(Un)sustainable Development

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When I tell people that my field of study is in sustainable development, they look at me in a sort of admiring way. They seem to think that it holds good promise for my chances on the labor market, assuming that business as usual will embrace the newly graduated sustainable developers. I asked one of those people why he thought that I would easily find a job after graduating. He explained to me the beauty of the idea, as he perceived it: “that we can go on in the same way, for a longer period of time.”

I told him that in my view it is not possible to go on in the same way. As we speak, people in the world are already feeling the consequences of climate change. Those who are more dependent on their natural environment and who often perceive nature as something that is not only instrumental, are especially affected.

The words sustainable development carry a paradox that has been pointed out by many scholars. ‘Emerging’ economies often go through a phase of unsustainability before environmental issues get attention. The rising middle class that doesn’t want to breath in the smog of industrialization, which made them rich in the first place, will gain power and will make sure that some abatement policies will be on the agenda. In that sense development has been the cause of unsustainability in the past.

But since sustainability will always become an issue after some time, many economists who have a lot of faith in the free market model believe that the markets will automatically sort out this issue. This line of thought draws ideas from the famous Kuznets curve and follows this logic: in order to solve environmental problems, we need to create these environmental problems first. Economists use the very same Kuznets curve to justify rapid and unequal economic growth for a happy few. When the economy grows, in other words when gross domestic product (GDP) rises, the middle class will gain power and through a ‘trickle down’ principle some money will go to the poor.

Some people phrase these thoughts in a nice way and call it ‘sustainable development’. But it can never be ‘sustainable’, especially not from the viewpoint of those who think climate change is as a reality now and in the near future. Moreover, it doesn’t mean ‘development’ for the people who need it the most. Though, in most places in the world it is the status quo.

(No) Economic Growth

The Netherlands is in an economic crisis, as are the majority of western countries. Newspapers do not predict a sunny future for us, since our GDP will only grow not even one percent.[1] People have become wary of doing anything that will upset ‘the financial markets’.

Some environmentalists and environmental economists state that no economic growth is a very good thing. They see the economy and the environment as conflicting forces: export-driven systems, resource depletion, high emissions, and pollution make GDP grow but are harmful to the environment. However, it is impossible to reason that people who live in poor economic circumstances and, for example, don’t have access to high quality food, healthcare, and education are not allowed to benefit from economic growth. These people have a right to development.

Dominant neoliberal governments in Europe have instigated increasing austerity measures and therefore rising inequality. To support the economy our government cuts back on funds for education, healthcare, and the environment, all things that contribute to our social well-being. Even though it seems painfully clear that social well-being will always be subordinate to economic growth, there is a persistent belief that through the instrument of (industrial) economic growth we can increase the social well-being of the people who need it most.

GDP is the wrong way to measure social well-being, because it does not reflect social well-being or the burden its emphasis has on the environment. In export-driven systems resources are rationally depleted and the environment is left polluted. Often, this happens through shady contracts between governments and corporations, the people who actually live in the ‘community’ that is dependent on these resources are not entitled to say anything about this.

(Green) Growth

Growth does not have to be problematic if it comes naturally and if is not a fetishistic endeavor. According to the unconventional economist Tomas Sedlacek, our current system which he characterizes as the 'market democracy' can be fertile ground for growth. Growth sometimes happens, and sometimes does not happen. We should be fine either way. Sedlacek criticizes that today people reverse this logic: they consider growth as the precondition for market democracy.[2]

This fix on growth has been one of the reasons that we now welcome environmentalism on the premise that it will be good for our economy. The new green is framed in such a way that by increasing efficiency we are able to solve environmental issues, for example, reusing waste to maximize profits. The original contradiction between environmentalism and economy is solved promptly. The neoliberal green growth agenda of the current Dutch government does not mention that to them those environmental problems that cannot be turned into profitable business are simply not interesting. This could never be the basis of a righteous policy that will ensure a healthy environment for future generations and us.

