

Despair is too easy

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1. What do you think when you hear the word 'sustainability?' And what does it have to do with you?

I think the word 'sustainability' has become part of the vocabulary of certain fields – areas of science, politics and economics – with different, sometimes even contradictory, meanings and goals.

For me, the primary meaning of the word 'sustainability' is to say that human development that respects fundamental human rights must take the limits of our planet into account, leaving behind a resilient 'planet' for future generations.

However, what we have been observing for decades is taking us in completely the opposite direction to the one we should be going in: forests are disappearing, the consequences of climate change are speeding up and getting worse because greenhouse gas emissions are not decreasing, biodiversity is collapsing, social inequalities are deepening dramatically, etc.

In other words, fundamental human rights in the present and the future are being trampled by a constantly growing section of the population.

However, the term 'sustainability' is ubiquitous in economics and politics, overused in a way that is completely distorted and at odds with its primary meaning. This results in short-term policies and measures with a local influence (i.e. the length of a political mandate within one's own population), although the environmental, social and economic emergency should necessitate long-term global visions; most often of all, it results in greenwashing (such as advertisements for individual cars, sustainable tourism, etc.).

All of this concerns me because I am a professor of environmental sciences specialising in risk and disaster management and, in my professional practice, I observe that all my research leads to the same conclusions: disasters are multiplying because of climate change and the absence of governance in land management, and that the victims are always the same people, the vulnerable social classes who sink a little further into precarity each time. These conclusions know no borders: they are identical whether we are in Cameroon, Pakistan or the Vesdre valley in Belgium. These climate, environmental, social and economic injustices are very intimately interlinked, and I find that intolerable.

2. If you needed to replace the word 'sustainability', which word would you choose?

If I had to replace the word 'sustainability', I'd immediately choose 'taking care of the commons'. 'Taking care' because it is our responsibility to 'regenerate' our local and global quality of life. Polluting here and replanting trees elsewhere is not acceptable. This participates in the eternal relationship of domination that makes us believe a minority of people can do what they want whilst the immense majority suffers. By 'commons', I clearly mean all life, both human and non-human. A species that disappears will not come back. An indigenous people who disappear will not come back.

A primary forest that is cut down will not come back, and all the biodiversity it holds will be destroyed forever. Humans, whether wealthy or abandoned to their fate, all need a healthy environment and biodiversity to be able to survive. Exterminating non-human life means exterminating ourselves.

3. If we're already too late, then what is there still to be done?

It's not too late to change, but the time we have left is extremely limited. All the indicators are in the red zone, and the socio-economic system that is leading us to disaster is led by the 'dominant' members of society who oppose the changes we need to ensure the planet is inhabitable in the future.

To change this system that sows massive destruction and is responsible for ecocide, we will have to overturn the tables – in one way or another – and impose some form of global governance...