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True sustainability requires more than green initiatives or economic growth. It means recognising ecological limits, protecting nature's irreplaceable systems and ensuring today's development does not undermine future generations.

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In my previous write-up, I explored the distinction between weak sustainability and strong sustainability and argued that nature cannot always be treated as a form of capital that can simply be replaced by human-made assets.

This leads to another, perhaps more uncomfortable, question: What happens when the word "sustainability" itself becomes a way of avoiding necessary change?

A tool for change, or a language for avoiding change?

Today, the word *Sustainability* is used so extensively that, in many contexts, its meaning is becoming increasingly blurred.

An organisation may expand production, consume natural resources, generate carbon emissions, and place increasing pressure on ecosystems—and then add some tree planting, carbon offsets, social investments, or skills-development programmes and present itself as "sustainable."

The question is whether this actually addresses the underlying problem. Or are we simply creating a new language to keep an old system running for a little longer? This is where the issue of greenwashing also arises. If sustainability becomes merely a language of branding, it risks losing its transformative power.

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There is a possibility of misunderstanding here. When we speak of strong sustainability, some may interpret it as an argument for stopping economic development, halting industrialisation, or denying people's aspirations for a better quality of life.

A truly sustainable transformation does not simply mean adding a few green components to an existing system. Where necessary, it means changing the system itself—rethinking how we produce, reconsidering how we consume, improving resource efficiency, recognising the true value of our dependence on nature, and incorporating ecological limits into economic decision-making.

The *Dasgupta Review* similarly argues that biodiversity and natural capital need to be brought into the way we understand and measure economic prosperity.

Should we change the word "sustainability"?

Do we still need to use the word "sustainability" if, in many cases, it is being used not to promote necessary change, but to justify avoiding it? I am not in favour of abandoning the concept. Rather, I believe we need to think more deeply about what sustainability actually means.

In my previous article, I argued that sustainability is not simply about continuing to exist or operate over a long period of time. It also means having the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.

But now I believe we need to ask another question: What are we adapting to, and within what limits? If, in the name of adaptation, we ultimately damage or destroy the natural systems on which our existence depends, it becomes difficult to call that genuine sustainability.

Three questions for measuring sustainability

In my perspective, an effective sustainability framework should ask at least three fundamental questions.

First, how long can it last?

Whether an initiative, institution, technology, or economic system can remain viable and effective over the long term is certainly important.

Second, how well can it adapt to changing realities?

Without the capacity to respond to climate change, demographic transitions, technological transformation, resource scarcity, and social change, no system can remain effective over the long term.

Third, what might we lose in the process of sustaining it?

A system may survive and adapt, but that does not necessarily mean it is sustainable. We also need to consider what is being depleted, damaged, or sacrificed in order to keep it going.

From my point of view, this is perhaps the most important question.

A project may continue for decades. An organisation may generate substantial profits. An economy may grow significantly.

But if, behind that success, there is the degradation of a natural resource, ecosystem, or ecological function that is impossible- or extremely difficult and time-consuming- to restore, then we need to pause before calling that success sustainable.

Can we put a price on nature?

Can we express the value of nature solely in monetary terms? Economics can provide important tools for understanding the value of natural capital.

Valuing ecosystem services can also help make nature's contributions to human well-being and decision-making more visible. But assigning a monetary value to something and demonstrating that it is replaceable are not the same thing.

It may be possible to pollute a river and later construct a water treatment plant. But has the river's ecological function been fully restored?

It may be possible to destroy a forest and plant trees somewhere else. But can the biodiversity, soil structure, hydrological functions, and ecological relationships of a mature forest ecosystem be recreated within the same timeframe?

It may be possible to fill a wetland and construct a drainage system. But can the wetland's flood-regulation capacity, groundwater recharge, biodiversity, and local ecological functions be restored in the same way?

Not everything has a substitute. Recognising and accepting this reality may be one of the most important and perhaps fundamental conditions for genuine Sustainability.

Does sustainability halt development?

There is a possibility of misunderstanding here. When we speak of strong sustainability, some may interpret it as an argument for stopping economic development, halting industrialisation, or denying people's aspirations for a better quality of life.

I do not see it that way. Rather, the questions we should be asking are: What kind of development? Development for whom? Development for how long? And development within what ecological boundaries?

These questions are particularly complex for developing countries. When millions of people are still struggling to secure food, housing, healthcare, education, employment, and stable livelihoods, there is no justification for denying the need for development.

The Brundtland Report itself placed particular emphasis on meeting the essential needs of the world's poorest populations in its discussion of sustainable development.

Therefore, sustainability does not mean stopping development. Rather, it means restructuring the foundations of development in such a way that today's progress does not destroy tomorrow's possibilities. This is where sustainability and justice intersect.

Justice is necessary not only among people within the present generation, but also between present and future generations.

What do we need to rethink?

Perhaps the future debate on sustainability will be on which ecological foundations our future depends.

The United Nations' *The Future We Want*, adopted at the 2012 Rio+20 Conference, reaffirmed the need to consider economic, social, and environmental sustainability together and recognised Earth and its ecosystems as our common home.

It also emphasised the need to live in harmony with nature and to protect and restore the health and integrity of Earth's ecosystems. In other words, this understanding is not new within international policy thinking. The question is whether our real-world decisions are still aligned with that understanding.

What do we actually want to sustain?

We need to see nature not as merely one component of the economy, but as the foundation upon which the economy depends.

The economy depends on nature, and human lives and well-being depend on both a functioning economy and a healthy natural environment.

When the ecological integrity of nature is compromised, the economic system cannot ultimately remain insulated from its consequences. Therefore, the sustainability of the future may not be merely a question of efficiency, profitability, or longevity.

It will increasingly be a question of resilience, regeneration, ecological integrity, equity, and intergenerational responsibility.

How many years an organisation survives is important. But perhaps more important is what it leaves behind.

GDP can increase and produced capital can grow while natural capital simultaneously declines. If we fail to look at these changes together, our understanding of a country's true long-term wealth and well-being remains incomplete. This is precisely why the need to bring natural capital and biodiversity into the centre of economic decision-making is receiving increasing attention.

So, What Is the Question?

Not everything can- or should- be sustained.

Some things will need to change. Some will need to be transformed. Some may need to be left behind. And some things- particularly the ecological foundations upon which our lives and economies depend- will need to be protected as a priority.

True Sustainability may therefore not be a balance in which every loss can be compensated for by something else.

Rather, it may be a philosophy of decision-making in which we acknowledge that we are not the owners of nature; we are dependent on it. And therefore, leaving behind only a functioning economy for future generations will not be enough.

We must leave behind a planet with the ecological foundations necessary for that economy- and human well-being- to endure.