

Sustainability in an age of austerity

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Perspective

My theme in this article is to examine how we in the UK, essentially a group of four nations, move towards sustainability in an age of austerity? Sustainability was fashioned in an age of prosperity. It was technically coined in the World Commission on Environment and Development's Brundtland Report of 1987, although its provenance can be traced to the first of the great UN conferences, that on the human environment, held in Stockholm in 1972.¹ Its main ideas were established in the mid 'naughties' with the publication of the UK sustainable development strategy in 2005.² Figure 1 below summarises the five basic principles attributed to sustainable development, and to which all of the governments in the UK nominally signed up.

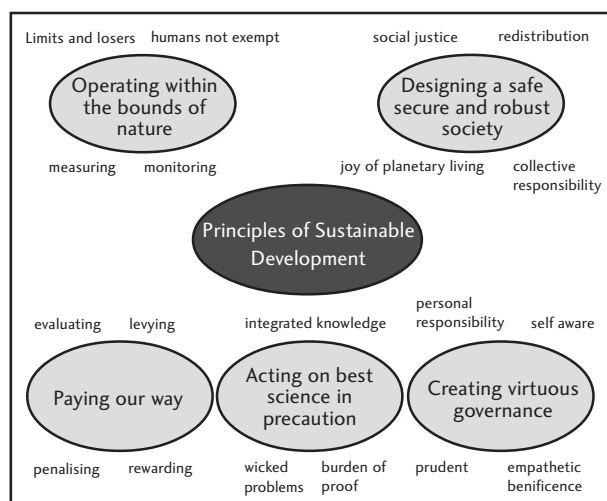


Figure 1: The essence of sustainable development principles as agreed in the UK SD strategy of 2005. Note that living within nature's limits sets up losers and gainers, and commits humans to the bondage of boundaries. Establishing a society that can derive joy in such a prospect comes second. The key to bringing all of this together lies in the creation of virtuous governance, as discussed in the text below.³ Note also the assumption that the cost of living within limits necessarily increases at least to the point when a true 'green economy' kicks in, and the otherwise uncounted costs of transgressing nature's boundaries, in the form of damage, extinction and impoverishment, are fully introduced into national economic accounts. This is the message of the report *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity*.⁴

Even in good economic times, sustainability received a hard ride in the UK. Nobody really understood the concept, which was used for almost any purpose to sell environmental good practice. And its message was unheard by the many millions who were far more concerned with their insufficient basic income, their threatened safety, their damaged health, and their lack of effective employment.

Sustainability was always promised 'around the corner' which was never reached. Its message of limits, nature's boundaries, paying your way, and sacrificing for a future which may never arrive as predicted, give it an aura of 'party pooper', hair shirt, misguided altruism, and general irrelevance to a society either in consumer glee, or in impecunious despair and struggle. The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)⁵ on which I served did its best to spread the message and create fresh perspectives in all four nations of the UK. To some extent it was successful, in that it did create a continued interest in sustainability, and constantly reminded government of its failings to deliver on its own strategy. But even the SDC languished in largely ignored reports and worthy seminars. The national mood was simply not in synchrony with its sustainability messages.

We are now paying some of the price for this misplaced exuberance. The national debt, according to the Office of National Statistics for July 2011, is officially set at £920.9 billion, equivalent to 60.6 per cent of national income. If the financial sector deficits are also included, the complete debt is estimated at £2,224 billion, 143 per cent of national income. Although enormous, this debt is overshadowed by what Greece and Italy face today. Nevertheless, in order to pay off just the recent debt caused by the financial bailouts, most households face a decade of austerity in the form of restricted pay rises, higher pension and maintenance payments, and increased consumer prices for food, fuel, transport, health care and education. According to official statistics, overall household income has already been cut by 5 per cent and may be lowered by up to 10 per cent in the coming years. The consequence is a reduction in spending, an increase in savings, and cautious price sensitivity. One might imagine that sustainability would receive an even more incomprehensible response nowadays.

