



Foresight: A major tool in tackling sustainable development

Philippe Destatte*

The Destree Institute, 9, avenue Louis Huart, 5000, Namur (Wallonia), Belgium

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 April 2010

Received in revised form 3 July 2010

Accepted 4 July 2010

Keywords:

Strategic foresight

Sustainable development

Sustainable planning

Ecology

ABSTRACT

For many decades, the concept of sustainability has been highly successful in public policies and even in the business world.¹ Nowadays, all initiatives must be sustainable and are primarily assessed on that criterion. However, the efforts made to construct specific methods dedicated to building sustainable strategies seem rather weak. Futurists themselves underestimate the relationship between sustainable development and foresight, even if they are talking about *sustainable planning*.² They remain generally unaware that foresight could be a major tool in tackling sustainability as well as one of the best methods of preparing sustainable strategies and policies.

Indeed, one of the biggest problems in sustainability approaches is the simplistic way used to define the concept, for instance, by using only the very first part of the 1987 the Brundtland report *Our Common Future* and by limiting the fields of activity on sustainability to the three pillars of the OECD model: economy, social questions, environment.

At the Copenhagen United Nations Climate Change Conference (December 2009), it seemed forgotten that sustainability is already an old issue in which futurists were heavily involved at the time of the United Nations Stockholm Environment Conference (1972), in the *Limits to Growth* Report, published by the Club of Rome (1972)³ and in the OECD Interfutures Foresight, spurred on by Jacques Lesourne (1978).⁴

Since that time (forty years ago!) researchers and consultants have learned how to deal with the concept of sustainability, how to analyze it as an ultimate aim for society as a whole as well as a complex object that needs to be approached with adequate methods such as systemic analysis.

As Christian Stoffaës said, the aim of foresight is sustainable development in a changing world. As a result, the ultimate aim of strategic foresight appears to be clear: it is sustainability. This article highlights that fundamental relationship as we see it today.⁵

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Points of reference and common references

The relationship between foresight and sustainable development is not new. First of all, the two concepts date back a long way. Development is found within change, extension, growth, progress and therefore duration; spanning a long period of time. Each of

* Tel.: +32 81 234 390.

E-mail address: destatte.philippe@institut-destree.eu.

¹ See L. R. Brown, *Building a Sustainable Society*, Norton, New York, (1981) and G. Mlinati, M.P. Penna, E. Pessa, A conceptual framework for self-organization and merging processes in social systems, in *Systems For Sustainability*, Plenum Press, New York, (1997).

² Sustainable planning integrates the objectives of economic development, social justice and inclusion, environment integrity and integrated transport. There is often conflict between short-term economic and fiscal benefits and the longer-term environmental and social implications arising from development. Cf. Ian Miles, Michaël Keenan *Practical Guide to Regional Foresight in the United Kingdom*, European Commission, DG Research, Brussels (2000) 18.

³ D.L. Meadows, ed., *Limits to growth*, Earth Island Ltd, London (1972).

⁴ INTERFUTURS, *Research project on the future development of advanced industrialised societies in harmony with that of developing countries, Final reports*, Paris, OECD, 28 September 1978.

⁵ C. Stoffaës, *Les logiciens de la pérennité*, in J. Lesourne and C. Stoffaës, *Prospective stratégique d'entreprise*, Dunod, Paris (2001) 25, 27.

these words represents a gateway that opens out onto a potential need for clarification when compared with the sciences, whether economic, political or social, as well as requiring clarification on some highly strategic decisions.

Futurists have generally considered the concept of sustainable development not as a means but as an end; that is to say, a general desirable aim, viewed as being possible to achieve over the long-term and that we will attempt to translate into strategic axes. When seen from this angle, sustainable development carries with it a real sense of action, in particular, political action which, for Pierre Massé, consisted first of *suggesting the invigorating ultimate aim of having justice expanded to all corners of the world to citizens from privileged nations*. That means promote literacy and basic education and ensure food for the countries of the South in terms of resources as well as distribution. Even if it amounts to *prospective thinking*, noted the former French Director of Planning, one of the fundamental questions consists of wondering whether it is desirable that, in the twenty-first century, the largest share of the planet is set to become one immense America; in other words, that environmental pollution, urban crowding, difficulties moving around and the creation of an artificial living space will become widespread throughout humanity [1]. Christian Stoffaës quite rightly underlined that *the ultimate aim of foresight is sustainable development in a changing world [...]*. He added that, from that moment, the end aim of foresight emerged clearly: sustainability [2].

