interprets this notion, the citizens of society “[are] or, given favorable circumstances, may become the supreme judges of their own best interests” (1993, p. 139).

Crisis of legitimacy

Habermas (1987) describes current technologically advanced capitalist societies as suffering from a crisis of legitimacy, where communication as the principal method or process of societal integration has been “colonized” by the dominant paradigm of instrumental rationality. The institutions of society, in many cases the business organizations (Harman, 1975; Hawken, 1993), are under a crisis of legitimacy, where legitimization is the citizens’ sense of trust, support, and authentic merit in the institutions of their society. Habermas argues that the citizens of society, disillusioned by the institutions’ failure to resist the continuing extension of the paradigmatic dominance of instrumental rationality, should question and are questioning their granted legitimacy. He describes the expansion of the dominant paradigm in terms of system and life-world. The dichotomy is that, although the system colonizes the lifeworld, the system needs legitimization from the lifeworld for its continued existence. Perhaps because Western societies have materially benefited from the economic framework of instrumental rationality, it has taken them some time to realize the level and depth of dominance. Moreover, for many this realization has not yet occurred. The benefits are relative, because (1) they are localized within our own context, and (2) in terms of historical time they have appeared comparatively recently. In addition, although the benefits go to those who have the power to make changes, they are arguably reluctant to initiate change because of the benefits. Their self-interest is in keeping the status quo concerning the dominant paradigm.

In contemporary society, the power of economics drives the circular loop of power/benefits. As the power/benefit loop becomes more acute, however, the benefits spread to a decreasing number of people. An inward spiral of diminishing benefit results in increased disillusionment and a deterioration of

legitimate support for the institutions. Initially the lack or reduction in quality of the benefits drives the legitimating crisis. It is, however, the intensity of the stifling effect of the economic framework as a societal philosophical paradigm that becomes increasingly destructive overtime. For Habermas, the “monetarization” and “bureaucratization” of everyday practices cause these one-sided effect and unsatisfied legitimization needs (Habermas, 1987, p. 325).

Habermas describes the crisis of legitimacy in terms of colonization of the lifeworld by systems. Building on the work of Shultz and Luckmann, (1973) with respect to the lifeworld, and more importantly of Parsons (1977), Habermas (1987) differentiates between the media of the system and the lifeworld. The system media are quantitative in character and instrumentally measurable. The lifeworld media are qualitative, unquantifiable, and only displayed in the communicative action between individuals. For Habermas the issue concerns a differentiation in the rationalization processes and the communication of those processes. On the one hand, there is the system rationalization process centered within and driving the direction of the science, technology, and economic realms. This rationalization process is instrumental in structure and extensive in influence. On the other hand, the rationalized process of the lifeworld is based on the notion of communicatively achieved understanding and agreement (Habermas, 1984). It emphasizes a movement away from exchanges based on the necessities or structures of the system, monetary convention, power, status, and the traditions of culture followed and adhered to blindly without the benefit of reflection (Alvesson, 1996, pp. 141–142). The lifeworld knowledge generation processes are in nature “communicative, political, and ethical” as opposed to the system process which is “technological, scientific and strategic” (Alvesson, 1996, p. 142).

For Habermas, the key to understanding what is going on is the notion of language and the potential of communication. Habermas sees language as the nucleus around which humans unify in the drive to diminish irrationality (Alvesson, 1996, p. 141). Thus to Habermas the power of the system media to influence the lifeworld is at the center of the crisis of legitimacy facing contemporary society. The system

media reflect only unto their own sphere of license and do not include an integrative reflection of all perspectives. The power is in influencing the granting of legitimization by the lifeworld of the system. The system media cannot legitimize the system: it does not have the power to legitimize itself, but it is capable of influencing the legitimizing decision. It is a self-interested power that is, according to Habermas (1971, p. 1984), unbalanced in terms of influence and effect.

Counteracting the imbalance is the essence of Habermas' project; his method revolves around the concept of undistorted communication, which provides the foundational base for communicative rationality, a form of rational thinking based upon and encouraging an open, inclusive dialogue and good reflective argument. We argue that the opportunity to have an inclusive fully reflective dialogue within a cognitive framework of communicative rationality has been lost with respect to the ideas of Sustainable Development.