1 T O'Riordan (ed) *Environmental Science for Environmental Management* (Prentice Hall New York 2000) ch 1.

2 HM Government *Securing our Future: the UK Sustainable Development Strategy* (HMSO London 2005).

3 See also T O'Riordan 'Reflections on the Pathways to Sustainability' in N Adger, A Jordan (eds) *Governing Sustainability* (Cambridge University Press Cambridge 2009) 307–328.

4 P Sukhdev and others *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity* (Earthscan Publications London 2010).

5 The Sustainable Development Commission formally closed on 11 March 2011, see www.sd-commission.org.uk.

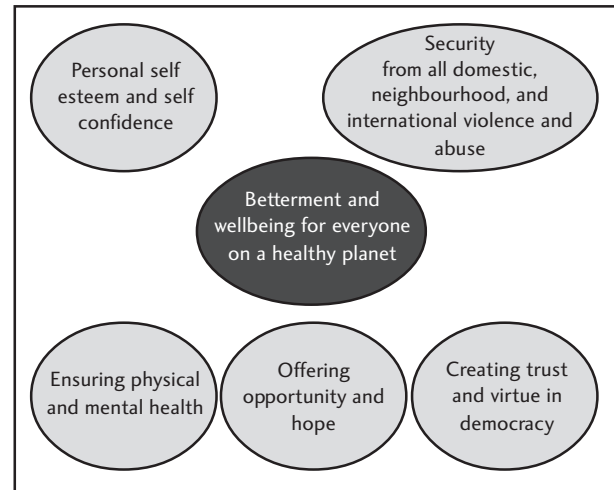
The government is ambivalent about how to handle and interpret sustainable development. Its vision was published in a document 'Mainstreaming sustainable development'⁶ and in its response to the Environmental Audit Select Committee's reports:⁷

The Coalition Government is committed to sustainable development. This means making the necessary decisions now to realise our vision of stimulating economic growth and tackling the deficit, maximising well-being and protecting our environment, without negatively impacting on the ability of future generations to do the same. These are difficult times and tough decisions need to be made. This Government believes in going beyond the short term with eyes fixed firmly on a long term horizon shift in relation to our economy, our society and the environment.⁸

This is not compatible with the current approaches to managing a supposedly 'kick-start' economy. The inherent contradictions cannot be bridged, as laid down by the Treasury and Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. Short time horizons, immediate and reliable payback periods, and reductions in public spending rather than seeking genuine and lasting value for money dominate the official economic agenda. Almost every day, there are reports of reductions in well-managed charitable programmes, sudden cuts in carbon reducing investments, and abrupt ends to imaginative pilot schemes before they have a chance to prove their worth. Sustainable development lies alongside the dreams of democracy, justice and fairness: ideals never to be abandoned, but never to be reached.

The manner in which sustainability is presented needs to change to fit the national mood of anxiety and frugality over the coming decade. It seems timely to portray a new form of social enterprise economy, where investment in social betterment and individual well-being takes on a higher purpose, and the overall value of nature's bounties is fully included in national accounts. Above all, we face a future, not experienced since the end of the last war, when our offspring may be financially worse off than their parents, with fewer jobs of a conventional kind to choose from. If this is to be the case, then sustainability needs to embrace the confidence, sense of self worth, and capacity to adapt to new forms of employment and living that all people need to experience before they can become true citizens. Citizenship is both a frame of mind and way of sharing. It conveys responsibility and virtue, with companionship and neighbourliness. All tribal creatures have to display such qualities if the group as a whole is to survive. Figure 2 offers a new perspective.

Figure 2: A more realistic vision of sustainable development for the present decade of austerity and unemployment. The key lies in redefining well-being and betterment to encompass the fundamental purpose of economic achievement, creating the opportunities for social investment, and establishing a truly cohesive society which accepts the need to maintain a habitable planet for all future generations. The notions of resilience and health, both for nature's purposes and human capacities to survive and innovate, lie at the heart of this vision.



