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## **Kyoto and the challenge of real-time policy: the nuanced reality behind sustainability**

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# Kyoto and the challenge of real-time policy

The nuanced reality behind sustainability

by Matthew Tinnemans

**Optimists have called the Kyoto Protocol a historical document while skeptics have called it inevitability. But in the end any way you look at this document it means an added dimension to political and commercial dynamics. One however which has important implications if wrongly understood or interpreted. This is truly one of the difficult sides to Kyoto and policies on sustainability, the questions are diverse and its reality all but simple, but wrong policy could maybe 'not' be overturned.**

The international stage of Kyoto and sustainability as a whole consists of many players and every player has his or her own rules and agenda. All these parties, on top of this, also use different tools and put different emphasis on the possibilities of international and national law, police force, scientists and media. Governments, multinationals, environmental organizations and local communities all have different views on 'sustainability'; and all are employing different strategies to achieve their objective. The overall picture, everybody is trying to get 'their' perfect deal on sustainability, the word 'sustainability' is as fluid as it is concrete.

This diversity distracts strangely enough from the pragmatic simplicity of the word sustainability, 'the possibility and requirements for sustaining something'. For example, the profit margin of a company or the percentage of rainforest on the planet. The government of The Netherlands for instance would see it as keeping the figures of national income and expenses balanced (and at best making some profit for future investment) while ideally organizing infrastructure and culture in accordance with the majority vote. In the case of a commercial multinational, profits and keeping investors satisfied would come closer to their pragmatic view of sustainability. Local communities would then maybe see their sustainability goal as something relating to everyday local life such as keeping the air, water and soil clean and public services (like a hospital, school and doctors) within reach. And environmental organizations would almost per definition see sustainability as relating to halting environmental degradation.



Away from this linguistic and pragmatic approach the word sustainability has however become attached to resources and environment issues. Even commercial multinationals like BP and Unilever have connected sustainability (besides human rights) with resources and environment policy. Although that the 'how' of this transition is a diverse and nuanced question

**"Even commercial multinationals like BP and Unilever have connected sustainability with resources and environment policy."**

some historical significance might be placed on the actions of the UN general assembly. The first important action being the 1972 Stockholm conference on

the Human Environment, setting the stage by outlining the basics for that which after the 1992 Rio conference became known as Agenda 21. The establishing of this basic document and the legal empowerment, through more than 172 signatures in Rio, is that which together with the Johannesburg (2002) conference has probably created the most powerful image of what sustainability is. Every signature also meant an increase in policies and documents which connected sustainability with resources and environment, further increasing the possibility of such a transition of the meaning of sustainability.

With the establishment of the Kyoto Protocol and institutes, policies and documents with the heading 'sustainable development' there however is also the danger of a distorted representation of the realities behind this 'new' sustainability. Documents such as the UN 'Agenda 21', and also the recent gauntlet of establishing sustainability policies in the commercial sector, draws an image of willingness and change. This however must be nuanced for the sake of sustainability. Even though that 'sustainability' for many has become synonymous for resource and environment policy, the reality is still marked by commercial and political pragmatism. A pragmatism which in fact is holding back any significant change in regards to sustainability in environment and resource policy. The nuance on



sustainability, which only reality seems to bring, became clear to me when I was confronted with the environmental devastation done by commercial and governmental organizations; that claimed and claim to be dedicated to sustainability.

Visiting the state Tasmania in Australia, January 2005, I was confronted with the results of a logging technique called clear-felling. I think that the image would have convinced many readers of the need for nuance when talking about sustainability. Before me I saw a patch the size of a soccer field filled

with charcoaled fragments, remainders of what was once a diverse ecosystem. This I discovered later was the residue of the commercial activities of Forestry Tasmania (the state government forest division) and Gunns Ltd. (a multinational with vast interests in the logging industry). Through research I discovered that after the logging they had used napalm to scorch the place in the hope of stimulating natural regeneration of the eucalyptus tree. They furthermore had used poison to kill straying wildlife, with the idea that the area could then regenerate itself without wildlife eating the young plants.

To clarify the diversity of sustainability somewhat one only has to look at the tools used by the Wilderness Society Australia and Gunns Ltd. The Wilderness Society Australia has mainly used public campaigns to protect the old growth of Tasmania, while Gunns Ltd. recently (on top of their pr- actions) has opted for legal action as tool for fighting the Wilderness Society actions - claiming 6.3 million in losses in the Gunns 20 case.

These examples leads one to suspect that each of the organizations involved adheres to a different view of sustainability and sustainable development. To illustrate, one can find statements of Forestry Tasmania placing emphasis on the amount of reserves they have established and the economical gains and history of logging in the area. While the Wilderness Society places emphasis on that which Forestry Tasmania are destroying and the alternatives for economical exploitation of the Styx.

Unfortunately this is not a unique Australian way of interpreting 'sustainability' for there are similarities with the Dutch Betuwelijn case. It was in that case also a government dedicated to sustainability which allowed destruction of one of the few patches of Dutch nature to build a commercial alternative

transport route - which ended up costing four times as much as the estimated budget and which according to the CPB was unnecessary. And here to it were environmental activists (seeing there 'sustainability' endangered) who squatted the houses and patches of land under threat.

Documents sometimes give a simplified image of a diverse question and topic (such as sustainability) which in reality has many nuances. But although that this 'blind spot' is generally accepted in the field of politics, it is also one of the biggest threats to the environment, the climate and eventually the

circumstances of life as we know it. Only awareness of the nuance of the reality connected to topics of policy relating to sustainability (and managers understanding their influence) can hold us back from that which some have already coined the proverbial tipping point.

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Sydney, 15 February 2005

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