

Sustainability as a “magic concept”*

Sostenibilidad como «concepto mágico»

Trond Ove Tøllefsen
Uppsala University
trond.tollefsen@teol.uu.se

doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18543/ced-64-2021pp29-52>

Recibido el 3 de febrero de 2021
Aceptado el 1 de marzo de 2021

Summary: I. Introduction.—II. Vertical Analysis. I.I. Methodological and theoretical frame. I.II. Defining magic concepts.— III. The Brundtland report as a turning point.—IV. Towards magic concept.—V. Horizontal analysis.—VI. Broadness.—VII. Normative attractiveness.—VIII. Implications of consensus.—IX. Global marketability.—X. Discussion.—XI. Conclusion.

Abstract: Sustainability studies have not been able to come up with a consensus conceptualization of “sustainability,” despite many attempts. This article asks what this conceptual confusion means. I do this through a (conceptual history) vertical analysis, and horizontal (discourse) analysis of the current use of the term. It finds that sustainability is a perfect fit for what Hupe and Pollit have called a “magic concept,” in that it is; broad, has a positive normative charge, imply consensus or at least the possibility of overcoming current conflicts, and has global marketability (2011: 643). This has both positive and negative effects: On the one hand, the popularity of the concept of sustainability has enabled an overarching discourse on the responsible use of natural resources. On the other hand, the concept is vulnerable to various strategic misuses, ranging from corporate greenwashing to Luddite passions. Based on a vertical analysis of the history of sustainability, this vagueness is not a coincidence: It was part of a political bargain at its birth, where environmental concerns were grafted onto an older discourse on “development” during the writing of the 1987 Brundtland report. Based on a horizontal analysis, this vagueness is now inherent to the concept and cannot be abandoned without losing the very magic qualities that make sustainability such a rallying point. This finding points to the conclusion that we should be cautious about how sustainability is wielded.

Keywords: Sustainability, sustainable development, development, magic concepts, conceptual history.

* The author would like to thank Ida Koivisto (Helsinki University) and James White (Ural Federal University / Tartu University) for their invaluable assistance through lively discussion and helpful feedback during the writing process.

Resumen: Estudios de sostenibilidad hasta el momento no han sido capaces de generar una definición consensuada de «sostenibilidad», a pesar de muchos intentos. Este artículo pregunta qué significa esta confusión conceptual a través de un análisis vertical (historia conceptual) y horizontal (uso contemporáneo) del término. Sostenibilidad es un buen ejemplo de lo que Hupe y Pollit han denominado un «concepto mágico», puesto que: es amplio, tiene connotaciones positivas, implica consenso o por lo menos la posibilidad de superar conflictos actuales y comerciabilidad global (2011:643). Por un lado, la sostenibilidad ha hecho posible un discurso general sobre el uso de recursos naturales. Por otro lado, se presta a una amplia gama de «mal uso» estratégico desde el greenwashing corporativo hasta las pasiones luditas. Basado en el análisis vertical, este significado difuso no es una coincidencia, sino fue parte de un compromiso político inicial, mediante el cual preocupaciones medioambientales fueron injertadas en el discurso más antiguo sobre el «desarrollo» durante la redacción del informe Brundtland de 1987. Basado en el análisis horizontal, este significado difuso es ahora inherente al concepto y no se puede abandonar sin perder esas cualidades «mágicas» que convierte «sostenibilidad» en un punto de encuentro tan importante. Esto permite concluir que debemos de tener mucho cuidado de cómo ejercer sostenibilidad.

Palabras clave: Sostenibilidad, crecimiento sostenible, crecimiento, conceptos mágicos e historia conceptual.

I. Introduction

The Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar left behind a private zoo when he died in 1993. Most of the animals were taken from his luxurious compound outside of Medellín and sold to other zoos or euthanized. For reasons that are not completely clear, four hippopotamuses were left behind. Soon after, they broke out of their enclosures and headed into the wild. Since then, they, and their numerous offspring, have thrived in the Colombian countryside.¹

With no natural predator and living in an almost ideal environment of tropical weather, grassland, rivers and lakes, their numbers have grown exponentially. There are now around hundred Colombian wild hippos, and at the current growth rate, there will be 1 000 hippos there in 2042, 10 000 in 2064. By the end of the 2080's, there will be 130 000 hippos, more than the current worldwide population.²

¹ Asher Elbein, “Pablo Escobar’s Hippos Fill a Hole Left Since Ice Age Extinctions,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2020, sec. Science, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/science/pablo-escobar-hippos.html> (Accessed February 22 2021).

² Jonathan B. Shurin *et al.*, “Ecosystem Effects of the World’s Largest Invasive Animal,” *Ecology* 101, no. 5 (2020).

It might seem that such a population explosion of a massive invasive species will lead to wide scale environmental destruction. Hippos, like other large herbivores, have a dramatic effect on their environment. They trample crops and grassland and eat seedling trees. They also have a large effect on lakes and rivers, where they cool down during hot tropical days.³ Hippo dung and hippo feet mix up the water with nutrients from the grassland around them, potentially leading to explosive algal growth and mass aquatic death, in the same way excessive farmland fertilizer in waterways does.⁴

Local conservationists have for this reason been calling for the removal of this invasive species before the number of hippos become too large to handle. They have so far not succeeded, due to the opposition by locals, who have seen their fortunes improve as the hippos became a tourist attraction, and an indifferent Colombian government.⁵ This is a classic sustainability conflict, where economic interests stand in opposition to efforts to conserve nature against the damages of an invasive species.

Recent academic research has upturned this debate, arguing that the hippos might be returning the local environment to the biological balance that existed before humans arrived in Colombia over 12 000 years ago.⁶ Most megafauna disappeared from the Americas within the first few thousand years of humans arriving, around the last ice age. The disappearance drastically changed the landscapes where the megafauna formerly dominated.⁷ According to another recent academic study, the hippos of Colombia are taking over the vacant environmental niche of a giant llama (*Hemiauchenia paradoxa*) and a semi-aquatic rhinoceros-looking *Trigonodops lopesi*, both hunted to extinction by the first humans on the continent.⁸ In other words, the hippos are helping to return the land to its condition before humans arrived, rewilding it, as its proponents call it.⁹ The debate is now raging between the “rewilders” that want the hippos to stay in

³ Keenan Stears *et al.*, “Effects of the Hippopotamus on the Chemistry and Ecology of a Changing Watershed,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 22 (May 29, 2018): E5028-37.

⁴ Stephen R. Carpenter *et al.*, “Nonpoint Pollution of Surface Waters with Phosphorus and Nitrogen,” *Ecological Applications* 8, no. 3 (1998): 559-68.

