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Mapping Sustainable Development as a Contested Concept

STEVE CONNELLY

University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT Despite the continuing salience of sustainable development as a norm for planning and policymaking, there is still no consensus over the societal goals that would count as sustainable development. This paper builds on a longstanding, though always minority, tradition that sees this conceptual ambiguity and ensuing contestation as inevitable and explicable. Where many representations and analyses of sustainable development obscure this complexity, the purpose here is to provide analysts and practitioners alike with a way of exposing and analysing it, in order to avoid the pitfalls of conflating opposing positions that are cloaked within the comforting rhetoric of sustainable development. The paper sets out a way to map contesting interpretations of sustainable development in relation to each other and wider political debates, and thus provides a visual representation of sustainable development as an essentially contested concept that may counter the rhetorically powerful organizing representations that support the dominant yet over-simplified analyses—the familiar three overlapping circles and weak–strong sustainability spectrum.

Introduction

Although 'sustainable development' has been a dominant concept in planning and policy making for over 15 years, there is still no general consensus over the societal goals that would count as sustainable development as a matter of definition, or would contribute to it in practice. This lack of resolution is seen by many as problematic and odd, given the importance of the concept (Brandon & Lombardi, 2005), and there have always been those who have deplored the term's vagueness and ambiguity—particularly if they see within this a danger that it can be used as a rhetorical cloak for environmentally and socially undesirable policies (Lélé, 1991; Richardson,

Correspondence Address: Steve Connelly, Department of Town & Regional Planning, University of Sheffield, Winter Street, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK. Email: S.Connelly@sheffield.ac.uk

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1997). In contrast, this paper builds on a longstanding strand of commentary and analysis that sees the conceptual ambiguity and ensuing contestation over the 'true' meaning of the term as inevitable (Torgerson, 1995; Jacobs, 1999b). From this viewpoint it is essential to recognize and analyse this complexity and take the implications of contestation seriously, not simply in the interest of intellectual rigour but in order to inform effective sustainable development policy and politics. As long as sustainable development is viewed as 'everything and nothing' it is weakened as a policy goal, and those wishing to promote environmental sustainability and social justice are hampered if they attempt to do so without a clear understanding of the tensions and potential conflicts between these desirable goals.

Here I set out a new way of mapping the alternative, contesting conceptions of sustainable development in relation to each other and to wider political debates, and contrast this with dominant current analyses that fail to distinguish adequately between the different conceptions of sustainable development found in the real world of policymaking and practice. The purpose is to help both analysts and practitioners not only to understand these distinctive conceptions more clearly, but also to conceive of sustainable development as an inherently political concept. The argument and presentation are principally made at a general, conceptual level, illustrated in the concluding section with an example from a Local Agenda 21 (LA21) process in a British local authority.

The paper starts by examining three dominant responses to the perceived ambiguities of sustainable development in more detail, and introduces the contrasting idea that it should be understood as an essentially contested concept. This is followed by a critical assessment of the two principal ways of representing the concept—the familiar 'three circles' and axes defining 'weak' and 'strong' sustainable development. The new map is then developed, and sustainable development located as a blurred and contested region around its centre. The paper concludes by suggesting that such a mapping provides a way of visualizing the arguments over the meaning of 'sustainable development' which constitute the politics of sustainable-development policymaking (Jacobs, 1999b), and draws out the implication that 'sustainable development' as a term plays a range of analytical and rhetorical roles, and so also prompts critical analysis of how the term is used by policymakers and others.[1]

'Sustainable Development' in the Literature: Straightforward, Ambiguous or Essentially Contested?

The literature is dominated by three ways of treating the problematic vagueness and ambiguity of the concept of sustainable development. The first of these simply ignores the complexities in favour of presenting the concept as unproblematic in principle, if hard to achieve in practice (Agyeman & Tuxworth, 1996). This is the quintessential governmental approach, of which the UK's sustainable development *Strategy* is typical (HM Government, 2005).

The second response is more sophisticated. Many authors note the ambiguity of the term, and move on to resolve this by selecting a specific, preferred interpretation from the range of possible meanings, sometimes justified as a logical interpretation of the principles embodied in the founding definition provided by the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Typically, this is the end of the consideration of the contestability of the term. Thus, for example, Elliott acknowledges the continuing debate over meaning and practice, claims that sustainable development is 'fundamentally about reconciling development and the environmental resources on which society depends' (Elliott, 1999, 34) and then develops a book-length 'introduction to sustainable development' with a strong emphasis on poverty reduction and access to resources. Carley and Christie (2000) follow a similar path, though with a different interpretation of what is fundamental to sustainable development—a challenge to the organization of industrial capitalism and the development of 'action-centred networks' as the way to a better environmental management. Similar argumentative structures, which move from recognition of conceptual complexity to the selection of a single desirable and implicitly correct interpretation of sustainable development, can be found across the disciplines concerned with sustainable development. Recent examples are readily found from the built environment (Brandon & Lombardi, 2005), community development (Hamstead & Quinn, 2005) and European policy (Roberts & Colwell, 2001), to indicate just a few.