Where capitalism without any 'repair measurements' would bluntly put profit before people, the mainstream sustainable development discourse focuses more and more on 'people, planet and profit', putting people on the same level of importance as profit. A truly ethical economy would have to put people over profit. Even though it is not hard to make this case from an ethical perspective, it is hard to change the mainstream economic debate into an ethical one.

Touching upon these issues briefly always greatly reduces the complexity of this globalized and increasingly complex economy. However, I want to make clear that sustainable development phrased in the wrong way is unethical and unsustainable. In what follows, I demonstrate through examples an ethical way towards sustainable development. While these projects on sustainable development wish to attain local community-oriented solutions, the solutions proposed still need to be viewed critically.

Green Economy

Being too powerless to make large changes in the global economy leads many scholars and activists to resort to local solutions. One of the reasons is that it is simply easier to realize these alternatives on a smaller scale. Environmental scientists Rob Krueger and Julian Agyeman published examples in: 'Sustainability Schizophrenia' or 'Actually Existing Sustainabilities' of US local planning offices creating existing sustainabilities without attaching the label of sustainability to them. They involved local health and environmental regulation and measures and showed the possibilities of sustainability on a local scale.

Geographers Stephen Healy and Julie Graham[3] propose a way of solving the old contradiction that sustainable development attains in their article 'Building community economies: a postcapitalist project of sustainable development' (2008). They look for alternative economic practices that take place in or 'next to' the current capitalistic market democracy. In those local economies there is room for different values. Other things are more important than maximizing surplus, efficiency, or rational behavior. These more prescient factors can include a sense of community, collaboration, interdependence, health, fairness, and clean environment. Healy and Graham consider these economies that exist next to the global economy as community economies. This term grew out of the feminist critique of economic geographer Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham on the dominantly capitalist economy.[4] The project is 'post-capitalistic' because it moves beyond the market and state.

In Healy and Graham's proposal they make the community the center of the economy, we do not have to rationally exploit our resources until we hit rock bottom, which is a very rational and rewarding thing to do in an export-driven system. On the other hand, within a community that is dependent on that resource for a longer term and which directly feels the consequences of pollution or overexploitation, it is not rational or rewarding at all. A good idea for actual sustainable development is the possibility to increase social well-being without the trickle-down principle that is at the foundation of capitalist societies. We want to be able to increase social well-being without focusing on the indirect and often industrial treadmill of the global economy. Healy and Graham propose two ways in which we can do just that:

1. Increase social well-being directly.
2. Use the surplus that is created for the good of the community and not let it drain out of the community.

That doesn't mean that these types of economies are free from the fluctuations and fake growth bubbles in the 'normal' capitalist economy. Many activists, documentary makers, and business people travel to Mondragon to see the wonder of a town that does not suffer as much from the crisis as the rest of Spain. Mondragon is a town in Baskenland where about 40 percent of the inhabitants are worker-owners in one of the numerous cooperatives that it contains. Ideally, that means that the companies are owned by the employees.[5] Most of these cooperatives are industrial, creating, for example, car parts or sports equipment. Unemployment rates are 10 percent less in Mondragon than in the rest of Spain. Nevertheless, these cooperatives depend on market capitalism for their survival. Although sales decrease, it is less damaging for them than for a regular business, because the cooperatives are governed in a democratic and social manner. In cases of severe economic weather the cooperatives also work together, so people circulate between the various cooperatives in town, or are sent back to school. As soon as damage to the environment became visible around the globe, Mondragon was able to act collectively and managed to make production meet the standards of the ISO 14000 certificate. These standards help companies minimize adverse environmental impacts, as well as meeting international standards for heath and safe production.[6]

To Healy and Graham, striving for a clean and healthy environment does not necessarily have to be the starting point in the community economies they offer as examples. The way the community economy is organized simply gives more freedom to take environmental measures, without, as they phrase it, saying "no" to the economy. They believe that within the community, community development and sustainability can be harmonized. Since the cooperatives are community-owned, it is in their own interest to care for the environment. When the production process inflicts damage or pollution on the surroundings it is not in the community's interest to keep up business as usual, as it would be in an export-driven system.