⁵ Elbein, “Pablo Escobar’s Hippos Fill a Hole Left Since Ice Age Extinctions.”

⁶ Shurin *et al.*, “Ecosystem Effects of the World’s Largest Invasive Animal.”

⁷ Christopher E. Doughty, Søren Faurby, and Jens-Christian Svenning, “The Impact of the Megafauna Extinctions on Savanna Woody Cover in South America,” *Ecography* 39, no. 2 (2016): 213-22.

⁸ Erick J. Lundgren *et al.*, “Introduced Herbivores Restore Late Pleistocene Ecological Functions,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 14 (April 7, 2020): 7871-78.

⁹ Paul Schultz Martin, *Twilight of the Mammoths: Ice Age Extinctions and the Rewilding of America*, vol. 8 (Univ of California Press, 2005).

order to return the Colombian countryside to the ecological balance it had before the arrival of humans, and traditional environmentalists that wants to remove the hippos to maintain the countryside in its current balance.

In this debate, the question of what to do about the Colombian hippos is no longer a question of sustainability versus unsustainability. It is a question of what the end goal of sustainability is. Should we be aiming to restore nature to a state as close to what it was before humans disrupted it, or should we seek to maintain nature in the state it is now, after thousands of years of human interference?

So far, the concept of sustainability has in the public debate largely been put in opposition to unsustainable practices and environmental, social and economic collapse. The concept has been increasingly successful as a rallying cry ever since the Brundtland report of 1987 brought sustainable development to the international mainstream.¹⁰ It has been so successful that one could claim that there is no real intellectual force arraigned against it any longer, as support for more sustainable practices are growing year by year.¹¹ However, its conceptual core remains elusive, according to the vast majority of academic studies on sustainability,¹² as does its end goal.

¹⁰ Gro Harlem Brundtland *et al.*, *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹¹ There is little in the sustainability literature on the public acceptance of the term. There is rather more on related issues, such as acceptance of anthropogenic climate change and the need to safeguard the environment versus economic growth. These studies shows a gradual increase in environmental consciousness from the mid 1960’s onwards, albeit with some ebbs and flows. By 2020 a majority of Americans thought safeguarding the environment was more important than focusing on economic growth. See: “Challenges in Assessing Public Opinion on Economic Growth Versus Environment: Considering European and US Data,” *Ecological Economics* 146 (April 1, 2018): 265-72, “Environmental Protection Rises on the Public’s Policy Agenda As Economic Concerns Recede,” *Pew Research Center – U.S. Politics & Policy* (blog), February 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/02/13/as-economic-concerns-recede-environmental-protection-rises-on-the-publics-policy-agenda/> (Accessed February 22, 2021); Axel Franzen, “Environmental Attitudes in International Comparison: An Analysis of the ISSP Surveys 1993 and 2000,” *Social Science Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2003): 297-308; Riley E. Dunlap, “Trends in Public Opinion toward Environmental Issues: 1965-1990,” *Society & Natural Resources* 4, no. 3 (July 1, 1991): 285-312, “Surveys Show Widening Worry on Climate Change—and Willingness to Fix It,” *Environment*, January 23, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/climate-change-awareness-polls-show-rising-concern-for-global-warming> (Accessed February 22, 2021).

¹² These are the most relevant results on the first page when searching on Google Scholar for “sustainability” and “definitions”. (Out of 1.9 million total results.): Peter Glavič and Rebeka Lukman, “Review of Sustainability Terms and Their Definitions,” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 15, no. 18 (2007): 1875-85; Karl de Fine Licht and Anna Folland, “Defining “Social Sustainability”: Towards a Sustainable Solution to the Conceptual Confusion,” *Etikk i Praksis-Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics*, no. 2 (2019): 21-39; Jeffrey L. Ramsey, “On Not Defining Sustainability,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmen-*

Why are we using the concept, then? The most obvious reason is this: much of the strength of “sustainability” comes from it being a big tent concept, which has room for a great diversity of approaches and insights, theories and definitions. Many of them are mutually exclusive.¹³ Caradonna, the most read conceptual historian on the term, sees its broadness as a positive: “... in the marketplace of ideas, breadth has been advantageous for sustainability.”¹⁴ But it should also naturally make us wary of using it, both in academic research and for practical purposes. Fuzzy concepts do not lead to analytical clarity or clear policies.

The response to this conceptual confusion is most commonly to sidestep the issue, by pointing out some of the major debates within its wide tent of meaning, such as the balance between its environmental, societal and economic aspects, or between so-called soft and hard sustainability.¹⁵ Many seek to solve the issue by coming up with their own “unifying” definitions.¹⁶ For each author doing this, the conceptual confusion increases.¹⁷

This article takes a different approach, it seeks to make the fuzziness of the concept the core characteristic under study. How does one analyze inherently fuzzy concepts? To try to find a conceptual core is impossible if there is no core. To find the limits of the concept is a lost cause if no one can agree what they are.

This article seeks to draw out some of the implications of the fuzziness of sustainability. It asks: What does the conceptual confusion on sustainability actually mean?

tal Ethics 28, no. 6 (December 1, 2015): 1075-87; D. L. Little, “Defining Sustainability in Meaningful Ways for Educators,” *Journal of Sustainability Education* 7 (2014): 1-18; “Review of Sustainability Terms and Their Definitions,” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 15, no. 18 (December 1, 2007): 1875-85; Julia E. Moore *et al.*, “Developing a Comprehensive Definition of Sustainability,” *Implementation Science* 12, no. 1 (2017): 1-8.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Jeremy L. Caradonna, *Sustainability: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

¹⁵ Caradonna, *Sustainability*.

¹⁶ Moore *et al.*, “Developing a Comprehensive Definition of Sustainability”; Peter Johnston *et al.*, “Reclaiming the Definition of Sustainability,” *Environmental Science and Pollution Research International* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 60-66; Robert Costanza and Bernard C. Patten, “Defining and Predicting Sustainability,” *Ecological Economics* 15, no. 3 (1995): 193-96; T. F. H. Allen and Thomas W. Hoekstra, “Toward a Definition of Sustainability,” *Covington, WW; DeBano, LF,(Tech. Coords.). Sustainable Ecological Systems: Implementing an Ecological Approach to Land Management. Gen. Tech. Rep. RM-247. Fort Collins, CO: US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station*, 1994, 98-107.

¹⁷ Heather M. Farley and Zachary A. Smith, *Sustainability: If It’s Everything, Is It Nothing?* (Routledge, 2020).