Sustainability is now about creating a sense of trusting companionship between humans. Through this process, sustainability extends between compassionate humans treated fairly and with respect, and their natural world. Nature's limits become means of redefining moral purpose and social harmony. These limits are not boundaries so much as contemplative zones for reflection and reconsideration of our individual and collective purpose. The fresh role for government and the law is to facilitate this transformation. For government, ideally, although difficult to contemplate via current governmental practices, the qualities of responsible citizenship should extend to the running of public, private and civil affairs.

For the law, the challenge is to enable the transformation of responsibility and virtue for everyone to take place, regardless of economic or social position. There is growing interest among environmental lawyers in some kind of constitutional right to a healthy and peaceful environment,⁹ as well as some sort of legal protection for ecosystem services which are vital for human survival.¹⁰ These are all documented in the UN report edited by Pavan Sukhdev¹¹ and championed in the Defra white paper on the natural environment.¹²

Roderick opens up a debate regarding the legal right to a resilient nature. He sees this in the form of the display in Figure 3.

6 Defra 'Mainstreaming Sustainable Development: The Government's Vision and what this Means in Practice' 28 February 2011 <http://sd.defra.gov.uk/documents/mainstreaming-sustainable-development.pdf>.

7 House of Commons Environment Audit Committee *Embedding Sustainable Development across Government, after the Secretary of State's announcement on the future of the Sustainable Development Commission* (The Stationery Office Limited London 2011) www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmenvaud/504/504.pdf.

8 Note 6 p 2.

9 P Roderick 'Taking the Longer View: UK Governance Options for a Finite Planet' (report for WWF-UK and The Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development December 2010) www.fdsd.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Taking-the-longer-view-December-2010.pdf.

10 P Roderick *The Feasibility of Environmental Limits Legislation* (WWF-UK July 2011) http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/feasibility_environmental_limits_legislation.pdf.

11 Sukhdev (n 4).

12 HM Government *The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature* (The Stationery Office London 2011).

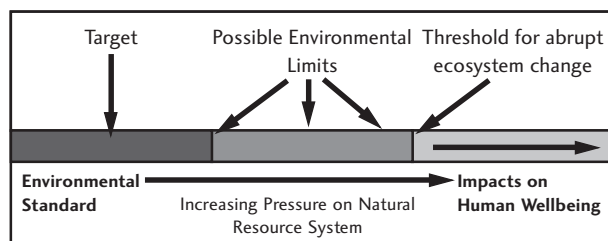


Figure 3: Peter Roderick's version of various limits for legal prescription. To quote him:¹³ "environmental limits" is a range reflected in the center cell in the above figure, beyond environmental standards and targets at the "safe" end (left cell), yet before a threshold or tipping point for possible abrupt change is reached (right cell). The term is not, at least initially, a numerical limit or other restriction or quality imposed by law on a particular activity that is damaging the environment, but rather a point in the natural world that needs to be understood in order to inform whether and where any limit should be legally placed. This is an important distinction to bear in mind – what is possible legally depends, to begin with, on the reality of the natural world'.

Roderick argues for a legacy act. This would define areas of ecosystem services considered vital for the well-being of future generations which would be designated as legacy zones. Any act likely to damage the integrity or resilience of such services would be prohibited over a defined period, with full participation among interested parties as to the appropriate metrics to adopt and safeguarding measures to put in place. This is fanciful at one level of discourse. But it is vital at another, as it fits in with the emerging thinking that functioning ecosystems are an intrinsic aspect of the economy, society and land-use care.