The semantic change of meaning in the term Sustainable Development, coherently described in Habermas' notion of the systems media colonizing the lifeworld, clearly indicates an obvious relationship between the change of meaning and the increasing emphasis on an economic argument for Sustainable Development. The world of instrumental rationality has absorbed the concept of Sustainable Development, systemically integrating the term into the rational working of that paradigm, thus making it challenging to understand, discuss and think about Sustainable Development in a truly reflective manner. For example, non-economic social frameworks, institutions and cultural traditions have less and less significance in the forming of society's structures (Habermas, 1987, p. 196). Modern society is evolving with the myth of economic wealth as the guiding force (Stead and Stead, 1994, p. 15) and, in doing so, is moving further away from having the capabilities for truly reflective, inclusive, integrated discourse on the formation of human society. Rigid structure, instrumental rules, regulations, and artificial measurements of success are overshadowing the notions of substance and thoughtfulness (Ralston Saul, 2001, p. 7).

From Habermas' perspective, the picture of the "how" in meaning change with respect to the term Sustainable Development becomes clearer. The lan-

guage or semantic meaning of Sustainable Development has, in Habermas' terms, been colonized by the dominant paradigm of modern society, instrumental rationality. Habermas (1984, 1987) promotes and argues the case for communicative action, or a rationality based on wholly reflective, inclusive communication undistorted by the structural influences of instrumental rationality, influences that include the relations of power, both formal and informal, strict adherence to the so-called truth of statistical numerical facts, and authority based on monetary accumulation. To Habermas (1987) truth denotes validity in the communicative action, and not the verification of a scientific hypothesis. Validity is agreement between the participants of the communicative process, of undistorted communicative rationality inherent in the speech act. As Habermas states (quoted in Thompson, 1982, p. 124), "Truth means the promise to attain a rational consensus," where "rational" refers to fully reflective communicative rationality (Alvesson, 1996, p. 142) and not to seemingly blinkered or self-reinforcing instrumental rationality.

We argue that the opportunity for Habermas' conceptual notion of a rational framework based on communicative action, where the emphasis is on a reflective, inclusive, fully rational process of knowledge generation, was lost with the meaning change of Sustainable Development.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore meaning with respect to the term Sustainable Development, and to assess the dominant ethic behind such meaning. Through the exploration, we uncovered a change in the semantic meaning of the term, described what that change in meaning entailed, and explained how this meaning change came about.

Early use of the term Sustainable Development had the potential, we argue, to stimulate discursive engagement with respect to the future development of the human species within an ethical framework based around the values of inclusivity, diversity, and integration. However, this is not what the term has come to mean. In an adaptation of Lélé's (1991) semantic model, we have shown how the philosophical context within which the term is used

influences the definitional process of meaning. Thus the meaning of Sustainable Development has been simulated into the language of the dominant scientific-economic paradigm, a language in which the discourse of Sustainable Development becomes more of a debate on scientific facts and methodologies and in which success is measured by the ethic of finance, as opposed to a fully inclusive, integrated discourse based on an ethic of values and diversity.

However, it is not enough to recognize that a change of meaning has occurred and what that change of meaning is. It is important to explore how this meaning change has come about. Understanding the foundations of meaning change is crucial: only through a deep knowledge of how meaning occurs can we attempt to reevaluate our philosophical positions. Here, we have looked to the Enlightenment period and the resulting philosophies to excavate these foundations, then to the work of Habermas (1971, 1984, 1987) to explain how the scientific-economic paradigm came to dominate the meaning of Sustainable Development.

Although Habermas' concept of the system colonizing the lifeworld provides an effective description of how the semantic meaning of the term Sustainable Development has changed, it would be naïve to assume that we fully understand the process and resultant meanings of discussing Sustainable Development within a framework of communicative rationality. Although offering a good philosophical framework from which to understand how changes of meaning have come about, Habermas' (1984, 1987) ideas offer only one perspective. To understand the real importance of meaning change in the term Sustainable Development, and the epistemological underpinnings and consequences of that change, the subject needs critical evaluation from a number of different perspectives and philosophical frameworks. Such evaluation is crucial if we are to progress beyond a society in which success is measured in an ethic dominated by the scientific-economic philosophical paradigm. As Harold Innis (1951) stated, "The conditions of freedom of thought are in danger of being destroyed by science, technology, and the mechanization of knowledge, and with them western civilization" (p. 190).