Many scholars who criticize the contradiction in the words sustainable development wish to strive for actions that are transformative: only those environmental practices that actually acknowledge that the roots of environmental problems lie in capitalist relations of exploitation of people and resources deserve attention.[7] It is often difficult to imagine how these practices could come into effect on a large scale without having to start anew. Healy and Graham, but also a growing amount of literature on the commons that I address in the next section, look for the things that are already there on a local scale and which are transformative in the sense that they do not reproduce capitalist power relations. In the growing amount of literature on the commons, critical voices point to the dangers of co-optation, or seek to embed local practices in a larger strategy. It is for this reason that I examine this literature to stress several things that in my view are lacking in Healy and Graham's article. I use the word commons in a similar sense to its use in community economies. A common, in the way I see it, is a community-governed recourse and an alternative to the state and the market. In this sense a community-owned house or the cooperatives in Mondragon can also be a common.

There is a precondition for these community economies or commons to be interesting as an alternative to capitalism; they should function in a fundamentally different way. There lies a danger in idealizing any common, however. Although I am a common-enthusiast, I think that commons should be viewed critically for them to stand any chance of being a viable alternative. Massimo De Angelis writes in his essay in *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*: 'First, we should not romanticize commons. Actual commons can be distorted, oppressive or emancipatory.'[8] But De Angelis goes on to warn activists that they should not force commons on ideologies, excluding people who do not share the exact same values, naming the example of radical social centers that didn't engage with the local community in which they operated.

However, many ideas that search for strengthening communities and sustainability are co-opted by for example urban planning agencies. Urban planning agencies look to develop sustainable communities. Being resilient communities that stand strong after the municipality build a new shopping center or cuts in welfare expenditures. These measures evoke a sense of competition between communities. Rather than being transformative, the policy exists to facilitate

the further retreat of the welfare state and the expansion of the influence of large corporations. De Angelis writes:

> The question of co-optation is a strategic field of possibilities, one that requires situated judgments based on context and scale. For example, many would argue that access by commons to markets to meet some of their needs is by definition evidence of their co-optation, while in fact it could be a contingent strategy of survival and a precondition for their reproduction.
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> One key variable in defining the outcome of this ambiguity is the wage rate, in both its 'private' and social component. A lower wage rate reduces, among other things, the ability of people to spend time and pool social resources in the commons – to engage in commoning.[8]

Healy and Graham write a counter argument in their essay *A Post-Capitalist Project of Sustainable Development*. They argue that when they talk in public about their community findings the public gives criticism and that this criticism upholds a 'capitalocentric' view.

I will focus on one of these criticisms that is especially important in the light of these discussion and that Healy and Graham name 'complementarity': 'In its complementary position, moreover, it tends to be seen as deliberately or unintentionally supplanting the state, which is the appropriate complement to the market, rightfully charged with capitalist reproduction.' They state about these critiques that: 'Even, and perhaps especially, those who are critical of economics (and politics) as usual are reluctant to let go of capitalism as the dominant or determinant force in the economy.'[9]

To me Healy and Graham's critique does not acknowledge a vital and important part in the commons discussion. Their argument focuses on the 'transactions' that exist in a capitalist system that are of a fundamentally different nature. It is crucial that they cause us to remember that what people do in their daily life is for a large part not reproducing capitalism. Work, for example caring, cleaning the house, working in a community garden, bringing soup to your neighbor, is important for our subsistence and in our lives. This work, however, is not wage labor. We have to find ways to develop, ways to increase the well-being of people without going through the harmful treadmill of industrialization. We want sustainable development! In this light the Healy and Graham's proposal is promising, but it is not enough.