The third, more overtly analytical response sets out to make explicit and characterize the ambiguity of the concept. Influenced by distinctions made by environmental philosophers and economists in the 1980s (Myerson & Rydin, 1996), this approach is characterized by the adoption of a single analytical axis. Usually denoted by 'strength' of commitment to sustainable development, a typology of different conceptions or interpretations of the concept is set out along this—typical examples are in Pearce (1993), Baker et al. (1997) and Myerson and Rydin (1996).

There are two issues raised by the above which suggest that another attempt at anatomizing 'sustainable development' is worthwhile. On the one hand, I will show below that the single-axis analyses are insufficient to distinguish between significantly different stances on sustainable development through their conflation of different constituent dimensions. On the other, the above responses all contain a thread of normativity—clear in the first and second of the approaches to sustainable development discussed above, and also revealed in the language of the third (Myerson & Rydin, 1996) and in the associations they assert between stances on environmental sustainability, social justice and participatory democracy. Clearly normativity *is* valuable, and such progress as has been made away from the traditional, unsustainable development trajectory has arguably been supported by writings on what sustainable development could and should be. However, it is also widely acknowledged that progress has been insufficient, and this is partially at least attributable to the way the term has been appropriated and perhaps 'abused' (Lafferty & Langhelle, 1999, 2) or 'hijacked' (Mittlin, 2001) during policymaking processes.

In contrast to these three approaches is a fourth, which seeks to understand how sustainable development is actually developed and used as a concept. Central to this approach is the recognition that statements that 'sustainable development is such-and-such' or 'sustainable development ought to be like *this*' should often be seen as rhetorical claims. Therefore, as Haughton and Counsell put it,

> [r]ather than focus on searching for a definitive meaning of 'sustainable development' ... it is necessary to recognise the multiplicity of sustainabilities and to analyse the ways in which these are shaped and mobilised in political discourse (Haughton & Counsell, 2004, 72–73).

To support such analysis it is necessary to acknowledge the intellectual legitimacy of alternative interpretations of the concept, in order to appreciate how and why they can be strongly held and defended—an acknowledgement hampered by approaches that insist that alternatives are not just undesirable (perhaps politically illegitimate) but definitionally incorrect.

As Michael Jacobs pointed out long ago, the key here is that 'sustainable development' is not merely ambiguous but essentially contested (Jacobs, 1995). That is, like other political terms such as 'democracy', it has a widely accepted but vague core meaning within which there are differing 'conceptions of the concept'—legitimate, yet incompatible and contested, interpretations of how the concept should be put into practice. Consequently arguments over the meaning of 'sustainable development' are to be expected, being not just 'semantic disputations' (as they are frequently presented) but 'the substantive political arguments with which the term is concerned' (Jacobs, 1995, 5; 1999b, 26).

In recent years this approach has been increasingly applied to analysing how ideals of 'sustainable development' are put into practice, and thus how the term is given concrete meaning (and see, for example, Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 2000b; Sharp & Luckin, 2003; Richardson et al., 2004). Retrospective views of sustainability policy have also noted the development of distinctive meanings at different scales of governance—in particular, within the British context, between a local, broad 'quality of life' agenda and a regionally and nationally dominant interpretation of sustainable development as ecological modernization (Selman & Parker, 1999; and see Owens & Cowell, 2002; Haughton & Counsell, 2004). However, such analyses remain in a minority, and the fact that Haughton and Counsell's point quoted above still needed to be made in 2004 is testimony to the strength of the desire for singular definitions—reflecting perhaps the continuing importance of the concept in the struggle over the direction of social and economic development and the utility of simple messages in mobilizing opinion.

A salient characteristic of the dominant responses to sustainable development's ambiguity is their use of simple geometrical images and associated verbal metaphors, which provide rhetorically powerful organizing representations—the now-classic 'three circles' and the single lines of the analytical

axes. In contrast, the understanding of sustainable development as essentially contested is lacking such a simple, visualizable organizing principle to establish the relationship between competing conceptions, and to 'carry the message' of this approach. The purpose of this paper, then, is to support this approach by providing a map—a simple diagram that, rather than providing a typology of meanings, sets out the dimensions of the concept (Dobson, 1996) and shows how contesting conceptions of sustainable development can be located, both in relation to each other and to alternative solutions to what Lafferty called 'the environment and development problem' (Lafferty, 1996, 187).

Representations of Sustainable Development

The Elusive Centre: Circles, Spheres and Prisms

Probably the most prevalent and influential way of representing and introducing the concept of sustainable development has been through the image of three overlapping circles, separately representing concerns connected with the economy, society and the environment. Sustainable development lies in the three-fold overlap at the centre, where it integrates the three areas of concern. This representation, which appears to have been developed by the International Centre for Local Environmental Initiatives in the early to mid 1990s (ICLEI, 1996), has been both fertile and long-lived. It has been reproduced in its original form and close variants in many policy and educational documents across the globe over the past ten years, particularly though not exclusively in connection with Local Agenda 21. (A quick internet search yields many instances, of which a fairly typical selection are presented in Figure 2 alongside the ICLEI original.) Without the figure the simple spatial metaphor has become part of the taken-for-granted language of sustainable development, exemplified for example by Beauregard's definition: 'sustainability is situated at the intersection of environmental protection, economic growth, and social justice' (2003, 72).

