Envisioning a sustainable society

A growing number of people recognise that we must transform society, but many have difficulty imagining what a new, sustainable society might look like. Envisioning how to transform our present society into this new sustainable society is even more difficult. Any society, especially a new society, must first exist in the minds of the people. Every society exists, most fundamentally, as a set of mental constructs that make us believe that our present society is so solidly fixed that we have no hope of changing it. We fail, however, to realise that modern society has existed for an exceedingly short time, is changing swiftly, and will have to transform because its present trajectory is not sustainable.

Sustainability, or sustainable development, is defined as a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. A society would become increasing sustainable as it organizes its ecological, material, human and social capital accordingly. The dominant thinking in modern society is highly anthropocentric, i.e. regarding humankind as the central or most important element of existence. We are made to believe that humans can dominate and manage nature, and that it will continue to serve our purposes into the indefinite future. However, with extremely high population growth, increasing levels of pollution, loss of biodiversity and the constant deterioration of lifestyle, the survival of the world as we know it is not possible. The world will have to be transformed and evolved to adopt sustainable solutions and lifestyles for continued survival.

So, what does a permanently sustainable society look like?

Characteristics of a sustainable society

According to Medard Gable, a sustainable future world will most likely embody the following nine qualities:

1. **It is abundant.** The life-threatening problem of scarcities of resources needed to meet humanity’s basic needs is no longer with us, having been overcome through the use of abundant local resources.

2. **It is regenerative.** These abundant resources are produced and distributed in regenerative ways, revitalising natural systems — just as regenerative agriculture rebuilds the soil.

3. **It is dependable.** These resources are dependable in supply, quality and quantity, and free from disruption.

4. **It is safe.** All products and services are safe; they do not endanger workers, consumers or the environment.
5. **It is appropriate.** The primary determinants and limits on what is done in a given area are: culture; geography; local economy; and the basic human needs of people living there.

6. **It is equitable.** Resources, products and services are available for use by all in a fair manner.

7. **It is flexible.** The myriad systems involved in our products and services are open to change, growth, creativity, and experimentation.

8. **It is efficient.** Production and distribution are as efficient as possible — with efficiency defined for the long term.

9. **It is open minded** and locally controlled.

### Values of a sustainable society

The centrepiece of a value structure for a sustainable society is a life in a viable ecosystem. This is surrounded by four core values: a high quality of life, security, compassion, and justice.

All of these four core values are dependent on the size of the human population, the preservation of our natural resources and the conservation of renewable energy.

Among the forces that are undermining our progress towards a sustainable society, population growth ranks at the top. The official UN medium-level population projections show population expanding to 11.2 billion before eventually stabilising a century or more hence.⁵

It is noteworthy to mention here that these population projections are based on the implicit assumption that supplies of energy, food, and the other natural resources needed to support human life will continue to be available. The populations of India, Nigeria, Mexico, Pakistan and Bangladesh are increasing at a pace that is outgrowing their

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⁵ Refer to the original document for the full text.
basic life-support systems, while excessive demand for goods is leading to the consumption of the biological resource-base and the exhaustion of soils. Therefore, stabilising population size is critical to our vision of sustainability; however, it will be the pace of stabilisation that will determine the availability of natural resources. With world oil production levelling off and population continuing to grow, the oil supply per person is now falling at more or less the same speed at which population is increasing. By the same token, as the world turns from fossil energy to renewable energy sources, the area available per person to collect the solar influx, either biologically or mechanically, becomes a central determinant of energy-consumption levels. These upper limits posed by the collection area suggest that, in the absence of an effort to halt population growth far sooner than now projected, humanity may literally lack the energy to further improve its lot.

Role of population stabilisation in sustainability

Achieving a stable world population requires balancing births and deaths. Once fertility settles at the replacement level or below, it is only a matter of time until population growth stops. However, stabilisation of population is not sufficient to attain sustainability — as evidenced in the developed industrial countries, where populations are already growing more slowly but per capita consumption of essential resources is disproportionately high. Nonetheless, the population stabilisation model demonstrated by industrial countries provides important lessons for developing countries seeking to lower their fertility rates. For example, in the developed countries, as levels of education and literacy rose, as employment opportunities for women expanded, as access to family planning services improved, and as abortion laws were liberalised, people chose to have fewer children. Thus, it is clear that population size can stabilise even when stabilisation is not an explicit national goal. Improvements in the social environment that include education, access to basic healthcare facilities, and incentives to have smaller families through the use of contraceptives facilitate population stabilisation, which helps to achieve a sustainable society.