First of all we should acknowledge that there exist many economies next to/underneath/in/in relation to the capitalist economy. However, dominant power relations are such that the commons can be co-opted and communities can even be in competition with one another. Viewed from the perspective of sustainability it is vital that we find solutions to dominant forces that exploit resources until they are depleted, and the surroundings are left polluted.

Second of all we should embed these commons or community economies in a larger framework. Activist and author David Bollier and human rights professor Burns H. Weston for example work out a human-rights-based approach in their essay in *The Wealth of the Commons* (2012). They propose several measures that can be taken to protect commons or common-pool resources and to strive for an altogether more healthy and just governance. I mention it here as it is an admirable attempt to embed the concept of the commons in a larger framework that acknowledges the wider and complex context in which community economies or commons take place, are born, are co-opted, provide people with subsistence, and make people less dependent on the market and state. And to stress the importance of this, I would like to end with a section from their conclusion:

> **Yet there is little doubt that we must re-imagine the role of the State and Market, and imagine alternative futures that fortify the Commons Sector. We must gird ourselves for the ambitious task of mobilizing new energies and commitments, deconstructing archaic institutions while building new ones, devising new public policies and legal initiatives, and cultivating new understandings of the environment, economics, human rights, governance, and commons.[10]**

Bollier and Weston describe the multifaceted challenges that we as commoners or partakers in 'community economies' face now and will face in the future. It is indeed an ambitious task in

which we will not shy away from the word: ‘capitalism’ whilst at the same time we will imagine alternatives that go beyond mere criticism, alternatives that are indeed as in the words of Healy and Graham: ‘post-capitalist’.

1 See ‘OESO: Nederlandse economie blijft zwak en krimpt licht’ *Volkskrant*, 19 November 2013, www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2680/Economie/article/detail/3547456/2013/11/19/OESO-Nederlandse-economie-blijft-zwak-en-krimpt-licht.dhtml. See ‘Kortetermijnraming december 2013’, CPB Economische beleidanalyse, www.cpb.nl/cijfer/kortetermijnraming-december-2013 for the latest predictions of the Central Plan Bureau (CPB).
2 Thomas Sedlack, ‘Het antwoord op de crisis komt uit Griekenland’, *tegenlicht*, 2 September 2013, http://tegenlicht.vpro.nl/afleveringen/2013-2014/griekenland.html.
3 See Julie Graham and Stephen Healy, ‘Building community economies: a postcapitalist project of sustainable development’, in *Economic Representations: Academic and Everyday*, ed. David F. Ruccio (London: Routledge, 2008).
4 See J.K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).
5 I say ‘ideally’ because there are people criticizing the romanization of Mondragon. Around 40 percent of the employees are worker-owners, meaning that a hierarchy still exists within the cooperatives. Next to that employees feel a big distance between themselves and the management. For more on this take a look at Erik Olin Wright’s *Envisioning Real Utopias* (New York: Verso, 2010), http://realutopias.org/.
6 International Organization for standardization (ISO) For more see www.iso.org/iso/home/standards/management-standards/iso14000.htm.
7 See Arturo Escobar, ‘Construction nature: Elements of a post-structuralist political ecology’, *Futures* 28, no. 4 (May 1996): pp. 325–343.
8 Massimo De Angelis, ‘Crises, Capital and Co-optation: Does Capital Need a Commons Fix?’ in *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State* (Amherst, MA: Leveller Press, 2012) ed. David Bollier and Silke Helferich, http://wealthofthecommons.org/essay/crises-capital-and-co-optation-does-capital-need-commons-fix.
9 Julie Graham and Stephen Healy, ‘Building community economies: a postcapitalist project of sustainable development’, p. 28.
10 David Bollier and Burns Weston, ‘Green Governance: Ecological Survival’, in *The Wealth of Commons*, www.wealthofthecommons.org/essay/green-governance-ecological-survival-human-rights-and-commons.