

ON APPROACHES to SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Patrick Nykiel

From the Editor:

Patrick Nykiel first attended an ACKMA Conference in 2009 in Margaret River, Western Australia at the age of 15. Patrick is now studying sustainability at university and I had several conversations with him at Waitomo, regarding his thoughts and current academic views on sustainability and sustainable development.

I would like to have a nit-pick about the way Sustainability was portrayed at the Waitomo Conference. Sustainability is firstly a very lofty term which is often thrown about with little understanding and has unfortunately led to a degradation of what it implies. The traditional definition of sustainability refers to a state in which economic, environmental, and social considerations are completely satisfied in such a way as they can be maintained indefinitely. I feel it is necessary to emphasise that there is more than one approach to analysing sustainability, more than one definition, and then there is Sustainable Development.

Sustainable Development is what most people usually mean when they say Sustainability, the term was coined by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 in *'Our Common Future'* to describe an approach to development that would ensure the needs of the present were met while ensuring the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The key difference between Sustainable Development and Sustainability is essential the scale, one refers obviously to development while Sustainability itself is more of a utopian end-state/goal.

At the Waitomo Conference the buzzword and theme of the conference was Triple Bottom Line; this was I feel erroneously linked with Sustainability and the Three Spheres Model of analysis without explanation. The concept of Triple Bottom Line was proposed by Elkington in 1997 in his book *'Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business'* as a method for encouraging sustainable development in a capitalist system. The Triple Bottom line is a simple framework for analysis which asks that the social, environmental and economic costs be considered in a cost benefit analysis. I should also emphasise that there are a number of other analysis frameworks such as the Three Spheres Model which requires that the interactions between the environmental, social and economic be considered; a point that the Triple Bottom Line does not consider. My personal preferred framework is a variation on O'Connor's Tetrahedral Four Spheres Model (2006) which makes the assumption that political forces drive the interactions between the three spheres. By analysing the interactions between the three spheres in the context of the political forces which drive regulation, the likelihood

of maintaining the sustainability of the development can also be interpreted. In simpler terms the tendency for political forces to mess things up is also included in the analysis within the fourth 'P' of politics (after people, planet, and profit).

In conclusion, Sustainability is a massive concept which I have barely touched upon here with strong ties to the infinite complexities of systems thinking. Use of the Triple Bottom Line analysis framework for determining Sustainability is merely one approach of which there are a number of arguably far more thorough methods. I would also stress that defining approaches and analysis frameworks should be used when discussing the sustainability of things due to the many interpretations of approach, framework and sustainability. Above all, a project cannot be considered Sustainable simply by conducting a brief analysis using any framework model, the label can only be applied with an in depth understanding of all possible impacts and requirements for a project. A project may show elements of Sustainable Development but I know of no project, business, model, or system which is completely Sustainable.



*Patrick abseiling in Zweihohlen, Waitomo.
Photo: Sasa Kennedy*