

Evaluation Challenges

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With this second piece on Sustainable Development (SD), I would like to mainly discuss the difficulties of "evaluating" the status of SD itself.

As mentioned in the previous piece, although many people casually refer to this concept nowadays, when we pay close attention to its intricate dimensions and status of so-called sustainable development, one can realize indeed how *complicated* and at the same time *complex* this whole concept really is.

We all know that the concept of SD is something that, first of all, all humankind should strive for, i.e. it functions as part of our common goal just as what is declared and promised with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, it is extremely difficult for us to check and/or confirm the status of "sustainable development." Faced with this task of evaluating where we are toward the status of SD as our goal, we find three types of challenges.

The first is the issue of *attribution*. Because the status of SD can only be achieved in close collaboration with many stakeholders from various levels, i.e. from the community, regional, national and international, it is almost impossible to pin down, let alone quantify, the level of attribution (or *causation*), i.e. determining which actors' and whose actions deemed effective (and how much). This impairs our ability to judge which actions are indeed effective in bringing a status of SD.

The second difficulty is of temporal scale. Since the status of SD is closely related to economic, societal, and ecological equilibrium, simply put, it is beyond humankind's temporal scales. Even though the temporal scale for economic activities or wealth being generated can be measured on a quarterly basis, when we think about that of societal equilibrium, it easily requires decades or more for us to confirm any change in a society. And here, what gives us the hardest challenge in evaluating SD relates to ecological time scales. For one, it requires a hundred years to confirm a change of climate through an

increase or decrease of greenhouse gas emissions. And to a lesser extent, it requires 20 to 30 years to witness any change in climate variability.

Also, there is another important sub-dimension of the temporal scale, which is *spatial frames*. An ecological spatial frame, e.g. tropical rainforest, does not respect political or societal boundaries. It thus goes without saying that it poses a great challenge in our trying to evaluate the status within certain ecological spatial frames. And our modern history is with ample evidence that such ecological time- or spatial-frames have been blatantly ignored.

The third aspect relates to *values*, i.e. economic, societal, and environmental values. What type of value we adopt is a pivotal question when *e-evaluating* (with a literal translation being 'to give a value') the process toward achieving the status of SD. In order for us to measure the progress toward SD, we are required to put a common type of value through which we are able to compare and judge the effectiveness of our efforts toward achieving SD. The common type of value that has been overly used in our modern society has been always that of economy, i.e. monetary values. But one can easily fathom the limitations to be derived from solely relying on this dimension of value to, e.g., ethnic, religious, cultural, and ecological diversity.

With these three types of challenges in evaluating the process and the status of SD, we realize the importance of understanding what it really means to achieve SD in our society and, more importantly, for Earth itself. Going beyond the rhetoric of an elusive concept and our casual mentions of SD, it is high time that we humankind started to discuss this concept more seriously and rigorously among all engaged stakeholders.

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