I.I. *Methodological and theoretical frame*

The answer to this question has two parts, based on a vertical and horizontal analysis. Vertically by analyzing both the conception history of the term from up to the Brundtland report of 1987, and the later popularity of the terms “sustainable development” versus “sustainability”. The vertical analysis is a historical analysis using secondary historical literature and select primary sources such as UN reports. In the horizontal analysis the current use of sustainability is analyzed through a discourse analysis using academic literature.

Both the history and use of “sustainability” is analyzed through the lens of Pollitt and Hupe’s “Magic Concepts”.¹⁸ With magic concepts, Pollitt and Hupe – academics studying public policy – sought to describe the common characteristics of certain immensely popular buzzwords in public policy and academia, such as “governance” and “accountability”. This article will show that “sustainability” perfectly fits the criteria for being a magic concept.¹⁹

I.II. *Defining magic concepts*

The concept of magic concepts was coined by Pollitt and Hupe,²⁰ building on work done by H. G. Frederickson on outlining common characteristics of certain “buzzwords” within public management.²¹ According to Pollitt and Hupe magic concepts all have four characteristics in common:

¹⁸ Christopher Pollitt and Peter Hupe, “Talking About Government - The Role of Magic Concepts,” *Public Management Review* 13, no. 5 (June 1, 2011): 641-58.

¹⁹ A couple of studies have pointed out that “sustainability” and “sustainable development” are magic concepts in passing, but none have laid out the case for it. See: Niki Frantz-eskaki, Shivant Jhagroe, and Michael Howlett, “Greening the State? The Framing of Sustainability in Dutch Infrastructure Governance,” *Environmental Science & Policy* 58 (April 1, 2016): 123-30; Alexander Roberto Constantijn De Haan, “Aircraft Technology’s: Contribution to Sustainable Development,” 2007.

²⁰ They developed the concept in three articles. Although they focus on different aspects, the last article is generally the one cited. Christopher Pollitt and Peter Hupe, “Talking Governance: The Role of Magic Concepts,” July 24, 2009; Peter Hupe and Christopher Pollitt, “The Magic of Good Governance,” January 29, 2010, <https://repub.eur.nl/pub/51017/> (Accessed February 22, 2021); Pollitt and Hupe, “Talking About Government.”

²¹ H. George Frederickson, “Whatever Happened to Public Administration? Governance, Governance Everywhere,” *The Oxford Handbook of Public Management*, 2005, 282-304.

1 *Breadness*. They cover huge domains, have multiple, overlapping, sometimes conflicting definitions, and connect with many other concepts. They have large scope and high valency.

2 *Normative attractiveness*. They have an overwhelmingly positive connotation; it is hard to be “against” them. Part of this is usually a sense of being “modern” and “progressive” - often replacing something which is now alleged to be out of date. (e. g. networks replace bureaucracy and / or hierarchy).

3 *Implication of consensus*. They dilute, obscure or even deny the traditional social science concerns with conflicting interests and logics (such as democracy versus efficiency, or the profit motive versus the public interest).

4 *Global marketability*. They are known by and used by many practitioners and academics – that is, they are fashionable. They feature frequently in official policy documents, the titles of reform projects and new units in both governmental and university departments. The concepts provide themes for academic conferences, subjects for seminars and titles for journal articles.²²

Pollitt and Hupe suggested that the total number of magic concepts according to this criteria were relatively limited; “performance”, “participation”, “innovation”, “governance”, “accountability” and “networks”, “transparency” (as a subsidiary concept to accountability).²³ Their frame has since become a part of the standard academic discussion around these concepts.²⁴ In the last few years, magic concepts have started to be found outside of the short list outlined by Pollitt and Hupe. Some examples are resilience,²⁵ leadership²⁶ and “co-production”.²⁷

The article is organized as follows: First it lays out the conceptual history of “sustainability” as a magic concept in its vertical analysis, then lays out the evidence of “sustainability” fitting perfectly into the magic concepts framework in the horizontal analysis. Then it discusses what it means for “sustainability” that the concept is a magic one. Finally, it will discuss what adding “sustainability”

²² Pollitt and Hupe, “Talking About Government,” 643.

²³ Gemma Carey and Eleanor Malbon, “Strange Magic: What Can the Emergence of “Magic Concepts” Tell Us about Policy Implementation?,” *Policy Design and Practice* 1, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 169-82.

²⁴ Carey and Malbon.

²⁵ A. Cabrera Flamini, K. Schwartz, and R. Kloosterman, “Incorporating Resilience in a Dutch Water Utility: Exploring the Translation of a “Magic Concept” to Everyday Practices,” *Resilient Water Services and Systems*, 2019, 95.

²⁶ Eva Knies, Christian Jacobsen, and Lars Tummens, “Leadership and Organizational Performance,” *The Routledge Companion to Leadership* (Routledge, 2016), 404-18.

²⁷ Maddalena Sorrentino, Mariafrancesca Sicilia, and Michael Howlett, *Understanding Co-Production as a New Public Governance Tool* (Taylor & Francis, 2018).

to the short list of “magic concepts” proposed by Pollitt and Hupe does to this framework. It will show how the inclusion of “sustainability” problematizes the back story Pollitt and Hupe gives to “magic concepts”: A conceptual history of “sustainability” as a magic concept raises the intriguing possibility that magic concepts might not be a product of late modernity, as the authors argue, but as a semantic strategy of policy elites stretching back much farther into the past.

II. Vertical analysis

The academic literature on magic concepts has not dealt much with the conceptual history of the concepts that have been identified as “magic”. This does not mean that there is no implied theory of the historical origins of magic concepts. According to Pollitt and Hupe, magic concepts are products of what social theorists call late modernism, because they are highly abstract, are very general, and are presented as above ideology or group interests. Finally, they “are part of a quintessentially modernist narrative of progress”, because more of the magic concept is always called for in order to make a better future.²⁸

Going beyond previous conceptual histories of “sustainability” and the previously almost ahistorical literature on magic concepts; this article pinpoints *when* “sustainability” became a magic concept, showing *how* its growth is inherently linked to the political bargains of its birth, and discussing *what* this means both for the idea of magic concepts in general and for sustainability in particular.

The conceptual history literature of “sustainability” is relatively small, but shows a great deal of agreement regarding the idea’s history. The three main writers in the field are Simon Dresner,²⁹ David Grober³⁰ and Jeremy Caradonna.³¹ According to these authors, the roots of sustainability can be found in the writings of officials and economists of the 18th and 19th Century, who worried about the depletion of forests through overlogging and the balance of the economy from population growth. I will first lay out

²⁸ Pollitt and Hupe, “Talking About Government,” 653, following the definition of James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (Yale University Press, 1998); Scott has taken his definition of modernism from the noted marxist scholar: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell, 1990).

²⁹ Simon Dresner, *The Principles of Sustainability* (Earthscan, 2008).