The original figure has spawned further variations, of which a particularly suggestive example is Campbell's early space-within-a-triangle figure—the 'planner's triangle' (Campbell, 1996) (see Figure 3). Here the three corners of the triangle are given individual meanings as possible standpoints for planners to adopt. The edges, 'axes', between these represent conflicts between the positions, and sustainable development is placed in the centre as the potential, elusive reconciliation towards which planners can strive—unreachable in any complete and final way yet ever present as a guiding pole in relation to which planners can orient themselves.

The image of the three circles and the metaphor it captures are powerful, their longevity testifying to their attractiveness as *the* way to communicate what is special and (once) new about sustainable development (Myerson & Rydin, 1996). They neatly capture the difference between sustainable development and the previously separate concerns of policy and politics, suggesting not only the holistic scope of the concept but also its characteristic

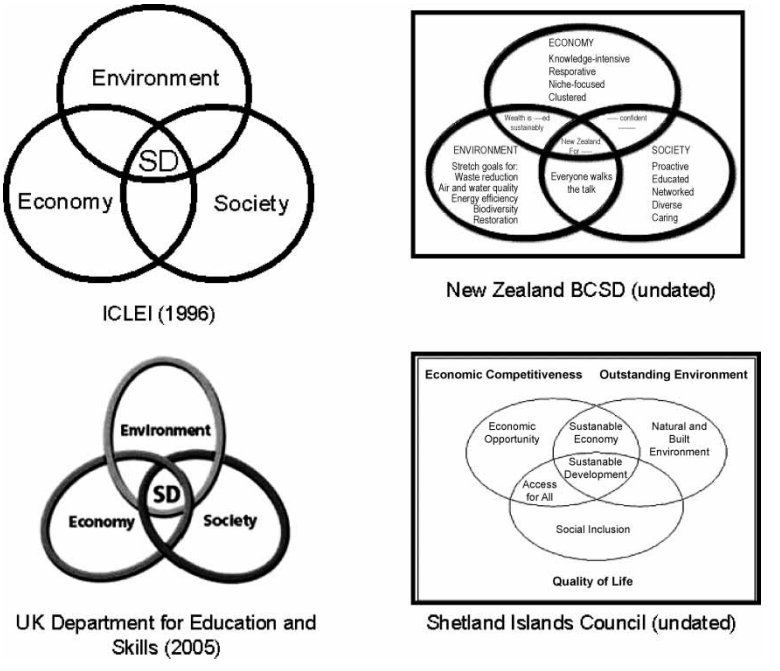

Figure 1. The three circles of sustainable development

claim to integration—it is an easy step from the overlapping circles to claims of possible 'win–win–win' policies (see, for example, Pinfield, 1996). The boundary they mark out between sustainable development and the separate concerns is well defined, setting it apart as essentially different. Within the boundary, the concept is internally undifferentiated, communicating the sense that 'sustainable development' is a unitary, unambiguous concept or

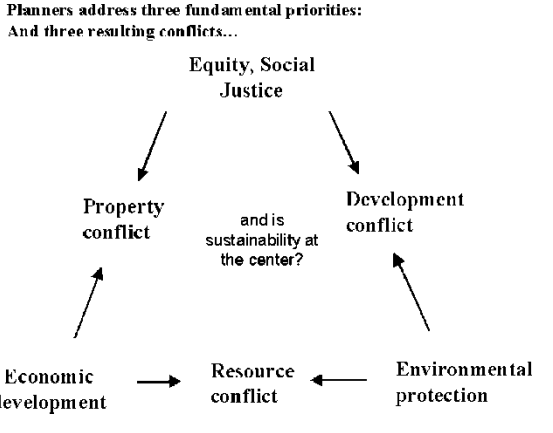

Figure 2. Scott Campbell's 'planner's triangle' (Campbell, 1996)

goal. This gives the image its rhetorical power and usefulness as a presentation of the 'first order' of meaning of the concept—the level over which agreement is easy (Jacobs, 1999b).

Axes and Binary Pairs

However, beyond the generality of this first level of meaning, many differing conceptions of sustainable development are possible, incorporating different visions of a sustainable society and the means of achieving it (Owens & Cowell, 2002). These differing conceptions set out the bare bones of a solution to the 'environment and development problem' through showing how social, economic and environmental programmes will be integrated (Lafferty, 1996: 187) and could in principle be extremely different from one another.

