

What does 'sustainability' mean?

Rich Heffern | Apr. 27, 2011 | Eco Catholic

The following was written by Holy Cross Br. David Andrews, a senior representative at the Washington-based [Food & Water Watch](#)[1], a consumer lobbying organization.

The word 'sustainable' is being used in so many ways today that it is hard to know what it means. It came into increasing use after the 1987 report 'Our Common Future' published by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development -- also known as the Brundtland Report, named after the Chair of that Commission.

Its fundamental insight is now well known: 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'

It has frequently been asserted that sustainable development rests on a three legged stool: social justice, environmental protection and economic well being. In other words it sees three elements: the planet, profit and people as interrelated in any holistic view of sustainable development.

Advocates of sustainable agriculture typically utilize these elements in their vision of sustainability.

In more recent days advocates of sustainability have utilized organic agriculture and local agriculture as close synonyms to sustainable agriculture. At one time it was thought that these definitions would suffice to protect sustainable agriculture as distinct and different from more conventional agriculture with its highly industrialized modes of production.

But the popularity and positive public image of sustainable agriculture has been seen as a welcome brand for food and fiber production. Such is the case that new branding efforts by industrialized production, processing and distribution systems have now been claiming their own sustainability brands. The evening news programs on public radio frequently carry Monsanto's claim to represent sustainable agriculture.

The Leonardo Academy and the Keystone Center are two efforts to create national brands for sustainability. Their efforts show how defining the criteria for sustainable agriculture is increasingly demonstrating the conflictive claims of the use of the term 'sustainable'.

The Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture proposed to use all available technologies to feed the world more 'sustainably', while at the same time being eco-efficient. As part of Keystone's framing activities, it pointed to its peer-reviewed, science-based outcomes approach that documented increased efficiency in the production of soybeans, corn, and cotton.

The Keystone project is less open to public participation, making the exercise of structural power in setting the parameters of the standards creation process less contested. An examination of the trade associations, commodity groups, and GMO TNCs listed as members of the Keystone Alliance supports the idea that it is the more preferred model between these two approaches.

Not long ago, The National Research Council published a thick book: *Toward Sustainable Agricultural Systems In The 21st Century* which sought to define sustainability as a goal to be reached in the future, rather than draw any bright lines which would differentiate various ideal types, for example, industrial versus sustainable, agro-ecological versus conventional.

It preferred to identify four sustainability goals:

1. Satisfy human food, feed, and fiber needs, and contribute to biofuel needs.
2. Enhance environmental quality and the resource base.
3. Sustain the economic viability of agriculture.
4. Enhance the quality of life for farmers, farm workers, and society as a whole.

The goals move in a direction but fail to reach or identify a particular end state. Sustainability in farming systems in this model is a process on a trajectory toward greater sustainability. The authors don't like to differentiate between conventional and sustainable farming systems.

The National Research Council and the Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture emphasize an approach that makes room for every type of farming system since they are all "on the way" toward sustainability. It claims that there are incremental approaches and transformational approaches, but all types of agriculture can be claimed to be "sustainable". Some are more firmly "on the way" than others.

Once again, the public discourse in these approaches moves in the direction of watering down the meaning of the term "sustainable" so that the term includes most farming systems as going in the direction of sustainability no matter how abusive they are to animals, no matter how dangerous their use of pesticides might be, no matter how poorly compensated their farm workers are and how harmful the physical demands on the laborers are as long as they are "in the process" of moving onto the goals identified.

The Leonardo Academy's effort to identify the metrics of sustainability is a story told in the journals of the academy.

Douglas Constance, a sociologist from Houston State University published an account of how the Leonardo Academy had to deal with threats to its certification process brought on by the U. S. Department of Agriculture because it did not want to include genetic modification as a tool of sustainable agriculture. The biotechnology industry teamed up with the Department of Agriculture to threaten the process of the Leonardo Institute to produce reliable indices of sustainability. They threatened to take away their certification.

The term sustainable is hardly serviceable today to demark a type of agriculture, it is being replaced by "local", "agro-ecological" and organic as serviceable alternatives in the nomenclature battles of food and agriculture.

As a brand it still has value, although its definition varies from group to group. Certainly given the status of current branding efforts the consumer needs to be wary of the term without engaging in closer looks to try to ascertain the concrete meaning of the term.

By itself the word "sustainability" has little meaning.

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[1] <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/>