Roderick's proposals also resonate with the established ecological notions of 'coherence' and 'equivalent compensation'. The application of coherence means that habitat sites should be integral with overall species distribution and resilience for survival. By 'equivalent compensation' there should be no overall net loss of species integrity and composition following any developmental purpose. These two concepts lie at the heart of the conservation rules guiding the operation of the EU Habitats Directive, and championed by the Lawton enquiry¹⁴ into future wildlife protection, which underpinned the Defra natural environment white paper. What would be vital here would be the recognition in planning practice that zones of ecological value are appropriately recognised and adequately safeguarded in the design of future land and marine management. In the light of the draft guidelines for the National Planning Policy Framework,¹⁵ and despite some ambiguous drafting, such safeguards are unlikely to be put in place. Peter Roderick's ambitious ideas need to be supported and championed by UKELA.

13 Roderick (n 10) 4.

14 Prof Sir J Lawton and others 'Making Space for Nature: A Review of England's Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network' (independent review for Defra 2010) www.archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf.

15 Department for Communities and Local Government *Draft National Planning Policy Framework* (July 2011) www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/1951811.pdf.

The age of the Anthropocene

The coining of the term 'Anthropocene' is attributed to the Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen, who suggested the appellation in 2000. Crutzen argued that since the onset of the industrial revolution, the hand of humans has become dominant in shaping the planet's great chemical cycles, notably nitrogen, carbon, phosphorus, and water. A study by the Resilience Alliance published in *Nature*¹⁶ suggested that the natural rhythms of nitrogen, carbon and biodiversity generally have already outstripped the capacity of the planet to accommodate them, and that by the end of this century, this transformation could be beyond recovery. (See Figure 6 p165) The current processes of development are impoverishing the natural habitat and creating greater inequality, despite bestowing longer and healthier lives and greater financial wealth on many.

Sustainability also rears up in the form of 'tipping points'.¹⁷ These are convulsive breaks in either natural patterns or social normalities (or indeed in combination) which trigger either runaway changes, or new perspectives on circumstances that are commonly taken for granted. The melting of the polar ice caps and ice sheets is one example of the former, with possible dire consequences for inhabitants of coastal cities and fishing villages. The urban riots in London of August 2011 could well be another example of a set of unexpected stresses which lead to a wholesale re-analysis of social order and civility.

An analysis by *The Guardian* newspaper (19 August 2011) reveals that most of the convicted rioters came from deeply deprived areas. A Liverpool University urban planning lecturer, Alex Singleton, analysed *The Guardian's* preliminary data by overlaying the addresses of defendants with the poverty indicators mapped by England's Indices of Multiple Deprivation, which breaks the country into small geographical areas. He found that the majority of people who have appeared in court live in poor neighbourhoods, with 41 per cent of suspects living in one of the top 10 per cent of most deprived places in the country. The data also shows that 66 per cent of neighbourhoods where the accused live became poorer between 2007 and 2010.

The greatest danger arises where natural and human-induced tipping points combine. Climate change, water scarcity, soil instability, tribal or communal conflict and wholesale disease and forced migration of the kind currently occurring in north-east Africa are examples of combined tipping points with no immediate sustainable solution.

The age of the Anthropocene is from one perspective an age of embedded non-sustainability. It is difficult to imagine the kind of society which reflects resilience adaptability, or capabilities for accommodation and compassion, emerging through tipping points and nature's

16 J Rockstrom 'A Safe Operating Space for Humanity' (23 September 2009) 461 *Nature* 472–475 www.stockholmresilience.org/planetary-boundaries.

17 T O'Riordan, T Lenton 'Tackling Tipping Points' (2011) 18 *British Academy Review* 21–27.

breakdown, unless the tipping points become 'benign' and herald a whole new morality and governance. Yet to others, such as Mark Lynas¹⁸ and *The Economist*,¹⁹ the age of the Anthropocene is one of fresh exuberance. Lynas speaks for many in claiming that an anthropic technology lies in our hands to be used creatively, pushing at the guardrails of nature's limits. Yet even he realises that such exuberance has to be treated with caution. Here is *The Economist* on the need to be careful:

For humans to be intimately involved in many interconnected processes at a planetary scale carries huge risks. But it is possible to add to the planet's resilience, often through simple and piecemeal actions, if they are well thought through. And one of the messages of the Anthropocene is that piecemeal actions can quickly add up to planetary change.