A substantial theoretical literature has developed that simplifies and classifies this potential complexity into a number of distinctive positions with differing operational outcomes and underlying ethics. As noted above, many such analyses involve a single axis, along which a typology of different interpretations is set out—typically lying between 'weak' and 'strong' poles. These interpretations are constructed by claiming that disparate component aspects of sustainable development are inherently linked and so concluding that in practice there is a rather limited number of coherent interpretations of sustainable development. For example, Pearce (1993) and Baker et al. (1997) each identify four conceptions of sustainable development which consist of associated ethical positions, types of economy and management strategies. To this list Baker et al. add characteristics of civil society. Similarly Myerson and Rydin (1996) group approaches to the three key fields of development, environmental protection, and equity into four 'perspectives' along a weak–strong spectrum (see Figure 1). The extreme positions, particularly at the weak end, are hardly recognizable as 'sustainable development', and so for Baker et al. the typology reduces to two contrasting positions characterized as 'weak' and 'strong', bracketed by a purportedly unsustainable, traditional economic paradigm at the weak end and a model of an ideal Green society at the other.

More circumspectly, other authors identify a number of opposing positions within the various components. Thus Dobson (1996) examines contrasting pairs of 'problem causes' and proposed solutions across ontological, epistemological, social, economic and institutional domains while Jacobs (1999b) identifies 'faultlines' within the concept of sustainable development which generate opposing pairs of positions on the scope of the subject area, equity, public involvement, and attitude to environmental protection. However, both go on to claim that, although conceptually separate, in practice sets of these positions tend to be 'held at the same time by the same people' (Jacobs, 1999b, 38), again creating two contrasting conceptions. These, labelled 'equity-' and 'market-based' approaches by Dobson and 'radical' and 'conservative' by Jacobs, approximate to the 'strong' and 'weak' versions of sustainable development.

Approach	Quasi-cornucopian	Social choice	New economics	Limits to growth
Development	Current growth pattern	Marginal change	Substantial change	No growth
Environmental protection	Positive feedback possible	Trade-offs necessary	Negative feed-back currently	Absolute limits to growth
Equity	Redistribution possible	Redistribution depends on growth	Redistribution a prerequisite for sustainability	Redistribution possible now
Key figures	Schmitt-Heiney	Pearce	Ekins	Meadows, Daly
Sustainability spectrum	----------Weak----------			----------Strong----------

Figure 3. Myerson and Rydin's Perspectives on Sustainable Development (Myerson and Rydin, 1996)

There are two problems with this approach to constructing typologies which make them unsatisfactory as analytical frameworks. Firstly the consonance between the different facets of each position either rests on theoretical claims that are not self-evidently correct or on generalizations of uncertain application. Two aspects are particularly problematic: the conflating of concerns with social justice with positions on the relationship between economics and the environment, and the assumption of a close relationship between sustainable development that is 'strong' in its view of the importance of sustaining natural capital and its incorporation of participatory democratic political structures.

In these typologies 'strong' positions prioritize both environmental protection and social justice, set in opposition to untrammelled economic and industrial development. This is not a necessary linkage, however. Ecocentric philosophies such as Arne Næss's 'Deep Ecology' (Næss, 1997) prioritize the health of the ecosystem over concern for human welfare, let alone human justice. While such positions are explicitly opposed to sustainable development and similar arguments are rarely articulated *within* the rhetoric of sustainable development, these priorities clearly surface in some fields of policy and practice—as for example in the case of national park policies. In the UK environmental protection is in principle given priority in case of conflict between different sustainability objectives, explicitly recognizing that these may not always be compatible (UK Environment Act 1995). Elsewhere, wildlife conservation has often been coercively prioritized over human welfare, and even human rights—in recent years under the banner of achieving 'sustainable development' (see, for example, Bolaane, 2004).

Similarly, while convincing arguments can be made for the importance of public involvement in achieving sustainable development, this is not a logical or necessary connection (Goodin, 1992; Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 1996;

Saward, 1996). Equally strong arguments can be made *against* widespread public involvement, on the grounds that only a technical and political elite is qualified and can be trusted to correctly identify problems and truly sustainable solutions. Such views were prevalent in early formulations of the environmental problem and justified authoritarian solutions in the name of humanity's survival (see, for example, Hardin, 1968). Similarly technocratic, though less authoritarian, beliefs underpin the (reformist socialist) Fabian Society's promotion of an 'environmental modernization' that incorporates a concern for equity alongside environmental protection and economic growth, but without any reference to widespread public involvement in decision-making (Jacobs, 1999a).

The linkage between social justice, environmental protection and public participation is political rather than inherent in the concepts—it represents a particular choice amongst possible policy goals, which has been clearly articulated as central to the mainstream Green political programme (Goodin, 1992). This is not to deny the attractiveness of the association of these ends in a single political programme in opposition to the environmental and social impacts of unrestricted economic development. Nor is it to decry the importance of public participation—and of democracy more generally—in promoting social justice and environmental sustainability *in practice*.[2] The point here is that alternative viewpoints exist and that analyses of 'sustainable development' should not blind us to the possibility that actors in any given process may subscribe to conceptions of sustainable development which comprise any possible combination of social justice, environmental protection and public involvement, rather than necessarily embracing all three.