³⁰ Ulrich Grober, *Sustainability: A Cultural History* (Green Books Cambridge, 2012).

³¹ Caradonna, *Sustainability*; A good summary of their findings can be found Caradonna’s historiographical essay in: Jeremy L. Caradonna, ed., *Routledge Handbook of the History of Sustainability* (Routledge, 2017).

this familiar story, then discuss how seeing sustainability as a magic concept changes this perspective:

There is general agreement that sustainability as an idea had its origin in Early Modern Europe and developed gradually over the following centuries. Grober traces the origin of the word itself to the German word *Nachhaltigkeit*, used by the Saxon mining official Hans Carl von Carlowitz in his *Sylvicultura Oeconomica*.³² Carlowitz advocated for sustainable forestry practices, to secure long term supplies for the Saxon mining industry.³³ While these ideas had wide influence on European forestry, the wider debate about human society and the carrying capacity of the land was more muted over the next hundred years. With the advent of romanticism, a new appreciation for the natural beauty of the land started growing in the nineteenth century. With it came reactions to the destruction of this natural beauty. The conservationist and preservationist movements in the United States during the progressive era, 1896-1916, was undoubtedly the most influential of these reactions. During the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt (1901-09), large swathes of land in the United States were made into national parks, safe from human exploitation.³⁴ These movements were spearheaded by the social elites at the time. Among them, there were two main camps: Firstly the anthropocentric conservationist movement, that sought "sustainable use" of wilderness areas. Secondly the ecocentric preservationists, that sought to leave select wilderness areas in a pristine, untouched condition.³⁵

After the disruption and destruction of the two world wars, a new generation of environmentalists started asking searing questions about the effect of modernity on nature. They were led by anti-nuclear activists and the new movement of ecology. Leading early activists were the Barry Commoner of the Committee for Nuclear Information, and especially Rachel Carson. Her 1962 book *Silent Spring*, documenting the environmental damage done by DDT and other pesticides, is said to have kick started the postwar environmentalist movement.³⁶ This new movement moved away from the particularist focus of earlier environmentalists, towards a global ecological vision. To these environmental activists, the

³² Ulrich Grober, "Hans Carl von Carlowitz: Der Erfinder Der Nachhaltigkeit," *Er-scheint In* 300 (1999): 1645-1714; Hans Carl Von Carlowitz, *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* (Leipzig, 1713).

³³ Grober, *Sustainability: A Cultural History*.

³⁴ Dresner, *The Principles of Sustainability*.

³⁵ Charlotte Epstein, "The Making of Global Environmental Norms: Endangered Species Protection," *Global Environmental Politics* 6, no. 2 (2006): 32-54.

³⁶ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

world was no longer divided into the human and the natural domain. They saw humanity and nature as interconnected, as the hippie movement of the late sixties preached.³⁷

These concerns became mainstream at the end of the 1960’s, as counterculture movements in the United States and Western Europe went mainstream.³⁸ Among these groups were the Club of Rome, an elite gathering of industrialists, government officials and leaders of international organisations. The group had, with the help of early computer science, run simulations on what would happen to the world if human population growth and resource extraction continued unabated. The result was an inevitable collapse, according to their landmark report, *The Limits to Growth*.³⁹

At the same time, the United Nations were starting to take up the issue of global sustainability. Svante Oden from Uppsala University had discovered in the late 1960’s that Swedish forests were slowly dying from acid rain, pollution from industrial production brought along with the winds from the large industrial powers of Europe.⁴⁰ UN General Assembly Resolution 2398 from 1968 was the first to take up the issue, and was the start of the leading role the United Nations have taken in global sustainability. The resolution itself led to the first UN conference on the environment, the Stockholm Conference of 1972.⁴¹ The conference laid bare severe differences on how to attain global sustainability: Among these, developing nations resented the call from industrialized nations to limit population growth in order to safeguard the health and well being of rich westerners. They also worried that any global drive to reduce pollution would inevitably hinder their own efforts to lift their own populations out of poverty.⁴²

³⁷ Erik W. Johnson and Pierce Greenberg, “The US Environmental Movement of the 1960s and 1970s - Building Frameworks of Sustainability,” in *Routledge Handbook of the History of Sustainability* (Routledge, 2017), 137-50.

³⁸ Blake Slonecker, “The Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s”, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History, 28 June 2017; Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* (University of Chicago Press, 2003); Sabine Von Dirke, *All Power to the Imagination!: The West German Counterculture from the Student Movement to the Greens* (U of Nebraska Press, 1997).

³⁹ Donella H. Meadows *et al.*, *The Limits to Growth* (Universe Books, 1972).

⁴⁰ Peringe Grennfelt *et al.*, “Acid Rain and Air Pollution: 50 Years of Progress in Environmental Science and Policy”, *Ambio* 49, no. 4 (1 April 2020): 849-64, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-019-01244-4>.

⁴¹ Grober, *Sustainability: A Cultural History*, 161-66.

⁴² Dilys Roe, “The Origins and Evolution of the Conservation-Poverty Debate: A Review of Key Literature, Events and Policy Processes”, *Oryx* 42, no. 4 (October 2008): 491-503, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605308002032>.

The stalemate at the conference did not mean that the United Nations stopped working with the issue. As a direct consequence of the conference, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) was founded.⁴³ All through the seventies and up the mid 1980's, UN planners and representatives churned out draft papers and held conferences, while the world around them changed. The western, capitalist first world went through a series of right-wing reforms and electoral victories. In the United States former western movies actor Ronald Reagan won the presidential elections, and promptly took down the solar panels his predecessor had put on the White House roof.⁴⁴ In the Communist second world, the economy was stagnating and militarizing, as their population turned more and more sceptical of the vision of a coming workers utopia. In the poor third world nations, a series of wars and climate catastrophes wreaked havoc, especially in Africa. Millions of people starved to death, as the rains stopped in the Sahel, and the Sahara desert marched southwards. Acid rain was now killing waste swathes of European forests, and there was increasing worry about a growing hole in the protective ozone layer above the South Pole, created by indiscriminate usage of CFC gasses by industrialized nations.

It was during this time that sustainability as we know it now was shaped among UNEP planners and scientists. The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, led by the Norwegian physician and politician Gro Harlem Brundtland, sought to find a middle ground between calls for conservation of the environment and calls for economic growth. It was in many way a rhetorical sleight-of-hand: They claimed that far from being opposites, the two sides were mutually supportive, if the goal was sustainable growth. There can be no sustainable economic or societal developments, without them also being ecologically sustainable, because human societies are part of nature. This can not be done at the level of nation states, but must be dealt with globally, because all human societies share the same world. We all need to cooperate on a global scale to accomplish sustainable development. From these preconditions came the most cited definition of sustainable development and sustainability: “... development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Stanley Johnson, *UNEP the First 40 Years* (UNEP, 2012).