To my mind, this technocentric enthusiasm (even though we need some of it) is precisely where sustainability becomes unstuck. It is extremely difficult to see how the necessary investment in this promised technological transformation can come about in an age of financial and fiscal restraint and where the inventiveness of the human mind is restricted only to a fortunate few, in the face of the many who cannot enter meaningful employment. I am therefore convinced that we face a decade of transition to a whole new economy of human well-being and betterment in a world of human-nature reconciliation. To this possibility I now turn.

Social investment and the Norfolk Citizenship Initiative

In this age of reduced public spending, there is an urgent need to seek to offset future costs by investing in preventive measures to avoid such costs arising. This is being tried out in Peterborough prison. Some 3000 male prisoners are receiving counselling by charitable trusts to give them the capacity and inner confidence to work creatively with society (in caring roles, in nature restoration, in their own learning skills). Normally about 60 per cent of such offenders reoffend within six months of release. Each reoffender costs society over £40,000 in custodial protection, and much more in damage to property and to victim well-being, to say nothing of the loss of value by the reoffenders themselves who readily become unemployable. The Department of Justice will pay back the £5 million invested in the charitable care programme if more than 7.5 per cent of the targeted ex-prisoners do not reoffend within a year.

This is social investment at work. The aim is to provide a basis for avoiding future public sector costs and social and personal despair by financing the betterment of those who might otherwise cause such costs to themselves or to others. The mechanism needs a kick-start from a charity

or a far-sighted government department. It needs investors who sign up to a programme of personal and social repair, thereby creating successful transformations of otherwise socially 'costly' people to a world of citizenship as defined above.

At present, Britain harbours nearly one million young people between the ages of 19 and 25 who are not in employment, education or training (NEET). This is 104,000 more than the same group last year. Many studies have shown that young people out of work for over six months find it very difficult indeed to get into regular employment to which they are suited. We are in the process of creating a 'lost generation', a group of motivated but marginalised young people who face the stigma of the now-derided benefits culture, but who cannot break through into meaningful social enterprise. They are the children of the age of austerity.

Geoff Mulgan, now of the innovation organisation NESTA,²⁰ but formerly the CEO of the Young Foundation, suggests seven criteria for successful social investment:

- the intervention is preventative in nature and sufficient funding is currently unavailable
- the intervention improves social well-being and prevents or ameliorates an undesirable outcome
- the specific impacts of the intervention can be quantified
- enough people will benefit from the intervention to enable robust measurement of impact
- possible to identify specific government stakeholders who will benefit financially
- savings for the government stakeholder(s) are greater than the costs of the intervention
- stakeholders are open to social investment bank approach²¹

Mulgan argues that for this approach to prove its success, there have to be measurable and unambiguous outcomes, strictly defined control groups for meaningful comparison, and philanthropic investors ready to risk designing schemes for which there are few, if any, precedents.

Figure 4 summarises one of the areas of social support coordinating a number of care and crime prevention agencies, which heralds the possibility of this form of social investment for those who predominated in the courts following the summer riots. This comes from the work of Geoff Mulgan and his team at NESTA. Luke Fletcher has also contributed an important analysis for building support arrangements for investing in civil society.²² His imaginative work should be championed by the Treasury, Business, and Work and Pensions Departments.

18 M Lynas *The God Species: How the Planet Can Survive the Age of Humans* (Fourth Estate Press London 2011).

19 'Welcome to the Anthropocene' *The Economist* (26 May 2011) 9.

20 <http://www.nesta.org.uk/>.

21 G Mulgan *New Ways of Financing Social Outcomes* (The Young Foundation London 2011). www.youngfoundation.org/about-us/people/general/-all/geoff-mulgan.