The second problem with these analytical frameworks is exactly that they *are* simply typologies of sustainable development. The outer positions on the axes are brackets that define the boundaries of the concept. This is unproblematic in analysing the concept itself, but is unhelpfully limiting. It obscures the independence (and prior existence) of alternative political and value positions that populate the political environment within which sustainable development must compete.

Before using this final point as a way of reframing the analysis, it is worth noting another approach to reconceptualizing sustainable development which aims to avoid the obvious tensions inherent in defining its operational objectives. This is to see the essence of a 'sustainable society' as lying in its processes, rather than its goals. Thus Harrison (2000), following a perceptive analysis of competing efficiency, equity and environmental ethics 'narratives' of sustainable development, suggests that while each is separately insufficient they are mutually incompatible, and therefore that a goal-oriented sustainable development is a myth. As an alternative he therefore proposes that sustainability can be judged in terms of societal processes—the extent to which a society is capable of continuous and successful responsive adaptation to changes in the natural and social environment. From a very different perspective, Morris (2002) opposes any goal-directed intervention by the state, and claims ecologically sound human development is best achieved through economic development governed by the 'sustainable' institutions of 'property

rights, the rule of law, free markets, limited government and free speech' (Morris, 2002, 1). Intriguing those these proposals are, it does seem that both aim to remedy the inherent tensions through proposing a singular, normative conceptualization of sustainable development, and thus have this much in common with the first set of analyses discussed above.

Mapping the Field

The principal strengths of the above analyses are in the identification of sustainable development as in some sense 'central' and integrating the three key domains, Campbell's recognition of the separate domains as possible (if undesirable) standpoints of planners (1996), and the possibility of dissecting the ambiguity of 'sustainable development' into various 'conceptions of the concept'. Their common weakness lies in the isolation of sustainable development from other political and value positions and the conflation of the various dimensions along which sustainable development can be differentiated.

The solution proposed here is to combine and build on these analyses in a way that unpacks the ambiguities and tensions, rather than attempting to either suppress or oversimplify them. The key to this is a shift in the underlying image from the circles or single axes to a continuous triangular field, on which *any* solution to the environment and development problem can be located—including those which will count as sustainable development, but extending well beyond these. This field is shown in Figure 4.

Different categories can be mapped on the field. For simplicity and illustrative purposes the discussion here is framed in the language of priorities and norms underpinning policies, but positions could equally well be associated with values and norms, or with specific policies, or used to analyse practice. Positions on the field are determined by the relative emphasis given to economic, environmental and social goals. This clearly cannot be an exact and objective positioning, as no quantitative metric is possible—as with the other diagrams representing sustainable development, the field is a metaphor, an image used to illuminate an analysis. Positions can be located in relation to one another, and to the three separate goals. The corners represent extreme viewpoints that prioritize economic growth with no concern for equity or

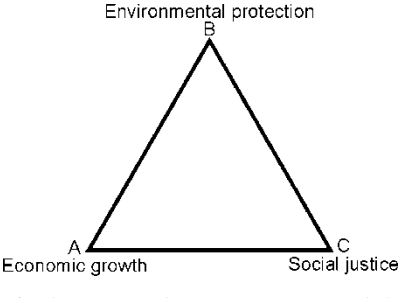

Figure 4. The field of solutions to the environment and development problem

environmental costs (A), environmental protection at any economic and social cost (B) and social justice with no concern for economic growth or for the environment (C). Between these lie axes that represent balances between them (whether through integration or trading off) and which can be identified with familiar fields of debate. Thus the axis between points A and C comprises positions in the traditional political debate between the priorities of growth and equity; the A–B axis is concerned with the relative priorities of the environment and economic growth; while the B–C axis represents positions in the debate between environmental and social goals.

Sustainable development occupies the central region of the field, corresponding to its agreed, 'first-level' and uncontested meaning as a policy principle incorporating some balance of economic, environmental and social priorities. It thus gives greater priority to the environment than previously dominant policy agendas—which lie closer to the A–C axis—and occupies a roughly central position in the political arguments between equity and economic growth. The concept is clearly not represented by a single point at the centre of the field. Such a position, a singular, 'true' 'sustainable development', is undefinable, since it would be impossible to demonstrate that economic, social and environmental goals were all given equal weight. More importantly, the concept's ambiguity requires that its representation is an area that includes the centre, and within which there is scope for a range of positions corresponding to interpretations of sustainable development which attribute relatively more weight to any of the three poles.

Given the preceding discussion, there is clearly a definitional question as to what range of positions is to be counted as being part of the concept, and which solutions to the 'environment and development problem' are 'unsustainable' and so lie outside the boundary. The central 'sustainable development region' is thus only vaguely defined, unlike the central curved triangle of Figure 2 with its sharp boundaries. Moreover, given the contested nature of the concept, different actors will identify different positions or areas as constituting 'real' sustainable development and legitimately challenge others' definitions. However, contiguous and continuous with these are those which would not be claimed as sustainable development even by their proponents, and so fall outside the boundary. The following paragraphs suggest how recognizable positions might fall along the symmetry axes of Figure 5, moving in each case away from the centre—from interpretations of sustainable development to positions that are opposed to the concept.