References

- Alvesson, M.: 1993, 'Organizations as Rhetoric: Knowledge-Intensive Firms and the Struggle with Ambiguity', *Journal of Management Studies* **30**(6), 997–1021.
- Alvesson, M.: 1996, *Communication, Power and Organization* (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin).
- Alvesson, M. and S. Deetz: 2000, *Doing Critical Management Research* (Sage, London).
- Barbier, E. B.: 1987, 'The Concept of Sustainable Economic Development', *Environmental Conservation* **14**(2), 101–110.
- Blackburn, S.: 1999, *Think* (Oxford University Press, Oxford).
- British Broadcasting Corporation: July 30, 2003, 'Pressure Mounts Over Terror Bets', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3110095.stm> (Accessed April 8, 2004).
- Brundtland, G. H.: 1987, *Our Common Future: The World Commission on Environment and Development* (Oxford University Press, Oxford).
- Capra, F.: 1975, *The Tao of Physics* (Shambhala, Berkeley, CA).
- Daly, H. E.: 1996, *Beyond Growth* (Beacon Press, Boston, MA).
- Davis, W.: 2001, *Light at the Edge of the World* (Douglas McIntyre, Vancouver, BC).
- Eribon, D.: 1992, *Michel Foucault* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA).
- Esty, D. C.: 2001, September/October, 'A Term's Limits: Planning of Sustainable Development', *Foreign Policy*.
- Gladwin, T. N., J. J. Kennelly, et al.: 1995, 'Shifting Paradigms for Sustainable Development: Implications for Management Theory and Research', *Academy of Management Review* **20**(4), 874–907.
- Habermas, J.: 1971, *Toward a Rational Society* (Heinemann, London).
- Habermas, J.: 1984, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol. 1. Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Beacon Press, Boston, MA).
- Habermas, J.: 1987, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol. 2. Lifeworld and System, a Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Beacon Press, Boston, MA).
- Hamilton, C.: 2002, 'Dualism and sustainability', *Ecological Economics* **42**, 89–99.
- Harman, W.: 1975, 'The Great Legitimacy Challenge', *Vital Speeches of the Day* **42**(5), 147–149.
- Hart, S. L.: 1995, 'A Natural-Resource-Based View of The Firm', *Academy of Management Review* **20**(4), 986–1015.

- Hawken, P.: September/October, 1993, 'A Declaration of Sustainability', *Utne Reader*, 54–61.
- Innis Harold, A.: 1951, *The Bias of Communication*, (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, ON).
- Kingwell, M.: 2000, *The World We Want: Restoring Citizenship in a Fractured Age* (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD).
- Lawson, T.: 1997, *Economics and Reality* (Routledge, London).
- Lélé, S. M.: 1991, 'Sustainable Development: A Critical Review', *World Development* **19**(6), 607–621.
- Meadows, D. H., D. L. Meadows, et al.: 1974, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (Universe Books, New York, NY).
- Midgley, M.: 1992, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and its Meaning* (Routledge, London).
- Mitcham, C.: 1995, 'The Concept of Sustainable Development: Its Origins and Ambivalence', *Technology in Society* **17**(3), 331–326.
- Natale, S. M.: 1983, 'Ethics and Enterprise', *Journal of Business Ethics* **2**, 43–49.
- Parsons, T.: 1977, *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*, (Free Press, New York, NY).
- Postel, S.: 1992, *Last Oasis: Facing Water Scarcity* (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY).
- Ralston Saul, J.: 2001, *On Equilibrium* (Penguin, Toronto, ON).
- Redclift, M.: 1992, 'The Meaning of Sustainable Development', *Geoforum* **23**(3), 395–403.
- Schutz, A. and T. Luckmann: 1973, *Structures of the Life-World: Vol. 1, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL).
- Stead, W. E. and J. G. Stead: 1994, 'Can Humankind Change the Economic Myth? Paradigm Shifts Necessary for Ecologically Sustainable Business', *Journal of Organizational Change Management* **7**(4), 15–31.
- Stead, J. H. and E. Stead: 2000, 'Eco-Enterprise Strategy: Standing for Sustainability', *Journal of Business Ethics* **24**(4), 313–329.
- Strong, M.: 2000, *Where on Earth Are We Going?* (Knopf Canada, Toronto, ON).
- Thompson, J. B.: 1982, 'Universal Pragmatics', in J. Thompson, B. and D. Held (eds.), *Habermas: Critical Debates* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA), pp. 116–133.
- Ury, W. L., J. M. Brett and S. B. Goldberg: 1988, *Getting Disputes Resolved: Designing Systems to Cut the Costs of Conflict* (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA).
- Wackernagel, M. and W. Rees: 1996, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC).
- Worldwatch Institute: 2003, *State of the World 2003* (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY).

Andrew H. T. Fergus
University of Calgary,
Haskayne School of Business,
2500 University Drive, Calgary,
Alberta,
Canada T2N1N4
E-mail: afergus@ucalgary.ca

J. I. A. Rowney
University of Calgary,
Haskayne School of Business,
2500 University Drive,
Calgary,
Alberta,
Canada T2N1N4
E-mail: Julie.rowney@haskayne.ucalgary.ca