22 L Fletcher 'Investing in Civil Society: A Framework for a Bespoke Regulatory Regime' (Nesta London 2011).

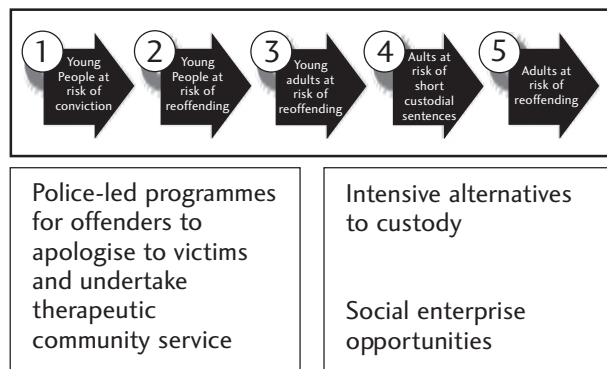


Figure 4: A possible pathway for supporting potential young offenders. The key is to create meaningful mechanisms for enabling supported young people to gain the confidence and training for social enterprise opportunities, so they can create their own entrepreneurial initiatives. The related requirement is for the three sectors, public, private and civil, to create the necessary arrangements for such enterprise to flourish.

Enter the Norfolk Citizenship Initiative (NCI). This is a scheme run in conjunction with Norwich City College, aimed at young people between the ages of 19–25. The purpose is to offer them a menu of four options: work experience, volunteering, mentoring or social enterprise. Each young person will be offered a website where they can display their skills and seek companions or support groups. Each will be channelled through an accreditation programme to enable them to show they have attended, that they have gained from their experiences, and to prove that they have met the requirements of being a Norfolk Citizen. At present the scheme is being tried out on 50 young people, with the aim of creating a basis for 250 annually in five years' time. Each cohort is encouraged to mentor the succeeding cohort, so the process of advising, guiding and monitoring becomes self-sustaining.

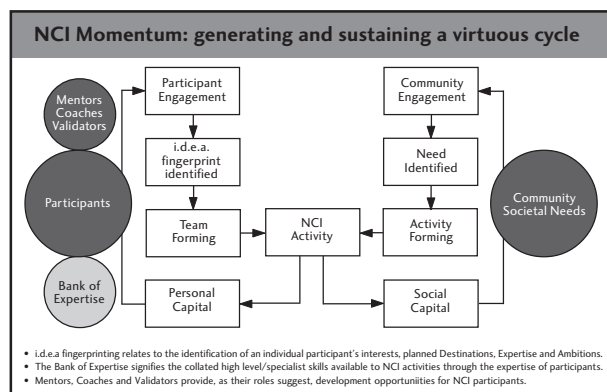


Figure 5: The key features of the Norfolk Citizenship Initiative

The key features of the Norfolk Citizenship Initiative are:

1. Online software – via the web – enables community-based activities to be matched to individual participant's needs and interests.
2. Employers, employees and individuals offer expertise and experience to create the Bank of Expertise.
3. Participants enhance their CVs by additional qualifications as well as undertaking community projects.

4. Projects developed as social enterprises, via for example community interest companies, to create new models for community development.
5. Employers provide work placements, internships, and possibly even jobs.
6. Possibility of mechanism to validate benefit claims through ESA/JSA and 'three strikes' rules.
7. Confidence raising skills in mentoring, work experience and volunteering should add to employability and versatility, as well as encourage socially constructive behaviour, so as to create 'work available' young people.

The Norfolk Citizenship Initiative seeks to run its course on the basis of social investment. Every participant is rewarded with the skills of social support, of personal responsibility, of leadership and team playing, and of self-confidence and adaptive flexibility. The Job Centres in the county accept that an accredited participant can legitimately sign up for Job Seekers' allowance, yet be largely left alone so long as the scheme is running and is effectively monitored.