As world population moves toward 7.5 billion, humanity is moving into uncharted territory. The dynamics of the relationship between population size and the earth’s natural resource systems are uncertain and in some respects unpredictable.
Cities and sustainability

In much of the world, a majority of the population lives in poverty. Environmental damage is inflicted in city, town and village. There exists an urgent need to discuss and engage in creating patterns of human dwelling that are socially just and ecologically sustainable. It is important to distinguish here that cities in themselves are not unsustainable: in fact, it is the process and pace of urbanisation that determines the sustainability of cities. The recent trend of sprawling urbanisation, metropolises and mega-cities is currently having widespread negative impacts.

However, cities offer a wide range of opportunities to develop a sustainable society. Urban areas are better equipped to mitigate environmental damage and provide access to clean water than rural areas with a more widespread population. Similarly, the processes of ensuring energy efficiency, resource reuse, recycling, decent standards of education and healthcare are more efficient in urban areas due to the concentration of population. A sustainable society would thus need to obtain maximum use from minimum resources.

Role of urban agriculture in sustainability

Bringing provisioning and services closer to city-dwellers in order to minimise the need for resources and energy expenditure is a step towards achieving sustainability. Several examples of this can provide us with a good framework: Cuba grows 60 per cent of its vegetables in city farms, and Havana allows only organic food to be grown. Similarly, the various organic and ‘farm-to-table’ movements in global cities like London and New York are designed to reduce the use of chemical fertilisers, support local farmers and avoid the use of processed food, which in turn alleviates soil erosion, mitigates climate change and improves human health. The process of carbon sequestration, wherein atmospheric anthropogenic carbon dioxide is captured and returned to the soil, offers a solution for climate change and food security. This technique of regenerative organic farming involves covering the open land with plants, which consequently reduces the global atmospheric level of carbon dioxide as plants consume it for the process of photosynthesis.

These measures, and others — like preservation of biodiversity, and using renewable resources like forests, fisheries and fresh water at rates less than...
or equal to regeneration rates — constitute the practices of an ecologically-sustainable society.

Overcoming inequalities

Another characteristic of a sustainable society is that it is a socially equitable society. The transition to a socially sustainable society includes: eliminating unjustifiable inequalities; ensuring widespread economic opportunities and universal basic access to healthcare facilities; narrowing the rich-poor divide; creating a market that operates justly and sells as much to society as it gains from it; protecting civil liberties; and, lastly, ensuring the universal fulfilment of the basic needs of humanity prior to serving luxury wants.\(^9\)

The issue of social sustainability in society is relevant in the modern city, which tends to reflect a social divide between the rich living in high-rise towers and the poor living in slums. The number of people living in slums has steadily increased while their lifestyle has failed to improve, as they lack access to essential public resources, and the high-consumption approach of the more affluent city-dwellers is unaffordable for slum-dwellers.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goal of improving the lives of 100 million slum dwellers over the next ten years is a formidable attempt to elevate people out of poverty and into sustainable living.\(^9\)

Transition to a sustainable society

Any sustained erosion of living standards as well as natural resources in continuum with projected population growth is certainly an impediment in the transition to a sustainable society. A growing population in a finite environment is by definition unsustainable, at least in the long term.\(^9\) The accelerated loss of the earth’s biodiversity due to unsustainable growth in human population is largely unappreciated by the general public, but is of gravest concern. The planet’s land areas have been increasingly degraded by overgrazing or deforestation, or assaulted by human-created toxins, from acid precipitation to pesticides; other organisms have lost their habitats; and more and more species have been pushed to extinction. As ecosystems are destroyed or degraded, the essential ‘services’ they provide for human society are impaired or lost.

Given the central role that energy use plays in the generation of virtually all environmental impacts, it is estimated that each person in an industrialised nation can be seen on average to have seven times the impact of a person in a developing nation.\(^12\) If we continue to ignore the need to adopt sustainable measures, there will be a sustained increase in soil erosion, reduced vegetation and insufficient water resources. The road towards a sustainable society thus involves sustainable agriculture — one that does not deplete soil or people, and is ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, and humane.
Conclusion

An ideal sustainable society will not consume more than its needs and will ensure equal rights for all its citizens. Conclusively, any attempt to envision a sustainable society must explore and equate the two-way relationship between humanity and the earth’s natural ecosystems.