Towards corner A are interpretations that prioritize economic growth as a goal, identify economic opportunities in environmental protection and recognize that growth may require the consideration of both equity and environmental protection. These positions are characteristic of recent developments in corporate philosophy, both as a matter of visible public accountability (see, for example, Department of Trade and Industry [DTI], 2004) and based on purely economic grounds. The practical implications of Morris's (2002) free market approach would put his version of sustainable development in the debateable margins of the concept in this direction, while closer to the corner are positions outside the boundary, whose proponents

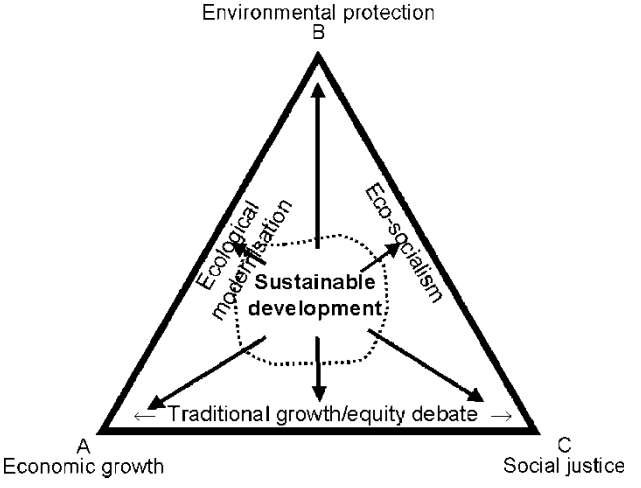

Figure 5. Sustainable development mapped in the field

would oppose the concept altogether on the grounds that considerations of equity and the environment as policy goals were inimical to economic progress (Beckerman, 1994).

Towards the environmental corner, B, are versions of sustainable development motivated ultimately by the need to protect the environment but which recognize that meeting human needs and economic growth are instrumentally necessary to achieve that goal. Beyond the boundary, are 'deep Green' positions that reject sustainable development as too great a compromise, see any development paradigm as intrinsically incompatible with the protection of nature and instead espouse a biocentric ethic prioritizing the natural world over considerations of human equity (Luke, 1995; Næss, 1997).

Towards corner C are found positions that prioritize equity, having the primary motivation of achieving social justice, but recognize the importance to this of both economic growth and environmental protection. More extreme views in this direction would lie outside the realm of sustainable development, taking traditional left-wing positions on the A–C axis and very instrumental and anthropocentric views of humanity's relationship to nature.

Moving from the centre away from the corners also identifies important positions. Away from corner C, equity is emphasized progressively less, and the goals for sustainable development are seen as achieving synergies and acceptable trade-offs between economic growth and environmental protection. This 'ecological modernization' is clearly less holistic than many other interpretations, and, while it is viewed by its proponents as constituting 'sustainable development', critics such as Lélé (1991) and Langhelle (2000) consider it to lie outside the acceptable boundaries of usage of the term and oppose what they see as the term's appropriation in this way. Many such critics are opponents of capitalist and/or industrial development who

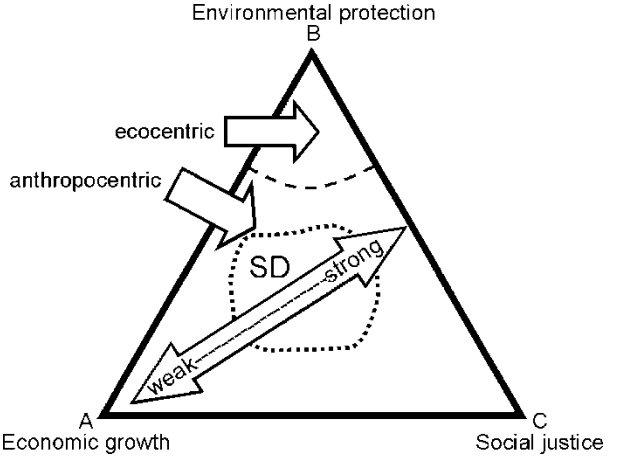

Figure 6. The sustainable development axis and anthopo/eco-centric faultlines

occupy positions on an axis leading away from corner A, emphasizing the links between equity and environmental protection and the need to restrain economic growth (see, for example, Jacobs's early work [1991]). More extreme positions in this direction reject the notion of growth altogether and see desirable futures in much simpler, less industrialized society based on a blend of left and Green politics (e.g. Bookchin, 1971). Finally, positions moving away from the B corner progressively de-emphasize the importance of environmental considerations. This is the terrain of a more traditional politics in which the major issues are the balance between growth and equity, with environmental concerns of only peripheral concern.