This is a welcome arrangement. It would be very difficult to make the NCI work if those enrolled on the programme were constantly pressurised to find inappropriate work at the expense of taking the time to enjoy the experience of confidence building, teamwork and valuable mentoring which the NCI offers. So the capacity for young unemployed people to be somewhat ring-fenced from the benefits 'hassle' is extremely important for the success of this programme.

One outcome of the Initiative is that of creating genuine social enterprises. These are essentially small businesses run by entrepreneurs with an interest in social investment and sustainable betterment. For example, mentoring those vulnerable people who may be at risk from unwanted pregnancy, or obesity, or smoking or drug abuse may be best achieved by those who have released themselves from these distressing and unrewarding experiences, and who can act as role models for their new friends. Such enterprise can be justified on the basis of social investment, especially by health programmes and policing. This is precisely the kind of experimental opportunity which should be promoted in an age of austerity.

Similarly, there is every reason why the transition to a low-carbon economy might be speeded up by the entry of social enterprise into home insulation, replacement of inefficient heating and cooling devices and the reduction of wasteful water use (water is a carrier of carbon in its costly pumping). Such enterprise should be paid for by a carbon levy reflecting the future cost of additional amounts of carbon to the globe. Many estimates place the values of a future tonne saved at £25. So there is scope for financing social low carbon enterprise from the investment of carbon reduction credits.

This is a fine example of 'paying our way'. But in this context, the carbon levy is a social investment fund which sponsors creative and worthwhile employment for people who can work in their own deprived neighbourhoods reducing energy wastage, saving household costs and keeping property warm and cool and its inhabitants healthier. Equally possible are schemes for growing fresh and healthy food next to housing estates, coupled with cooking enterprises

to assist those who cannot or do not cook, to prepare healthy and nutritious meals as well as cutting the embedded carbon in 'food miles'. This is the kind of carbon removing and health generating social investment which can work precisely where it is most needed; in poor households where unemployment and despair, of the kind that lay behind the recent riots, is unable to be offset by technological exuberance, even though there is a place for such exuberance.

It is to be hoped that the Norfolk Citizenship Initiative will be replicated elsewhere. It may herald the beginning of a whole new approach to social investment and citizenship which could just become the outcome of the riots' tipping point. We shall see.

Sustainability in an age of well-being and betterment

Sustainability can now face a renaissance, if we have the courage to embrace what Tim Jackson terms 'the new prosperity of frugality'.²³ He points out that the notion of frugal is 'to bear good fruit'. This is, to live and work so as to be released from the bondage of consumerism for its own

sake and to address an economic world which innovates around low-carbon living, which heralds a three-day working week with shared jobs, which extols the joys of communitarianism, of street festivals, street lunches, green lungs, innovative approaches to social investment, creative mentoring, and flourishing social enterprise. This sounds terribly middle class: but actually it is the essence of being human.

Jackson is not alone in realising that growth, as is currently being demanded, will not be able to fill the jobs which are missing. Nor is such growth possible if it is to avoid the breach of nature's barriers and the progressive depreciation of the assets necessary for future generations, if their sustainable livelihoods are to be preserved. Any significant change to take place in this shift to a 'well-being sustainability' will depend on the state of the conventional economy in the coming years, the experiences of young people in getting a decent education and employment, the tolerance of parents, and the plight of the growing underclass of the disadvantaged. This framework sets the scene for both opportunity and deepening crisis. To follow the first is to embrace the emerging age of sustainable development.

