Sustainability and the World Council of Churches

The word “sustainable” has been a normal part of the English language for a long time. It has had obvious applicability to agriculture, forestry, and fishing, and other human activities that use natural resources. It means that the activity is conducted in such a way that the resource is not exhausted and its use can continue indefinitely. However, the word did not become prominent in the literature until 1975. The event that lifted it to centrality in the discussion was its use by the World Council of Churches Assembly in Nairobi.

The preoccupation of the churches had long been with issues of justice. Many of the member churches were located in Third World countries that were struggling to overcome the legacy of colonialism. They needed assistance in economic development, but they found the economic and political structures of the world arranged to benefit the First World powers. The World Council was sensitive to their concerns, and called for a “just and participatory society.” When, around 1970, the ecological crisis became a focus of attention in the First World, many in the Third World saw this as another distraction from the really urgent problems of the Third World. The World Council stood aloof from the 1992 United Nations meeting on the environment in Stockholm.

Nevertheless, many in the World Council were convinced that failure to consider the destructive impact of human actions on the natural world was unacceptable. They made their case at Nairobi. Justice and participation are certainly important, but if a society destroys its natural base so that it cannot survive, these virtues by themselves are radically insufficient. A society must live in a way that is sustainable. The Council
added “sustainable” to its slogan, which now called for a “just, participatory, and sustainable society.”

In the following seven years the Council organized meetings all over the world to discuss the meaning of “sustainability.” These discussions heightened consciousness on the part of many participants as to the destructiveness of many current practices. On the whole it was recognized that the requirement of sustainability imposes limits on economic growth and that the First World might already have exceeded those limits. There was often a strong sense that recognition of the requirements of sustainability pointed to the need to redistribute access to natural resources so that the Third World would have a chance to develop economically. There was some recognition that population increase was also a threat to sustainability, but this topic has always been difficult to discuss in the churches.

Despite seven years of emphasis on sustainability, the next World Council Assembly, in Vancouver in 1982, turned its attention to the topic of peace. Fear of war between the First and Second Worlds had long informed WCC agenda, and it returned to dominance at this session. Third World delegates saw that this directed attention away from their concerns for justice. The debates centered on peace and justice. Relations to the natural world faded from consideration. However, they were kept alive in the new slogan that emerged from this Assembly: “peace, justice, and the integrity of creation.” This led to further conferences all over the world and to less anthropocentric reflection about nature, but it removed “sustainability” from the focus of attention in the churches.

Meanwhile the term had been adopted widely in the international community. This became apparent especially at the United Nations “Earth Summit” at Rio de Janeiro
in 1992. Out of that meeting, the idea of “sustainable development” has taken hold as the overall rubric under which policy is to be formulated.

In this context, however, the implications are quite different from those drawn by the World Council of Churches. “Development” means global economic “development,” and economic development means economic growth. Instead of suggesting a society should live within limits, the term “sustainable” now calls for evading limits, making economic growth sustainable. This puts the focus on technology as the instrument through which limits can be pushed back again and again. This approach also sets aside the question of redistribution of resources, since the problems of the Third World are to be solved by overall global growth, which takes place best when the great economic actors are given free reign.

In some contexts, the quest for sustainability still functions to discourage excessive use of resources. An interest in the sustainable use of forests and oceans, for example, sometimes leads to the acknowledgment of limits and to attempts to stay within them. Unfortunately, the origin of the current use of the term in an anthropocentric context restricts its usefulness even in these cases.

**John B. Cobb, Jr., Claremont School of Theology, Emeritus**

**Further Reading**