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# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INSIGHTS

# Pushing “Reset” on Sustainable Development

## Alan AtKisson

In Fall 2008, when the scale and magnitude of the world’s economic meltdown began to settle in, I posted the following update to Twitter (which was automatically copied to my Facebook page):

The collapse, went the implied thinking, would make it more evident that a massive overhaul was necessary in our use of energy and materials, our treatment of the world’s poor, the perverse incentives in our economic

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan AtKisson is president of the AtKisson Group, a global sustainability consultancy, and co-president of the International Network of Resource Information Centers, aka “The Balaton Group.” He has worked at the leading edge of sustainability innovation and practice since 1988. His firm’s clients include global companies, governments, cities, and other organizations committed to sustainability leadership.

His most recent book is *The ISIS Agreement: How sustainability can improve organizational performance and transform the world* (Earthscan, 2008).



*Alan AtKisson is wondering how to continue accelerating sustainable development in an era of financial collapse.*

Responses posted to my Facebook wall (apologies to readers who do not know that I am referring to short text messages published on popular social networking websites) and by email were uniformly optimistic. Corporate sustainability champions, university leaders, and other consultants all said the same thing: “This is the best opportunity for advancing sustainability that we’ve ever had.”

models, etc. Everywhere one looked, someone was “pushing the reset button” on everything from diplomatic relations between countries to the structure of the global financial system. Now, finally, the envisioned transformation to sustainability would inevitably occur.

Time has marched on since then, and while there are obvious encouraging signs of change, the case for unbridled optimism about a rapid sustainability transformation has become more difficult to make. The Obama Era was

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officially launched with its eco-friendly politics and even a White House organic garden — though the garden immediately came under public relations attack by the chemical industry. More importantly, the new Obama Administration hurried to reestablish a privileged, instead of an embattled and diminished, role for science in public policy making, and to effect the restitution of the rule of law where it was deeply frayed, including the observance of international agreements such as the Geneva Convention. (The mere fact that such restitution was genuinely necessary still weighs heavy.)

These were American moments, but they were emblematic of a global mood. “Yes, we can” was the Obama phrase snapped up by center, left and right, around the world. Massive funds were committed to restart the global economy, and all our most prominent and powerful leaders — the words of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton are typical — dedicated all their energies to “get growth going again.”

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Meanwhile, aid-dependent sustainable development programs in the world’s poorer countries began preparing for an era of greatly reduced generosity. Natural systems

remained harder pressed than ever, in virtually every way they could be measured, and environmental protection budgets could hardly expect increasing attention when the jobless were marching in the streets or taking their former bosses hostage. At a much smaller (and certainly much less tragic) scale of indicator, sustainability officers and consultants were among the first to look into their options as they joined the swelling ranks of the un- or underemployed.

As of late-2009, despite some interesting new developments in the global dialogue, the “global reset” still does not look uniformly positive for sustainability-as-usual. Can it be that sustainable development itself requires a reset?

### **Redefining “Reset”**

Computers and video games have so permeated industrial consciousness that even the statements of CEOs (Jeffrey Immelt of GE, writing about capitalism and the world economy in his introduction to GE’s 2008 Annual

*Wikipedia* (the free, crowd-sourced, internet-based encyclopedia) defines it this way: “to clear any pending errors or events and bring a system to normal condition or initial state usually in a controlled manner.”

We can see immediately that “reset,” at least in its original computing sense, is an inappropriate metaphor for our times. With the combination of financial collapse, climate change urgency, shaky geopolitical security, and weakening ecosystems, it will be quite impossible to “bring the [world] system to normal condition or initial state” in any manner whatsoever, much less a controlled one, in the foreseeable future. There is no going back to a previous, apparently more stable situation: that situation was, in fact, the cause of our current instability.

So, if we are to continue using the “reset” metaphor, we must redefine it. Let us say that it should mean truly starting afresh -- but starting from where we are, taking a hard look at current conditions and emerging trends, and setting a new and very different course that is more likely to lead to the positive outcomes that (most of) the world aspires to.

Here is a proposition: if the world is indeed in “reset” mode, involving the transformation of many core institutions, policy envelopes, and ways of structuring the collective game we call the “global economy,” then sustainable development must hit the “reset” button as well. It needs a fresh start if it is to be meaningful and effective in this increasingly different and difficult world. But a fresh start compared to what?

Report, published in 2009) and top diplomats (Hillary Clinton, describing relations with Russia in early 2009) grabbed onto this all-pervasive metaphor. What does “reset” mean?



