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# Scenarios of Sustainability

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## Why think scenarios?

**SCENARIOS ARE A RANGE OF POSSIBILITIES THAT** can lead to one or other alternative future. Strictly speaking, they are not predictions of the future.

The future is inherently unpredictable. Nothing is certain what will come out of the action of so many people, to say nothing about mediation by natural factors. To paraphrase George Soros' (or Karl Popper's) notion of reflexivity, what the future will be is influenced by what we believe the future will be and what we do to make that future happen.

But while men and women make the future (or history) they do so under conditions created by men and women before them. There's no avoiding what's given.

Everyone desires some or other sort of future but complex interactions produce outcomes not quite to anyone's liking.

Outcomes of human actions usually have many parents.

The usefulness of scenarios derives from one of the causes of unpredictability and uncertainty—the possibility of human agency to change the course of future events. There are just so many individuals and institutions to consider, each of them believing, valuing, thinking, doing different things.

If certain scenarios are positive and desirable, they can lead their advocates to act so that the desired future is more likely to be reached. If negative and unpleasant, they can lead people to act in order to avoid the unwanted consequences.

## What sustainability?

Sustainability or sustainable development, however defined, invariably includes the social, economic, and ecological dimensions. Culture usually gets subliminal attention, which should not be the case.

A view shared by this paper speaks of sustainability as, at bottom, visioning the future. And it is based on a judgment of development history from some normative (*what should be*) standpoint and values perspective.

Sustainability can only be defined retrospectively, or negatively, if you will. Meaning, that you and I don't really know what's sustainable until we find that it's not sustainable. Something may seem to be sustaining but sooner or later would turn out to be unsustainable. "Sustainable till now" is probably all we can be sure of. In other words, talk of certainty about the future is no better than saying that, as Keynes would put it, in the end we are all dead anyway.

In this sense, sustainability discourse would make more sense and might be more productive if focused more on explaining why some things sustain and endure and others don't. Our action can then be adjusted accordingly from the perspective of a commonly desired set of values, e.g., Rio Declaration, Earth Charter, or some sustainability credo.

Sustainability is also about showing more than telling. From Rio till now much of the preoccupation has been in telling what sustainability should be than in actually doing it. One compelling demand of the moment is to find out exactly what's happening, what people have been doing and why, to explain why things happen the way they do, to continue making our action consistent with shared sustainability values.



We refer now and then to our desired future as a guide to what we hold important, to check the consistency of our actions against our values, or to see if our vision of the future itself needs some changing.

This paper, thus, suggests that instead of trying to assess the practice of sustainable development on the basis of a prior theoretical definition, it proposes to deduce the definition of sustainable development from what people actually do.

This alternative approach is focused on the initial impetus, the driving force, or the “will” behind the action. It talks about the starting point of sustainable development, that is, the motivation, incentives, background, and commitment of those who champion sustainable development in practice and define it through their action.

The future is anybody’s guess and can only be caricatured in any number of scenarios, whether desirable or not.

## **Scenario 1. Development as usual**

**Theory, belief, values:** No limits to growth and knowledge to find the technology fix for every human problem. Growing the economy is the key to ending poverty and delivering development and prosperity. This task is best left to the market forces, with government ensuring a liberal policy regime. In the long run, private pursuit will realize it is to one’s self-interest that poverty does not threaten social stability and that environment gets protected.

**Main driving forces:** market fundamentalists, big finance capital, modern science, rugged liberals, so-called market socialists, global traders, transport, communication and information companies

**Complementary state policy:** Liberalization, deregulation, privatization to undo barriers to free enterprise, free movement of goods and services, to provide incentives to industry, business and finance as lead driving forces, to allow the globalization process to take its course, and to enable government to focus on service provisioning in areas of public welfare where private interests are not likely or willing to invest. Agricultural modernization oriented to global rather than local markets. Commercialization of land, massive land conversion and property development. Urbanization left to its spontaneous sprawl as individuals and families freely decide where and how to live, make a living, and trade with others. Size of family left to individual or family decision.



**Goal/vision:** trickle-down economic growth

## Scenario 2. Soft Sustainable Development

**Theory, belief, values:** There are some limits to growth. Unregulated private enterprise will grow the economy but also increase social and environmental costs. Better to account for these externalized costs while growing or do the payback once money is earned to do it. Social enterprise and corporate responsibility would rein in greedy individualist pursuit. Sharing with others and caring for the environment can be done without altering basic structures of power and influence. Evolutionary rather than revolutionary process of changing society.

**Main driving forces:** state reformers, human rights and social movements, responsible capitalists, liberals, environmentalists

**Complementary state policy:** Calibrated liberalization, selective regulation, cautious opening up to the global trading system with safety nets provisions for likely fall-outs and losers, adequate social and environmental standards imposed on enterprise in keeping with the UN summit commitments, people allowed to organize, mobilize and express ideas freely. More space for public consultations and citizen participation in governance matters. Population policy with a mix freedom of choice and state direction. Growth-center bias in urbanization.