It should be emphasized that the field comprises positions concerned with the substantive goals and content of sustainable development. The process of achieving it is a separate issue—in particular the important but problematic role played by public involvement is not part of the mapping. Given the discussion above (and its elaboration in the second endnote), which makes the key point that democratic and substantive issues within sustainable development are not simply linked, it would seem that the degree of public involvement is not mappable in the same dimension. Indeed, the separation of the participatory democratic element of 'strong' approaches to sustainable development from the (equally conflated) substantive goals is an important aspect of the analysis. (Levels of public involvement could perhaps be represented on an axis perpendicular to the field, allowing similar substantive goals to be associated with a range of different roles for the public, and vice versa, but this is not a model that can be developed in detail here.)

The 'sustainability axes' can, however, be located in the field—they bisect the plane, and thus promote some distinctions but obscure others. 'Strong' and 'weak' correspond to locations along the axis through the economic development corner, and conflate into them any positions lying in the field to either side—thus collapsing distinctions between radically differing

views over the relative importance of the social and the environmental. The field could clearly be divided in other ways—along for instance, an ecocentric/anthropocentric faultline, which would group many ecological modernizers and their opponents together, but parted from those for whom human development is an instrumental, secondary goal. (See Figure 6.)

Conclusion: Using the Map

The approach sketched out in this paper points to an understanding of 'sustainable development' as a phrase that plays several roles, which can be mapped as different delimitations of the central, 'sustainable' region of the field (see Figure 7).

The first role of 'sustainable development' is to refer to any of the 'conceptions of the concept', which, following Gallie (1955), we can expect to be claimed by its proponents as 'the true meaning' of sustainable development. For such proponents the boundaries of their sustainable development region are relatively small regions—corresponding, for example, to sustainable development as ecological modernization or the more socially oriented interpretations of many Local Agenda 21 programmes.

Sustainable development's second role is to refer to the highest-level definition of the concept, and so to the whole set of these various development trajectories, marked by a boundary that distinguishes them from other solutions to the environment and development problem. However, positions inside this boundary are not suddenly different from those outside, but in every direction there is a continuous gradation across the boundary, whose exact position is therefore arbitrary. That such a region exists, however, is shown by the way it is bounded from all directions by perspectives that explicitly reject the concept of sustainable development—the neo-Marxist (Luke, 1995), Green (Næss, 1997; Richardson, 1997) and neo-liberal (Beckerman, 1994).

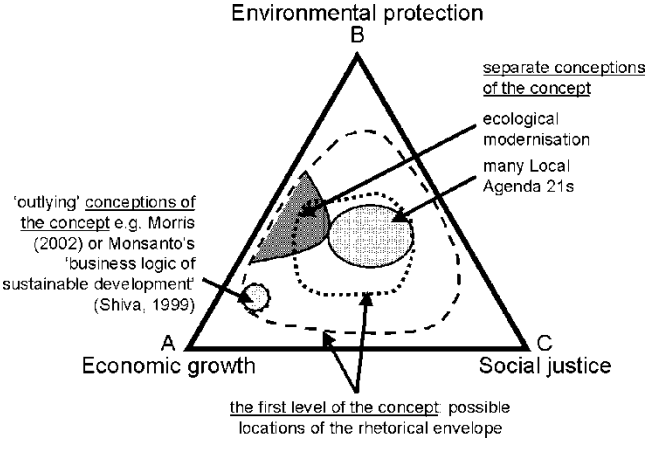

Figure 7. Sustainable development mapped as a contested concept

Furthermore, because the concept is not just ambiguous but contested, this boundary will be located in different places by different analysts. The largest enclosed area, reflecting the most eclectic definition of the term, would encompass all positions claimed by anyone as 'sustainable'. This 'rhetorical envelope' (Richardson, 2001) is rather large, since the concept has reshaped the terms of the struggle between different solutions to the environment and development problem (Campbell, 1996). Claims of sustainability have become part of the rhetoric of virtually every enterprise—as, for instance, in the claim that 'Monsanto Company activities and the use of its products positively affect agricultural sustainability' (Monsanto, 2005, 1)—and can act to legitimate policies that have potentially gravely damaging social, environmental and/or economic effects (Shiva, 1999). Alternatively they simply allow certain viewpoints to be aired—like, for example, those of radical environmentalists who are 'often pressed to frame their arguments in terms of sustainability' (Torgerson, 1995, 10). One could, perhaps, identify an ill-defined region that reflected a commonly accepted set of 'sustainable' solutions and excluded the most cynical uses—though even this might be difficult, given the debate over the status of ecological modernization (Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 2000a; Langhelle, 2000).