⁴⁴ Jeremy L. Caradonna, *Sustainability: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 139.

⁴⁵ Brundtland *et al.*, *Our Common Future*.

III. The Brundtland report as a turning point

The Brundtland report was what made “sustainability” (and sustainable development) into a magic concept. Von Carlowitz’s sustainability had very few of the constituent qualities of a magic concept. Its definition was narrow and precise, and should probably be translated as “sustained yield”, not as “sustainability, as Grober and Caradonna does. According to the famed political scientist James C Scott, what von Carlowitz created was not “sustainability” at all, but German scientific forestry, of monoculture.⁴⁶ The monoculture of German forestry science would devastate German and later global old growth forests, and replace them with regimented rows of quick growing and valuable imported trees. As the diverse ecology of the old forests were lost, this would often lead to severe local environmental damage.⁴⁷ When looking at von Carlowitz and his view of sustainable forestry, it seems very distant indeed from the current fuzzy concept of sustainability. His idea of sustainability was clearly not a magic concept, as it was narrow in meaning, clearly defined, and did not imply consensus.

Clearly the debate between conservationists and preservationists in the antebellum United States came closer to current debates of sustainability. Their definitions were fuzzier, and it was seen as not only a local but a global problem. On the other hand, conservationist versus preservationist ideas never had the same implications of consensus or broadness as Pollitt and Hupe’s magic concepts.

The post-war ecological movement encompassed a normatively attractive and marketable concept, but it was never as conceptually fuzzy as sustainability is nowadays, nor did it lay claim to consensus to the same degree. Ecology was self-consciously revolutionary, connecting itself to counter-culture, not UN special commissions.

IV. Towards a Magic Concept

If “sustainability” indeed is a magic concept, it means that we cannot, as the conceptual history literature on it so far has done, only look for its roots in the environmental field. To work its magic, the concept needs to be attractive also in other societal realms and disciplines. As Pollitt and Hupe pointed out “... the added value magic concepts ... provide is precisely the

⁴⁶ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 15-22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

value attributed to them.”⁴⁸ We therefore need to look for the roots of “sustainability” in all three spheres of “sustainable development” raised by the Brundtland report; not only the environmental but also the social and economic. One easy way to start is with the increasingly unfashionable part of “sustainability”, “development.”

Development, at least as it was seen in the first few decades after the Second World War, shares many of the characteristics of magic concepts that we discuss in this article.⁴⁹ It was a doctrine that grew out of the lessons learned during the rebuilding of Europe after the War, focusing on strengthening the economy to accomplish high standards of living, full employment and social progress the world over. It was one of the few things both communist and capitalist countries could agree was needed during the first few decades of the Cold War, although they disagreed somewhat on which methods to use to accomplish it.

Since the heady days of the Cold War, the global marketability of the development paradigm has faded significantly. Partly because it was widely seen as having failed at its core goal of reducing poverty.⁵⁰ Secondly because it came under sustained attack from both the right and the left, both politically and intellectually, from the 1970’s onwards.

Part of this critique was coming from environmentalists. According to one of its supporters in 1990, the development paradigm was under sustained attack by “culturalist” and “environmentalist” critique. ... The fact is that this new paradigm not only criticizes development methods, but questions the very goals and definitions of development as hitherto pursued by all parties.” This paradigm, according to the author, became prominent with the publications of *Limits of Growth*, by the Club of Rome in 1972.⁵¹

In its modern form “development” found its expression in a speech by US president Truman in 1949, seeking to “lift up” the recently independent poor countries of the world, with American assistance. This would be the start of decades of focus on “developing” former European colonies into facsimiles of their benefactors, be they communist or capitalist. This was done by economic aid and expert advice on

⁴⁸ Hupe and Pollitt, 24.

⁴⁹ Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (Zed Books, 2002).

⁵⁰ For a good overview of the conceptual history literature on development, see: Joseph Morgan Hodge, “Writing the History of Development (Part 1: The First Wave)”, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 6, no. 3 (2015): 429-63.

⁵¹ Adrian Atkinson, “Development Redefined,” *Third World Planning Review* 13, no. 4 (1990).

modernizing society and the economy. Large scale attempts at scientific forestry, fishery and industrial production were made. The results were not great. Industries failed, the oceans were fished clean, agricultural yields fell, and the economy of the new states kept shrinking. By the mid 1980’s scepticism was setting in, as millions in Africa starved and died and the Sahara marched southwards with alarming speed. This had only been partially addressed in dominant development doctrines. Only in the late 1970’s did Western focus on development change from focusing only on increasing economic growth to also focusing on redistribution and meeting the basic needs of the poorest. By this point, the debt burden of third world countries was so high, from failed economic reforms and corruption, that they had to endure “painful stabilization and structural adjustment policies.” The Mexican financial crisis of 1982, for instance, was so severe that it threatened “the survival of the international financial system.”⁵²

From this angle, the Brundtland report can be seen as not only seeking to make environmental sustainability palatable to poorer member states in the United Nations. It was also a way to move away from the overarching focus on failed notions of “development” that had dominated United Nations policy making, as well as Western and Communist foreign aid, since the start of the Cold War. It did so by consciously mixing cards. “Sustainable growth” was part of the development doctrine of the Western world from the 1950’s on, and denoted stable economic growth.⁵³ It also found a place in the Brundtland report, where it was seen as one of the goals of “sustainable development”.⁵⁴ According to Gilbert Rist, “sustainable development” was merely the last step in a constantly changing reimagination of “development”, from Trumans conception, to “endogenous development” to “human development” to “social development” before becoming sustainable with the Brundtland report:

The height of absurdity was reached when the Brundtland Commission (WCED 1987) tried to reconcile the contradictory requirements to be met in order to protect the environment [...] and, at the same time, to ensure the pursuit of economic growth that was still considered a condition for general happiness. This impossible task resulted in the coining of the catchy phrase “sustainable development”, which immediately achieved star status. Unfortunately it only meant exchanging one buzzword for another. “Sustainable development

⁵² Erik Thorbecke, “The Evolution of the Development Doctrine, 1950-2005”, *Advancing Development* (Palgrave Macmillan 2007), 15.

⁵³ Thorbecke, “The Evolution of the Development Doctrine, 1950-2005”.