## Rethinking “Mainstream”

For the past 20 years, sustainability and sustainable development work (there is a difference, we will come back to it) have been pursuing a pathway of increasing professionalism and mainstreaming. Sustainability has sought — with apparent success — to place itself nearer and nearer to where fundamental decisions are made. Efforts to promote integrated indicators and assessment in the 1990s evolved into processes like the Global Reporting Initiative and Corporate Social Responsibility, and finally into strategic investment, green product development, and even the building of whole “eco-cities.” Institutions and governments have whole departments of sustainability. Corporate leaders, especially, have moved dramatically to embrace the family of concepts that place their operations in a more positive ethical light.

Sustainability proponents achieved this remarkable advance by embracing two fundamental strategic principles:

1. Significant changes are necessary to safeguard the future and to prevent calamitous loss or collapse in critical environmental and social systems.
2. These changes are wholly compatible with mainstream planning, management, and market-based investment processes, and will lead to new, more effective, and more profitable ways of doing business in every sector.

Principle 1 remains truer than ever. I submit, however, that in a reset world, Principle 2 is no longer tenable.

*“The painfully obvious mismatch of unfolding events with inadequate responses should, one notes ruefully, have been sufficient to call the reset-to-normal project into question...”*

First, and most obviously, the rules of the game for business and management are in a process of real-time, continuous revision. While optimism is a strategic necessity for the world’s political leaders, the reality is that they are making the global recovery up as they go along, by trial and error; and the odds are that the trials will continue, probably for years, before a new equilibrium is reached in the structure and function of the world’s economy. New global powers like China, newly empowered protest movements, and the thrashings of the old guard are all demanding to have a greater say, and

practiced is likely to require adaptation or reinvention, along with the rest of the management machinery in our world.

Second, and more controversially, it may be that several of the core aims of sustainable development will be finally shown to be in irreconcilable opposition to the aims of the predominant global economic machine — and that an over-reliance on economic instruments and arguments is therefore an inadequate, even dangerous way forward. The world’s governments have, after all, shifted into hyperactive efforts to restart the consumption-based economy. Yes, the Stiglitz Commission has discovered, at long last, that the Gross Domestic Product is “an



will continue to do so. Much of what was once “mainstream” in business, financial, and government practice has become obsolete; and much of how sustainability is professionally

inadequate metric to gauge well-being over time.” Yes, there are greatly enhanced efforts to build cleaner and more efficient cars, and expand the production of



renewable energy. Many continue to see this as the great Moment of Opportunity, when the chaos of collapse opens wide the door for innovations that previously were reduced to pushing and squeezing their way through the small cracks opened by corporate CSR programs, the Clean Development Mechanism, and similar real, but symbolically small-scaled, nods to social and environmental idealism.

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But as trillions of dollars are electronically printed and mobilized, it must be observed that the great majority of gears that they are aimed at restarting are not particularly green, humane, or just. They are the gears of GDP-measured economic-

still watching a mad scramble to get people back into the shopping malls and charter-trip aircraft of the world.

### “Reset” is Radical

This global effort to push “reset” in its original computer-based definition (a controlled return to pre-disturbance normalcy) continues largely unchallenged, even as the visible disturbances and anomalies

continue to proliferate. The painfully obvious mismatch of unfolding events with inadequate responses should, one notes ruefully, have been sufficient to call the reset-to-normal project into question; instead, the

to push for a more radical version of reset are fated to be ineffectual, at least until the world suffers a far more catastrophic meltdown in the global nexus among economic markets, fiscal policy, geopolitics, and our planet’s ever-weakening ecosystems. There is, however, much else at play in the world system that one can, and should, point toward in pushing for a more fearless diagnosis and a more innovative and ambitious set of prescriptions — the kind of diagnosis and prescription that is (or should be) sustainability’s stock in trade.

For example, there is a growing consensus among many opinion leaders that the global targets set as the expression of the world’s sustainability ambitions — e.g. most prominently the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the various greenhouse gas emission reduction targets (certainly the old Kyoto numbers, and probably the new Copenhagen ones) — are not going to be met. With regard to climate, this observation is hardly controversial. With regard to the MDGs, there remains some hesitancy to speak out: one does not wish to poison the well of motivation with pessimism.



growth-as-usual. One may easily be blinded by the new funds going into building windmills, or the restructuring of car companies around more efficient models (the demise of vehicles like the Hummer certainly looked to many like the righteous judgment that will be meted out to sinful souls during the Last Days). Fundamentally, we are

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world watched heads of state debate the merits of exorbitant bonus pay for bankers. One might assume in the face of such spectacle that efforts

Despite the foresight some now claim to have had, the MDGs were never “unmeetable” in any fundamental sense; we simply have not taken the

actions and made the investments sufficient to meet them. Nor were these goals unrealistic in the first place; indeed, they were not terribly ambitious.