**Goal/vision:** sustainable growth

## Scenario 3. Hard Sustainable Development

**Theory, belief, values:** Our planet is finite and this defines the limit of growth. Development must internalize social and environmental costs in the here and now, not later. Redress of social inequality and environmental payback as necessary precondition and an integral part of the development process from the start. A responsive central government promoting devolution, decentralization, local autonomy, self-government, and subsidiarity.

**Main driving forces:** red-green government, radical social activists and environmentalists, green capitalists



**Complementary state policy:** A policy of social leveling as prior condition for equal opportunity. Stricter social and environmental standards and stronger enforcement systems. Land policy allows for equitable land distribution, ecologically balanced allocation for various uses such as human settlements, production, commercial, greenspaces and environmental/biodiversity protection. Poor-led and poor-oriented poverty eradication, community-based and co-managed natural resource use and conservation. Broad based private enterprise to include enterprises of poor people, communities, cooperatives, and small and medium entrepreneurs. Population management leaning on the 'control' side. Decongestion of mega-cities and balanced development of cities and towns guided by carrying capacity principle.

**Goal/vision:** a more egalitarian and environmentally-caring society.

#### **Scenario 4. Deep green, nature and heritage preservation**

**Theory, belief, values:** Modernization is headed for disaster. Conservation of nature and built heritage is humanity's salvation. Modern science which has been driving us to the edge must be replaced by appropriate technology. The world has more than enough to satisfy everyone's needs, the problem is greed and lack of sharing and caring for others. Small is beautiful—small economies, small societies, small organizations, and so on. Big is beautiful to the extent that they express the solidarity of small self-sufficient and self-governing communities and local institutions.

**Main driving forces:** anarchists, conservationists, green federalists, green small entrepreneurs, advocates of communitarianism

Complementary state policy: **withering or gradual dissolution of central government, enabling full local autonomy**

**Goal/vision:** simple living in nature-caring communities

#### **What might happen?**

Which scenario is likely to succeed? Under what scenario would poverty get eradicated and the rich-poor divide narrowed down? Which scenario or combination of scenarios might result in more environmental care? What sort of political and social consensus would it require to happen? What trade-offs can our society accommodate and tolerate?



Consider the following caricature for illustration. If **Scenario 1** were to run its course:

The Philippines would be a more open economy than it is already. A wide variety of goods and services coming from everywhere would become accessible to anyone with money to buy. The country might transform into one global marketplace.

Global competitiveness would be cutting edge of survival. Competitive local producers and service providers might sustain, uncompetitive ones could disappear.

Trading in services would become the dominant economic activity. Old-type national industrialization might be sidelined completely as steel, chemicals, heavy machinery, cement and construction materials, etc. would be cheaper imported than produced locally. Having dismantled most restrictions, government might even offer the country as host to dirty industries citizens of developed countries reject in their own backyards. In agriculture, there would be less interest in growing, food especially, as money can be had more through trading anyway.

Industrial and agricultural workers unable to adjust to new terms and working conditions (e.g. contractualization of labor) would be out of work or hard put to sell themselves for a decent wage.

As revenues from tariffs decline, government would be hard put to impose taxes to catch and provide for the fall-outs and losers. Old-age security which by then would have been privatized is now left to individuals and families to secure by themselves.

With relative prosperity, population might not increase as fast as it used to. The expanding middle class would be driving up consumption levels and make more claims on the running of government.

Urbanization would be more rapid as modernization goes full steam. Most Filipinos would by then be city dwellers. Countryside, as we knew it, might have transformed beyond recognition. Having left this process to its liberal sprawl, government might be trapped in an urban management nightmare.

### **But what's really happening?**

In real life motives, values, wishes and agendas do mix and intersperse. None of the above scenarios is as clear-cut as it seems. And none of them can proceed without challenge. The idea might be rigid but the



action might be more flexible. It's possible that change actors may be pushing kindred scenarios at the same time or blending the positive values of each scenario in the usual eclectic fashion.

So we need to look closely at what's really happening and find out why. Here it would be appropriate to look at the progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 and related commitments because they embody the global compromise among different scenarios.

What have people and their institutions done for sustainability since the 1992 Earth Summit? What have changed from pre-Rio conditions and in which direction?

Post-summit reviews—Rio+5, Cairo+5, Copenhagen+5, Istanbul+5, and so on—have been trying to come up with a balanced picture despite worsening situations everywhere. The so-called outcome documents—usually framed around [1] assessment of progress made; [2] obstacles and constraints encountered; and [3] further initiatives and action—would seem at best a compromise of contrasting judgments. World leaders in politics, business and industry, and social movements and other institutions of civil society are hard put to come up with consensus positive assessment of where Agenda 21 is at right now. Everybody's struggling to be optimistic.