⁵⁴ Caradonna, *Sustainability*, 153.

became a global slogan that all could readily endorse, and one that was sufficiently vague to allow different, often incompatible interpretations” [...]“Sustainable development” is nothing but an oxymoron, a rhetorical figure that joins together two opposites such as “capitalism with a human face” or “humanitarian intervention”.⁵⁵

If “development” is a magic concept, along with “sustainable development” and “sustainability”, the conceptual history of “sustainability” changes markedly. We should be looking at the ebb and flow in the use of magic concepts among policy elites, instead of tracing the origins of literature on environmental sustainability. As we shall see below in the horizontal analysis, the shift between “development”, “sustainable development” and “sustainability” in usage are still ongoing today.

V. Horizontal analysis: “sustainability” as a magic concept today

In the vertical analysis I explored the origins of “sustainability”, from the conceptual perspective of magic concepts. I showed that magic concepts as a conceptual tool helps pinpoint exactly when “sustainability” as we understand it today came to be, as opposed to similar sounding but narrower concepts. From the perspective of UN policy makers, it should rightfully be seen as a conceptual chain moving away from the ring of “development”, through the chain link of “sustainable development” to the new ring of “sustainability”. This mirrored the changing interests of global elites, shifting from the Cold War focus on economic growth in the developing countries to a new focus on stabilizing the environment, society and economy.

This does not mean that there has been no important changes in the history of “sustainability” since the Brundtland report. Many books have been written about the policy initiatives, global, regional and national sustainability legislation and agreements, as well as the academic debates.⁵⁶ It is nevertheless my claim that all these different developments still exists within the very wide frames of the Brundtland report. A general outline of this wideness will be given in the following horizontal analysis, which will strengthen my claim that “sustainability” (and its synonym “sustainable development”) is a magic concept.

⁵⁵ Gilbert Rist, “Development as a buzzword”, Cornwall, Eade, eds., *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords* (Oxfam GB, 2010), 21.

⁵⁶ The most up to date overview is: Jeremy L. Caradonna, ed., *Routledge Handbook of the History of Sustainability* (Routledge, 2017).

The first, and most fundamental of the characteristics of magic concepts are their broadness. One could see the broadness of magic concepts as the foundation of their magic, while their normative attractiveness, consensus-making and fashionability as being the superstructure. I will therefore spend most of this horizontal analysis on discussing the broadness of the concept, especially on its valency, or its tendency to conjoin with other (magic) concepts.

VI. Broadness

For “sustainability” to be defined as broad, according to Pollitt and Hupe, it needs to have multiple, often contradictory definitions, it needs to be used in many different settings, and it needs to effortlessly connect to a large number of other concepts. “They have large scope and high valency,” according to Pollitt and Hupe.⁵⁷ By broadness, Pollitt and Hupe refer to it having multiple, often contradictory definitions, diverse use, and tendency to be connected with other broad concepts.

A common theme in the academic literature on “sustainability” is the impossibility of coming up with an agreed-upon definition of it. The lack of a common definition is not from lack of trying. There have been literally hundreds of attempts to define “sustainability” or its close relative “sustainable development”.⁵⁸ The conceptual confusion has led to a significant number of academic works not even including a definition of the term.⁵⁹

It is probably easier to conceptualize “sustainability” by focusing on the core debates about what exactly “sustainability” entails. The two most important ones are: the nature of the tripartite relationship of sustainability:

⁵⁷ Pollitt and Hupe, “Talking About Government,” 643.

⁵⁸ Walter Alfredo Salas-Zapata and Sara Milena Ortiz-Muñoz, “Analysis of Meanings of the Concept of Sustainability,” *Sustainable Development* 27, no. 1 (2019): 153-61; Ivan Bolis, Sandra N. Morioka, and Laerte I. Szelwar, “When Sustainable Development Risks Losing Its Meaning. Delimiting the Concept with a Comprehensive Literature Review and a Conceptual Model,” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 83 (2014): 7-20; Glavič and Lukman, “Review of Sustainability Terms and Their Definitions”; Desta Mebratu, “Sustainability and Sustainable Development: Historical and Conceptual Review,” *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* 18, no. 6 (1998): 493-520.

⁵⁹ One study found that 91,3% of their selection did not define sustainability: Salas-Zapata and Ortiz-Muñoz, “Analysis of Meanings of the Concept of Sustainability,”; Similar findings were reported by: Remigijus Ciegis, Jolita Ramanauskienė, and Bronislovas Martinkus, “The Concept of Sustainable Development and Its Use for Sustainability Scenarios,” *Engineering Economics* 62, no. 2 (2009).

the ecological, the economic and the social / equity aspects.⁶⁰ The second one is about the debate between proponents for weak or strong “sustainability”, a contentious environmental economics issue.⁶¹

If there is a core definition of “sustainability it is the Brundtland report’s: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁶² Unfortunately it has proven very difficult to use this definition for anything practical. The central problem is that we simply can not know the capabilities and needs of future generations. The result has been a plethora of different, often mutually exclusive clarifications.⁶³ There is a thriving cottage industry of new attempts at coming up with a unifying definition, or workable conceptualizations and operationalizations of the concept in the academic and grey literature.⁶⁴

When it comes to policy outcomes, the results are also extremely diverse and sometimes mutually exclusive. An example is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, set out in 2015, with a planned finishing date of 2030.⁶⁵ Out of 17 different sustainable development goals, three focus on economic growth, eight on societal sustainability, three on making human environments more sustainable, and only four directly focus on global environmental sustainability. As a result of the tripartite focus of sustainability (societal, economic, environmental) Goodland and Daly has noted that “sustainability” is turning into a “... landfill dump for everyone’s environmental and social wishlists”.⁶⁶

Magic concepts, like atoms with high valency, likes to clump together with other broad concepts. Sustainability is no exception. In its original conception, it already connected with four other concepts: “Sustainable development”; and sustainable environment, society and economy. A

⁶⁰ Ben Purvis, Yong Mao, and Darren Robinson, “Three Pillars of Sustainability: In Search of Conceptual Origins”, *Sustainability Science* 14, no. 3 (1 May 2019): 681-95, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0627-5>.

⁶¹ Robert Ayres, Jeroen van den Berrgh, and John Gowdy, “Strong versus Weak Sustainability: Economics, Natural Sciences, and Consilience”, *Environmental Ethics*, 1 May 2001, <https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics200123225>.

⁶² Brundtland *et al.*, *Our Common Future*.

⁶³ Julian D. Marshall and Michael W. Toffel, “Framing the Elusive Concept of Sustainability: A Sustainability Hierarchy,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 39, no. 3 (February 1, 2005): 673.

⁶⁴ Niels Faber, René Jorna, and Jo Van Engelen, “The Sustainability of ‘Sustainability’—A Study into the Conceptual Foundations of the Notion of ‘Sustainability,’” *Journal of Environmental Assessment Policy and Management* 7, no. No. 1 (2005): 1-33.