True sustainable development, most would concede, is not to be measured in halving the world's poverty or modestly reducing greenhouse emissions, but in the elimination of poverty and the causes of anthropogenic climate disturbance altogether. Goals like these are usually not articulated in the world's centrally important public for a fear of being seen as infeasible or overly idealistic. "Realism," which has become nearly a synonym for fatalism, rules.

Meanwhile, while there are glimmers of progress in important dimensions, some of that progress is illusory and masks a decline, not an improvement, in the conditions of peoples and their countries. On a visit to Nairobi in April 2009, I read in the daily newspapers that the rapid improvement in gender balance in that nation's school system (from 54/46 male/female just a few years ago, to 50/50 today) is not the result of successful policies or cultural changes. It is the result of thousands of young, poor teenage boys leaving school and joining the Mungiki sect, a mafia-like quasi-religious movement making daily headlines with horrific acts of violence, and a regime of protection rackets that have poisoned the politics of Kenya's country towns (beheadings are the Mungiki sect's preferred form of enforcement). The girls of Kenya are now "more equal" because the boys, unable to see the future in education,

are abandoning the schools. A seeming contribution to the MDGs is in fact a terribly worrying leading indicator of decline in economic and social stability.

*"The goal of sustainability carries with it an imperative to go beyond incremental improvements, and to consider transformative changes in the deeper structures of these systems — changes that are very likely necessary to achieve our most urgent goals."*

Similarly, progress of "cap-and-trade" legislation through the United States Congress — hailed as an historic breakthrough, and an exciting reversal of policy after years of high-level scientific censorship in America — is not likely to bring more than a somewhat less awful emissions future for the country. James Hansen, the NASA scientist whose willingness to be

development has become so mainstream. While I am an avid and public defender of the term "sustainable development" against all comers, it is also the case that

this mainstreaming has generally proceeded within the framework of the dominant economic paradigm which, to say the least, deserves to be inspected more closely for design flaws. There may in fact be ways in which the most common forms of sustainable development practice itself -- incrementalist, conservative, market-privileging -- are contributing now to the kinds of progress/regress



out in front on raising the alarm on global warming has unfortunately been justified by two decades of observed data, calls cap-and-trade "worshipping at the temple of doom." He warns that it will "lock in disasters for our children and grandchildren." Once again, progress may in fact be regress in disguise.

Finally, it may in fact be highly problematic that sustainable

illusion-making described above. In many contexts, it might be masking the fact that the things that matter are getting worse; or, it may in fact be making them worse.

At this juncture, a revisiting of definitions is in order. *Sustainable development is the practice of aiming development toward sustainability.* At least, that is what it should be — and what it so often is not.



*Sustainability* is a system state that can be fairly easily defined and even quantitatively described for a vast array of ecological, economic, and social systems. Skyrocketing crime rates are not sustainable; social and economic development grinds to a halt or reverses. Decaying ecosystems are not sustainable; water sources disappear and previously free ecosystem services (e.g. pollination) start costing measurable money. Ever-increasing leverage in the global financial system is not sustainable; it leads inevitably to instabilities and crashes. (This has recently been shown to be the case in complex simulation modeling of the global economy, an after-the-fact theoretical explanation for what seemed obvious when it was actually happening.) Analyses of this type are now elementary, and easily supported by reams of research.

And yet, one is often hard-pressed to find this elementary understanding of sustainability’s absolute requirements in the context of sustainable development initiatives. The problem with sustainable development is that it has not been properly coupled to its actual goal: *the achievement and maintenance of sustainability in every major system on which the health, well-being, and stability of our world (human and natural) depends.*

## Reset Means Putting More Sustainability Into Sustainable Development

Because sustainability is an idealized or at least optimal system state, it can and ought to be a powerful global driver for more ambitious and accelerated change, and more honestly defined standards of achievement. Why is

*“...the practitioners of sustainable development are now called upon to speak, and act, in ways that reflect a more holistic, more principled, and much more ambitious view of what sustainability requires. And how to achieve it. And why.”*

setting ambitious goals still seen as controversial in the context of global agenda-setting? After all, even Toyota markets itself with the aid of “zero emissions” as a vision (though its car fleet is far from being zero emissions in actual fact). It is standard practice in corporate management to strive for perfection, for zero defects, for the best possible performance. The most successful companies are often distinguished by this practice, and management literature is full of such exhortations. Why is excellence and idealism not more clearly embraced and promoted by those pushing for the attainment of the world’s most urgent goals?