Turning to a more concrete example, drawn from empirical research on Local Agenda 21, the public rhetoric of one widely respected LA21 programme in northern England subscribes to a balanced set of objectives (a strong economy, lifelong learning, looking after the environment and promoting strong communities) to be addressed simultaneously and with due care for future generations and communities elsewhere in the world (see Connelly, 2002). This lies in the centre of the triangular field, defining sustainable development in a way consistent with the Brundtland definition. Yet within the local authority and its partners numerous potentially conflictive viewpoints on the meaning and implications of sustainable development have been expressed, exemplified in the following quotations and mapped in Figure 8:[3]

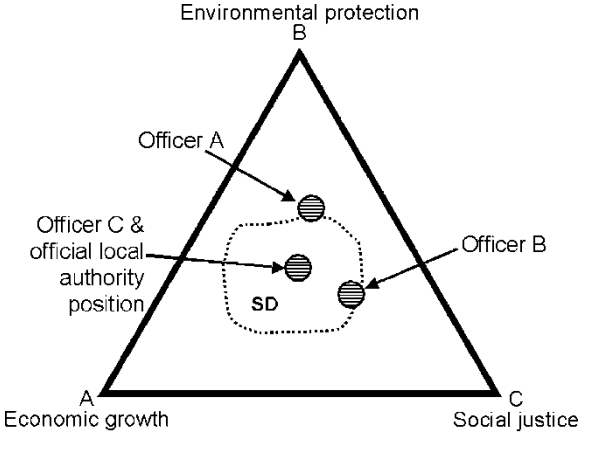

Figure 8. Contested interpretations of sustainable development in LA21

> Officer A: the extension of the initiative [into tackling social and economic issues] can't be allowed to happen. … I firmly believe in the LA21 process that we have, which still has at the heart the response to the global environmental crisis;

contrasted with

> Officer B: developing sustainable communities is the goal—the process is more important [than the environmental end result of the project]—capacity building so that people can go on to do other things;

and

> Officer C: there was an understanding of LA21 here as being strictly an environmental thing and it was quite an effort on our part to get into the indicators a number of the more social type indicators, like disabled access, the unemployment one … People were saying 'no we shouldn't be doing that, it's not sustainable development'.

Three points need to be made. Firstly these positions are clearly distinct from the very balanced rhetoric of the authority's publications, yet they come from very significant actors within the process. Secondly they show the divisions between positions which would be obscured by deploying the notion of 'strong sustainable development', and the faultline that can separate environmental and social priorities—yet all three speakers subscribed passionately to the ideal of 'sustainable development'. Finally they point to the active work of bridging divides, coalition-building and aligning and shifting distinctive values and goals that are a necessary part of making progress under the banner of such an ambiguous concept.

The value of the map is that it provides a relatively simple structure within which these conceptual issues and empirical findings can be presented and argued over. Essentially it maps a contested concept in its broader context, providing a visualization of the terrain of Jacobs's 'substantive political arguments' over the trajectory of social and economic development (Jacobs, 1999b). It makes no claim to be the basis of a rigorous analysis—pinning any conception of sustainable development down to a point defined by relative weighting of three essentially unquantifiable, complex and themselves contested concepts must always be an oversimplification. It is, however, a useful heuristic device, which opens up for examination and analysis aspects of the concept which other analyses tend to obscure. In empirical settings it provides a classificatory tool through which the relationships between different policies, programmes or impacts can be assessed, without artificially bracketing off some as embodying an objectively sustainable development and others not.

The mapping is also intended to have a normative, critical purpose. Practically, it can be used in a very directly critical way. Thus corresponding policy rhetoric and policy impacts can be mapped, in order to identify and

draw attention to, for example, the difference between governmental commitments to a balanced interpretation of sustainable development and less balanced actual progress (see, for example the UK's headline indicators [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), 2005], which clearly show more progress on economic and social factors than on 'the environment'.) More generally, though, it can show how 'sustainable development' is used and rhetorically defined, and so how unacceptable outcomes fall under the concept's positive aura. This final point illustrates the paradox that affects any but the most disinterested analysis of a contested concept: having recognized it as such, we cannot intellectually sustain a singular conception of 'sustainable development'. Yet, those of us who believe we can and should act to shape development trajectories must act as though such a conception exists as the ideal for which we strive, always in competition with conceptions that are comprehensible but, from our perspective, undesirable.

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Notes

[1] The approach taken here deliberately avoids adopting a particular theoretical stance, as it is intended that the map be useful as a tool that can be applied in a range of circumstances to address policy or practice, without the need to subscribe to a particular academic school of thought. It is undoubtedly, however, informed by an understanding of the world as the site of contests between discourses, and many of those writing with the understanding of sustainable development as essentially contested have explicitly used discourse analytical approaches (see, for example, Hajer, 1995; Haughton & Counsell, 2004).

[2] These issues are too complex to be dealt with thoroughly here and two observations will suffice. One problem lies, perhaps, in the way that widespread public participation is generally conceptualized as part of a consensual process towards sustainability. However, if achieving sustainable development is seen as a more political and potentially conflictual programme to shift societal goals and norms, then the selective mobilization of and by some of 'the public' in support of the programme is probably essential. From this perspective achieving sustainable development parallels the historic struggle for social justice, which has always involved political mobilization. However, such mobilization in itself is clearly not always oriented towards social justice. (See Armony, 2004, for a detailed examination of this.) Further, public involvement—or the freedom to participate—is seen by many as an inherent element of social justice, not just a means towards it. From this standpoint the possible tension between social justice and environmental protection becomes starker, since restricting public involvement to achieve the latter becomes in itself an injustice.

[3] Drawn from interviews carried out in 1999–2000 as part of my doctoral research (Connelly, 2002).

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