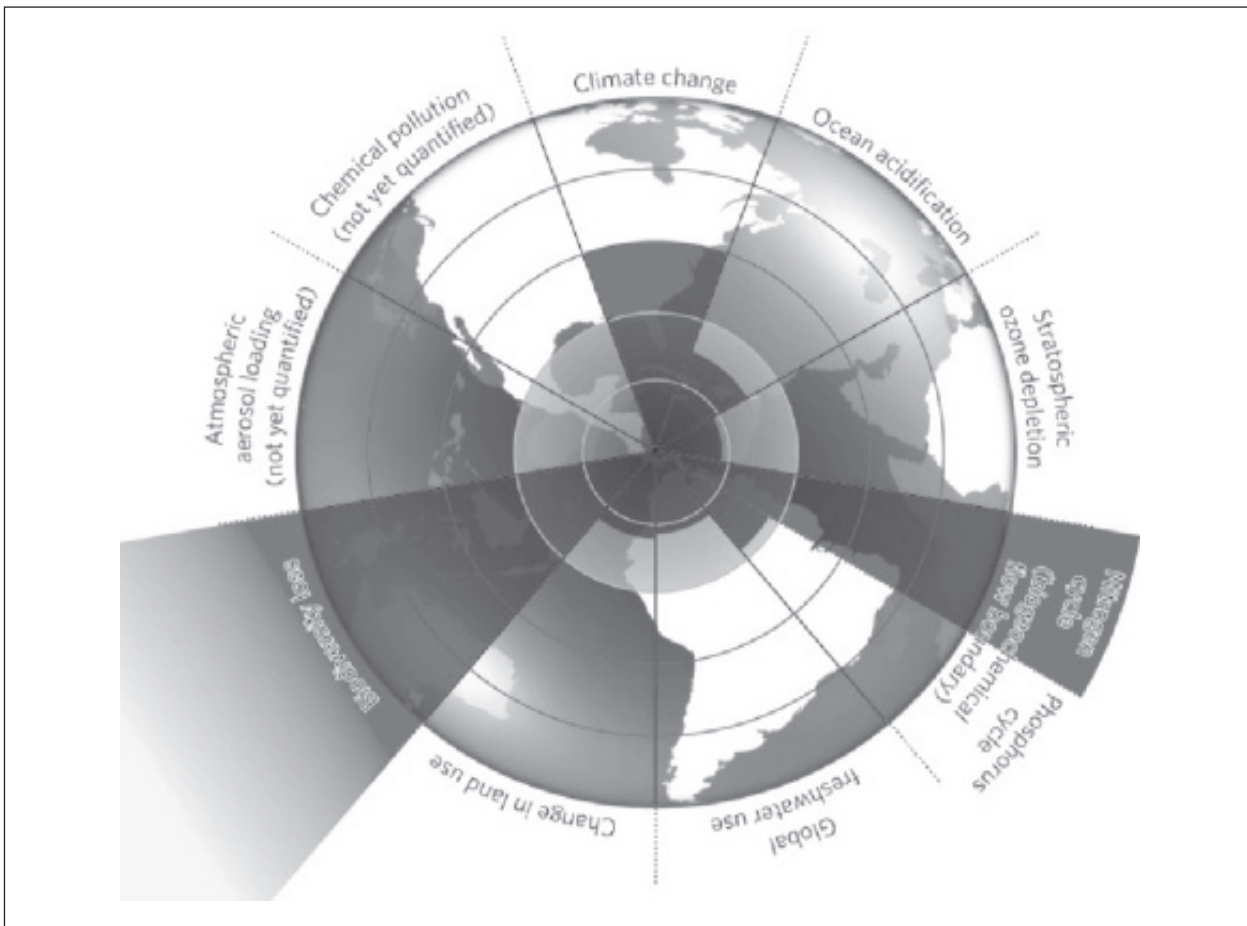


Figure 6: The twelve "wedges" of earth's limits for critical cycles of earth systems. A group of scientists calculated the likelihood of the natural rhythms being overwhelmed by the impact of humans. These estimates should be seen as indicators rather than predictions (Rockstrom et al 'A Safe Operating Space for Humanity' Nature Publishing Group 2009, www.Nature.com). But they suggest we all must be wary of our exuberant hubris.

²³ T Jackson *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (Earthscan Publications London 2011).