I propose an explanation: excellence and idealism in sustainable development lead us inevitably to a confrontation with business, government, and economics as usual. The goal of sustainability carries with it an imperative to go beyond incremental improvements, and to consider transformative changes in the deeper structures of these systems —

changes that are very likely necessary to achieve our most urgent goals.

*Professionals in the practice of sustainable development have a special ethical obligation to act as advocates for sustainability.* This ironic but all-too-necessary plea involves standing up for those system conditions that we know, via current research as well as the observations of history, to be sustainable. It also involves not shying away from the imperative of transformative change, if that is what sustainability requires.

This obligation includes, among other things, speaking out more strongly for values, and methods of valuation, that are not limited by neo-classical economics and methods of monetization. A climate-neutral economy ... a world free from hunger and poverty ... all children afforded the education and other essentials promised to them in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ... these things cannot be achieved through Clean Development Mechanisms and



other market-based instruments alone. They must also be achieved by ethical commitment, by social change, by building public understanding and willingness to sacrifice (in the sense of undergo wrenching transitions) for the greater good, the good of future generations, and the health of planetary ecosystems.

When the world's markets have failed so miserably even to deliver on a rather narrow band of materialistic promises, we cannot continue to pretend that those same, now rickety, markets can still be hitched to the wagon of sustainable development and prove adequate to make the journey.

It is not that the economics is unimportant. There remains, to be sure, a centrally important place for markets and market mechanisms in the pursuit of sustainability goals. It is simply that these kinds of instruments, and the mindsets

which can in turn mobilize a much wider array of forces for positive change. The solo voice of economics must be joined by the strong voices of social and natural science, principled political leadership,

as far as we dare let it. I believe that the theorists and especially the practitioners of sustainable development are now called upon to speak, and act, in ways that reflect a more holistic, more principled, and



idealistic citizen activism, cultural questioning of consumerist habits and values, and much more.

This change should be seen as a corrective to the earlier strategic success of the sustainability movement. In the early 1990s, I was one of the many people who urged

much more ambitious view of *what* sustainability requires. And *how* to achieve it. And *why*.

Which brings us back to the word “reset”. The origins of sustainability as a concept, and sustainable development as a practice, can be found in ground-breaking studies from decades ago, such as *The Limits to Growth* (1972) — a book which suffered the scathing attack of economists for most of its history, but which was recently lifted up by no less than the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* (as well as some of its former economic critics) as both prescient and urgently relevant. If we continue down this path, we will come to catastrophe, warned the authors of books like *Limits*, thereby earning scorn and derision and dismissal as modern “Cassandras” and “Neo-Malthusians.” But their uncompromising look at what the requirements of sustainability would be in an industrialized world, and their willingness to speak clearly about it, were matched by a second,

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behind them, have increasingly been allowed to hog that central position. And when singing solo, they sing false. Their voices lead us astray. This is part of what reset means: for sustainable development to have any chance of producing actual sustainability, the spotlight must widen to shine on a much broader array of approaches and motivations,

professional environmentalists to learn the language of economics. By framing sustainability ideas in economic and incrementalist terms, went our reasoning, the perceived relevance and acceptability of these ideas would be increased. That strategy succeeded, but the pendulum has now swung

more optimistic, and more helpful message which was largely ignored by their critics: we *can* change, and we must. But we will not change enough if we rely exclusively on the steerage of economics as currently practiced. That message is more relevant today than it has ever been.

Perhaps the word “reset” — a return to an original state, in this case the origins of our understanding of sustainable development, in terms of both systems science and social change — is the right metaphor after all. ●

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Comments to: [information@atkisson.com](mailto:information@atkisson.com)

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## Sustainable Development Knowledge Partnership (SDKP)

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## *Sustainable Development Insights*

Series Editor: Prof. Adil Najam

Boston University  
Pardee House  
67 Bay State Road  
Boston, MA 02215 USA

[pardee@bu.edu](mailto:pardee@bu.edu)  
617-358-4000 (tel.)  
617-358-4001 (fax)  
[www.bu.edu/pardee](http://www.bu.edu/pardee)

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