⁶⁵ United Nations General Assembly, “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” 2015.

⁶⁶ Caradonna, *Sustainability*, 137.

search on Google Scholar also shows a very strong connection between “sustainability” and the other magic concepts outlined by Pollitt and Hupe. They were mentioned in between 14 and 73 percent of all academic articles discussing “sustainability”.⁶⁷

An example of this confusion is the debate about the differences between “sustainability and “sustainable development”. Everyone agrees that sustainability is closely related to sustainable development, the term made famous by the Brundland report of 1987.⁶⁸ How *exactly* they relate is much more contentious: Are the two terms functionally the same?⁶⁹ Is “sustainability” the new term for “sustainable development”?⁷⁰ Is “sustainable development” an oxymoron, and stands in opposition to real “sustainability”?⁷¹ Or is “sustainability” a condition, and “sustainable development” is the means for us to reach it?⁷² From the perspective of magic concepts, this debate is itself a sign of the broadness in general and valency of both terms. For this article’s purpose, both the two terms and the debate about them are seen as part of the overall conceptual frame of “sustainability”.

While Google Ngram⁷³ is an imprecise measuring stick for the popularity of a concept, it does give us a glimpse into the historical use of concepts. A search on it shows that “development” peaked in English language literature around 1977, at the same time as both “sustainability” “sustainable development” took off. The two latter terms were equally popular in the 1990’s, but “sustainable development” peaked around 2000, and is now slowly declining. “Sustainability” overtook “sustainable development” in 1995, and has grown steadily ever since. As of 2019 (the last year of Google Ngram data) “sustainability” was used three times as often as “sustainable development”.

⁶⁷ A search was done on Google Scholar (scholar.google.com, accessed 5.1.21) where “sustainability” was paired with “performance” (the highest), then “participation”, “innovation”, “governance”, “accountability”, “networks” and “transparency” (the lowest). The search also revealed the immensity of the academic literature on “sustainability”. With about 4,3 million hits, it was more popular than “democracy”. Given that research on democracy has been going on since antiquity, these are impressive numbers indeed.

⁶⁸ Brundtland *et al.*, *Our Common Future*.

⁶⁹ Nearly 60 percent of academic works sampled used the terms as synonyms, according to Salas-Zapata and Ortiz-Muñoz, “Analysis of Meanings of the Concept of Sustainability.”

⁷⁰ Mark A. White, “Sustainability: I Know It When I See It,” *Ecological Economics*, 86 (February, 2013): 213-17.

⁷¹ Michael Redclift, “Sustainable Development (1987-2005): An Oxymoron Comes of Age,” *Sustainable Development* 13, no. 4 (2005): 212-27.

⁷² Graeme D. Buchan, Ian F. Spellerberg, and Winfried EH Blum, “Education for Sustainability,” *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 2007.

⁷³ “Google Books Ngram Viewer,” accessed January 21, 2021, <https://books.google.com/ngrams/> (Accessed February 22, 2021)..

Why “sustainable development” has faded as a synonym to “sustainability” is somewhat unclear. Despite an intense academic debate about the differences between the terms, there are few real conclusions from the debate, and they continue to be used interchangeably. From the perspective of magic concepts, however, a simple hypothesis is readily available. If “sustainable development” is a composite of the two magic concepts “sustainability” and “development”, it would make sense that if one of its component terms falls out of fashion, it will also. The gradual decline of “sustainable development” should therefore be seen as a result of the gradual decline of the “development” doctrine from the 1990’s onwards, a time when foreign aid from the western world fell, while contradictory economic growth among developing countries grew.

The gradual fading of the term “sustainable development” in relation to “sustainability” clearly isn’t related to a change of definitions. “Sustainability” has continued to maintain the importance of all three dimensions of sustainable development raised by the Brundtland report. One could hypothesise that when “development” lost its normative attractiveness and global marketability from the 1990’s onwards, it started being seen as unfashionable, and was increasingly dropped from talk about sustainability. This was merely a marketing change, not a change of meaning. From a conceptual perspective, they should be considered synonyms.

One enticing hint at how such endeavors to influence global policies through semantic shifts from “development”, through “sustainable development” to “sustainability” might not be an altogether passive process comes from the foreword of a 1990 book by the think tank IIED (The International Institute for Environment and Development), a leading which advocated for the creation of a new value system, “which enshrines the principle of sustainability over generations.”:

Sustainable development can mean different things to different people, but it still represents a most productive way of thinking. [...] For it to be understood and made fully effective, we have to look at certain cherished assumptions and habits of thought, and create new and more realistic values. That means: We need to recast our vocabulary. Words are not only a means of expression but also the building blocks of thought. The instruments of economic analysis are blunt and rusty. Such words as “growth”, “development”, [etc] are used in such a misleading way that they are more than ripe for redefinition.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Foreword by Sir Crispin Tickell. Johan Holmberg, ed., *Making Development Sustainable: Redefining Institutions Policy And Economics* (Island Press, 1992), 11-12.

VII. Normative attractiveness

By normative attractiveness, or normative charge as they also call it, Pollitt and Hupe refers to how magic concepts tend to tell, explicitly or implicitly, how things ought to be. These positive connotations are usually framed in such a way that it is difficult to be against them, for instance by claiming to be replacing outmoded modes of thinking, and that to be against the concept therefore means not being modern or progressive.⁷⁵

Sustainability clearly is normatively attractive. In the face of growing evidence of a climate catastrophe, “sustainability” is the answer everyone (that has accepted the overwhelming scientific evidence for anthropogenic climate change) is looking for. It is very difficult to be against it without throwing out a century of climate and weather science, and without butting up against core principles of biology and physics. The opposition of “sustainability”, according to its adherents is “collapse.” We simply cannot continue along the track we are going without exhausting nature around us and causing societal collapse. Given the extremely loose and all-encompassing nature of the concept of “sustainability” virtually all efforts towards creating a more sustainable environment, society or economy is for this reason seen, at least by some, as being in opposition to “collapse.”

VIII. Implications of consensus

Unlike older public management concepts, magic concepts claims to overcome earlier policy conflicts. According to Pollitt and Hupe, most traditional concepts within public management (the ground from whence “sustainability” and its twin concept “sustainable development” sprouted) have a certain proverbial commonsense quality, that nevertheless can be countered by an equally common sense alternative.⁷⁶ Magic concepts do not share this quality. They tend to claim to overcome such conflicts of interest. They either do not admit any alternatives, or only admit alternatives so manifestly bad that no sane person would choose them.

