Talking Conservation

Drie Valleyen

IS SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS AN OXYMORON?

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When we walk into the corner shop or a large retailer in our town, which claims they are a sustainable business, and were nominated, or acknowledged for sustainable actions through the year, is it just a figure of speech to get green points, so called greenwash, or are they really an environmentally sustainable business? You judge for yourself. A recent example is the article in the Daily Maverick of 21 August which reported that South Africa's Advertising Regulatory Board has found that TotalEnergies' claims of 'sustainable development' because of its partnership with South African National Parks are misleading and a violation of the Code of Advertising Practice. But it also found that the oil giant was not in violation on another front.

Sustainability is supported by three intertwined pillars: Social sustainability, Economic sustainability, and Environmental sustainability and together they are known as the "three pillars of sustainability." Theoretically, true sustainability requires even consideration of the three pillars. The one is not more important than the other and a business cannot claim to be sustainable if it neglects one of the pillars. The three pillars of sustainability are designed to provide a framework for applying a solutions-oriented approach to complicated sustainability issues.

Social Sustainability
Social sustainability is a broad concept and includes environmental justice, which occurs when, not only poor or marginalized communities, but anyone is harmed by hazardous waste, resource extraction, poor land use planning and other land uses from which they do not benefit. It includes human health, education, and resources such as clean water and sanitation which is a basic human right enshrined in our Constitution.

To effect social sustainability businesses could include focusing their efforts on employee retention instead of economic priorities. Investing in the well-being of employees will also most likely generate economic benefits for the company by increasing employee motivation. The wellbeing of employees includes health and safety training, uniforms, and decent ablution and tearoom facilities. Social sustainability is primarily supporting the local producer, which also points to economic and environmental sustainability in the sense of less travel, less packaging etc. of the produce.

Economic Sustainability
Economic sustainability includes job creation, profitability, and proper accounting of ecosystem services, which are the numerous benefits that we derive from healthy ecosystems, for optimal cost-benefit analyses. It is researched and known that high rates of employment benefit both the economy and people's social well-being through the security employment provides.

Efforts to be more environmentally sustainable can also benefit the economic sustainability of an organisation. For example, recycling valuable materials, such as electronic' and textile waste, can lower operating costs and reduce the intensity of resource extraction, transport and storage required to sustain businesses

Environmental Sustainability
Environmental sustainability focuses on the well-being of the environment. This pillar includes the business's impact on water quality, air quality, and reduction of environmental stressors, such as greenhouse gas emissions and waste generation, reduction, and management. It includes resource use, recycling, and remediation.

Our environment provides the natural resources necessary to foster economic sustainability. Companies rely on the extraction of natural resources to be economically sustainable. If resources are extracted at levels that are sustainable for the environment, then it will also provide economic sustainability through the continued availability of the resources.

How do businesses use the 3 Pillars?
When it comes to the three pillars of sustainability, the economic drivers of business are in direct conflict with both environmental sustainability and social sustainability. To achieve economic sustainability, business must produce to the detriment of both the environment and the people who depend on its resources. Thus, the concept of "sustainable growth" is fundamentally flawed. "Sustainable growth" as now commonly used by policy makers and economists is an oxymoron.

To establish this point:
At a macro level, the economic system processes, "material throughput" (intake of natural resources, output of wastes) to create human wealth and well-being. As the economy grows, throughput grows. The last century saw a 4-fold increase in global population, yet a 40-fold increase in GDP. a 16-fold increase in fossil fuel use and CO_2 emissions, a 9-fold increase in water use, and a 35-fold increase in fishery catches. The laws (not theories) of thermodynamics tell us that continuous material growth on a finite planet is biophysically unsustainable.

Evidence of stress abounds, with warning signs ranging from resource constraints such as water scarcity and soil depletion, to excess pollution overwhelming natural waste sinks, most notably CO_2 building up in the atmosphere. We are in a condition known as ecological overshoot, with the current global economy using 1.4 times the earth's capacity to regenerate what we use in a year.

If we continue like this, we will need two earths within a decade. The deficit grows each year, while the stock of natural capital shrinks. Think energy shortages, water shortages, soil degradation, food shortages, all forms of pollution and of course, climate change.

The time for bold and collective action is now. It is within our hands to do something.