Let's take our assessment from a UNEP base proposal, for example. Around the 1992 Earth Summit, the UNEP suggested that if we were to succeed in stabilizing the global climate system each individual then living could only be entitled to a CO<sub>2</sub> emission level of 1,500 kilograms. That time an American was doing over 20,000 kilograms while a poor guy from Zaire only 180 kilograms. But more, the UNEP 1,500 kg/person norm had two assumptions: [1] no more deforestation, meaning, the then existing carbon sink stands as is; and [2] zero growth of then around 5.3 billion world inhabitants. All these suggest the problems of carrying capacity and inequality.

And yet Agenda 21 which was intended to address these problems was itself already a global compromise of sorts as much as it was considered a positive global deal. The 'global deal', meant (a) the rich will cut down on emissions (read consumption) and share (ODA and technology transfers, better terms of trade, debt relief, and so on) and (b) the poor but biodiversity-rich will protect the world's greenbelt or carbon sink. A huge part of this agenda was reduction of poverty worldwide.

From this example overall conclusion about progress ten years down the road from Rio should be obvious. The two assumptions did not



materialize, to begin with. The carbon sink continues to sink and biodiversity loss goes on despite efforts to arrest, if not reverse, the trend. World population hit 6 billion by October 1999. The world economy has now rolled into recession even as very little progress, if anything, has been made in closing the rich-poor divide. The US, for example, remains a nation accounting for only 4 percent of the world's people but consuming 44 percent of the world's resources. And more. After 2001 up to 1.3 billion people still live on \$1 dollar a day.

Why are things not working as intended and planned? An easy explanation is most intentions produce consequences not intended by anyone of the willing and interacting players. And that most plans are often proven wrong anyway. Beyond this, there are any number of contradictory explanations.

Curiously enough, the US has suggested one explanation. In the resumed second meeting of the preparatory committee (PrepCom) for the 2002 UN Conference on Financing for Development (FfD) the US official statement suggested to discard so-called boring outcome documents and instead to just do with a one-pager or two-pager political declaration of allegiance to capitalism. Patterned after the post-September 11 line of "you are either with us or against us" by President Bush, this proposed 'capitalist manifesto' suggests that countries suffering from the many ills and deprivations in this world (social instability, lawlessness, poverty, corruption and so on) have only themselves to blame for failing to bring themselves up a bit closer to the level of prosperity and stability of countries like the USA. The reason: they did not take the capitalist road or did not embrace capitalism religiously enough.

Here's one more, spun differently but pretty much along the US line. In a recent conference on poverty and growth organized by the ADB, an AusAID official asserted that poverty reduction is about growing the economy. If you don't grow, you stay poor for you got nothing to buy your security (food, housing, education, and whatnot) or your own freedom of movement. He suggested that all of ODA, money which continues to decline and has little prospects of additionality anyway, must be entirely spent on growing the economy. Forget all the crap, so the counsel goes, meaning conditionalities being piggybacked on aid, such as environment, gender, participation and the like, since they all entail costs and divert scarce money away from the main thing.

These two suggestions make capitalist sense. But how are they to be reconciled with Agenda 21 and the lack of significant progress made after ten years?



In sharp contrast, one view suggests that progress (or lack of it) in sustainable development has been enabled or hampered by three major trends. One, most social and environmental indicators of sustainable development have worsened despite significant economic growth. Two, the reason why this is happening is not because of the lack of policy attention, but the unwillingness or inability to convert policy rhetoric into concrete outcomes. Three, in sharp contrast to these depressing trends, there is an abundance of will and concrete results in the civil society domain.

Such view is echoed from a different angle by British thinker Robert Wade. He suggests that our present troubles come down to the beaten, old-fashioned question of inequality. Whatever the champions and partisans of economic growth say, there can be no denying that inequalities between countries, within nations and societies, between men and women, between generations are far from getting redressed despite policies and pronouncements to the contrary.

The mantra of adjustment and opening and linking of local economies to the globalization process have not brought about the promised benefits. Poor and developing countries continue to be saddled by growing debt burden with little hope of any significant relief. The terms of trade continue to deteriorate at the expense of the weaker economies. Meanwhile, ODA has been declining as only a few OECD DAC countries have lived up to the promised level (0.7 percent of GNP) of commitment.

The rich and non-poor in every country, whether rich or poor, have yet to give up on their high levels of consumption. It seems their lifestyles are non-negotiable. The Kyoto Protocol, already by itself too weak to effect any reversal in climate destabilization, is indication enough of how far the rich of this world are prepared to give.

Considering these contrasting views, it's back to the old debate on sustainability come Johannesburg 2002. But this time it's different because the debate would have the benefit of hindsight. Ten years of experience from Rio is enough to tell where and how things have gone wrong, or right, and why.

Hope springs eternal, so they say. Indeed, it comes from everywhere, from strange quarters even. It comes from all levels, but especially from local action here, there and everywhere. Hopefully, come September 2002 in Johannesburg, leaders of nations and international institutions will have the courage to say in all honesty that things are not working. But more, they will have to commit with passion, clarity and a strong sense of urgency to deliver the promised sustainability this time around.





## About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