2. Return to some fundamentals on the growth of foresight and sustainable development

It must be borne in mind that foresight and sustainable development have been interlinked since the beginning of the 1970s, from the time that the concept of sustainable development was first created, with exercises in foresight such as the Meadows [3] and various Interfuturs reports [4]. Despite their differences, these two important works share some very important characteristics. On the one hand, they are founded on three particular points which, together, seem appropriate for foresight. First they integrate the long-term, catering for the long-term while also addressing the future on many levels in order to offer up alternatives. Together, they call for the systemic analysis of complex systems, by practicing interdisciplinarity and by drawing upon the theory and practice of modeling. Lastly, they are action-oriented, integrating a strategic will to advocate change, thus setting wheels in motion, attempting to influence history. On the other hand, the Meadows and Interfuturs reports both constitute approaches to foresight at a world level which highlight sharply the interdependences.

The aim here is not to describe these exercises or other work that has been carried out elsewhere, [5] but to point up several elements that shed some light on the relationship between foresight and sustainable development.

3. Antecedents

The idea of limitations to growth almost certainly is rooted in economic science. Indeed, the work carried out in recent years on sustainable development has only served to reinforce this. The antecedents to these concerns, highlighted by researchers, prove invaluable as they demonstrate that the idea which arose from the 1960s and 1970s has developed within the particular intellectual context of contesting modernity and within a precise factual framework, the accident in Well 21 [Santa Barbara Oil Spill] in January 1969, the shipwrecked oil tanker Torrey Canyon (March 1967), the nuclear risks associated with the Cold War, the Vietnam War, to name but a few. This idea is also enshrined within the very concept of development [6].

Here are three noteworthy examples of how this concept evolved.

In 1861, the French mathematician, economist and philosopher Antoine Cournot (1801–1877), noted in his *Treaty of the Sequence of Fundamental Ideas in the Sciences and History* that:

Given that the whole concept of natural wealth, which is the greatest asset in civilized society, is gradually being used up and is being consumed at a faster rate than civilization and industry are making progress, it seems that this gradual exhaustion is the most menacing threat in the future for civilization itself as we know it, and the most visible obstacle to achieving the aim of unlimited and endless progress, that naturally indicates the speed of current progress. Hence the reasons for fearing that human industry is destined, not only to reach a stage where it will cease to make any real progress, but even to fade away one day and ultimately disappear like a fire that has run out of fuel. But, we must leave this to one side and refrain from giving ourselves over to rash and pointless speculation on a future that is too far away. One mustn't discuss the chances of death with princes nor with people: princes correct this recklessness through disgrace; the public retaliate with ridicule. Furthermore, here we are concerned with principles, ideas and laws rather than facts. By law it is essential to be a living being, to go through the whole cycle of ages, even though an accident may kill them or they could die from a lack of nourishment before the cycle has come to an end, and similarly science and industry are no less essentially governed by the law of indefinite progress, even though they too would share in the human fate of perishing suddenly by some great cataclysm or slowly by using up all of the material resources that nature had placed at its disposition. [7]

In the same way as Michel Girard, the American conservationist movement could also be pinpointed as appearing among the intellectual origins of the concept of sustainable development. The eighth annual message from President Theodore Roosevelt on December 8, 1908, to the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives is part of this thinking which combines temporality and attention paid to future generations.

If there is any one duty which more than another we owe to our children and our children's children to perform at once, it is to save the forests of this country, for they constitute the first and most important element in the conservation of the natural

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/896900>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/896900>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)