Both because of this broadness of use, applications and connections, as well as its normative attractiveness sustainability also has a strong appearance of consensus. “Sustainability” implies consensus for similar reasons to why it is so normatively attractive: By placing itself in

⁷⁵ Pollitt and Hupe, “Talking About Government,” 643.

⁷⁶ Pollitt and Hupe uses centralization and decentralization as good examples of this. Both can be defended on commonsense grounds, depending on what one seeks to accomplish. Pollitt and Hupe, 643.

opposition to environmental, societal and economic collapse, and by never fully defining itself, it does not leave any meaningful room for opposition to it. To oppose “sustainability” is either to embrace collapse or reject all evidence that we are heading towards a collapse, an increasingly untenable intellectual position.

IX. Global marketability

Part of the allure of magic concepts are their fashionableness. For every conference, academic article, planning document, interdepartmental working group and funding round, the concept gets more “buzz”, and with it comes funding to talk and plan using it.⁷⁷

“Sustainable” has now reached such a degree of global marketability, that the term itself is used to market other things. There is an entire field of “sustainability marketing”.⁷⁸ The impact of it can be easily measured in the academic literature: “Sustainability” plus “marketing” gives 2,2 million hits on Google Scholar. Legions of academic researchers produce papers on how to maximise profit through sustainability branding.⁷⁹ The marketability of “sustainability” is now so high that entire countries⁸⁰ and transnational regions⁸¹ have sought to reimage themselves as sustainable. As long as this move towards using sustainability in marketing and branding is concurrent with a shift in corporate culture and production towards more sustainable practices, one might see this as a step in the right direction. But it does have the taint of “greenwashing”, or even worse, mere profit-seeking to it.⁸²

X. Discussion

In this discussion I will first discuss the findings of the horizontal analysis from a practical point of view: What does it mean that “sustainability” is a magic concept? Then I will discuss the theoretical argument raised by the

⁷⁷ Pollitt and Hupe, “Talking About Government.”

⁷⁸ Frank-Martin Belz and Ken Peattie, *Sustainability Marketing* (Wiley & Sons, 2009).

⁷⁹ Suraksha Gupta and V. Kumar, “Sustainability as Corporate Culture of a Brand for Superior Performance,” *Journal of World Business* 48, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 311-20.

⁸⁰ Maja Konecnik Ruzzier, Nusa Petek, and Mitja Ruzzier, “Incorporating Sustainability in Branding: I Feel Slovenia,” *The IUP Journal of Brand Management* 12, no. 1 (2015): 7-21.

⁸¹ “10 Things You Should Know about Nordic Sustainability”. <https://www.thenordics.com/tool/10-things-you-should-know-about-nordic-sustainability> (Accessed February 22, 2021).

⁸² Farley and Smith, *Sustainability*.

conceptual history analysis of “sustainability” as a magic concept; that Pollitt and Hupe might be wrong about magic concepts being a product of late modernity, and that they might have uncovered the characteristics of a semantic strategy for consensus making among international policy elites stretching much further back in time.

As we can see from the horizontal analysis, “sustainability” fits into all characteristics of a magic concept; it is overly broad, has a strong normative pull, constructs an implied consensus and has global marketing reach. Taken together with the conclusions from the vertical analysis, showing that vagueness of the term can be attributed to an attempt at shoehorning environmental sustainability and foreign aid to developing nations into the same conceptual framework, one might even start harboring some resentment towards the concept. One could end up concluding that in its fuzziness and over-inclusiveness sustainability as a concept does more harm than good. This would be a mistake.

Magic concepts also have positive characteristics. As Pollitt and Hupe point out, there is a reason why magic concepts are so widely used in our post-modern world, and not all of them are bad:⁸³ They are very good at creating new connections between different academic disciplines, interest groups and between countries and regions. They are great rallying banners for policy change within and between governmental, academic and private organizations, due to their implied consensus and fashionableness. They therefore gently side step much of the ideological conflicts and turf wars that have defined human history.

We should therefore be careful of how we use sustainability, given its magical qualities. Magic concepts make poor academic research tools, given that imprecision and instability are part of their definition, but good for government reform, international agreements and other areas where appearance is as important as substance.

The vertical analysis in this article indicates that it was indeed the vague and fashionable qualities of the term that made it such a fit for international decision making from the Brundtland report onwards. In the brief historical outline above one can see indications of a political compromise between the interests of rich and poor members of the UN. It was built on a semantic stitching together of two very different conceptual traditions; environmentalism and development.

It was from this mixing that “sustainability” got its social and economic elements. As has been noted in a vast amount of literature on “sustainability” and “sustainable development” this tripartite division is

⁸³ Hupe and Pollitt, “The Magic of Good Governance,” 22.

conceptually problematic, and means that most policies or views can in some way be labeled as sustainable. But as I note, this is what made it into a magic concept, and therefore a prime reason for why it has been so successful as a rallying cry.

As has been pointed out earlier in this article, one of the most fascinating aspects of “sustainability” is exactly its capacity to encompass almost completely opposite views on what is sustainable. The advocates of re-wilding Colombia through hippos are part of a wider movement that seeks to return as much of nature as possible to its pre-human state. On the other side, you have corporate sustainability drives telling you to reuse your towel in the hotel, or to buy carbon credits when you fly. Unfortunately though, while there is some charm to Walt Whitmans notion of contradictions, a concept cannot contain multitudes without eventually falling apart.⁸⁴

When “sustainability” will lose its magic all-inclusiveness is unclear. One might suspect that the continuing and growing popularity of the term is fed by the atavistic forces raised against it. If so, a further weakening of the forces behind the election of Trump in the United States and similar right wing demagogues around the world should be expected to also weaken the consensus surrounding sustainability.

Most likely the very wide tent that sustainability currently encompasses will fracture as soon as the potency of the political forces raised against it weakens. Without the common enemy of unsustainable populism, “sustainability” will most likely lose its unifying appeal, as its disparate supporters start arguing about the specifics. Let us hope that this fracture will lead to a fruitful debate on what exactly should be done to make our home planet more sustainable.

XI. Conclusion

This article has shown that “sustainability” is an example of Pollitt and Hupe calls magic concepts; it is broad, has strong normative attractiveness, it implies consensus and has global marketability. “Sustainability” is analyzed vertically, through conceptual history, and horizontally, through mapping the concept along Pollitt and Hupes criteria for magic concepts. From the perspective of conceptual history, viewing “sustainability” as a magic concept raises enticing questions. As I show, the concept can be seen

⁸⁴ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself, Part 51, v. 1324-1326,” in *Leaves of Grass* (New York U.P., 1965), 88.

as the current end of a chain of concepts among UN planners, from post-war focus on “development”, to “sustainable development” as a connecting point, to “sustainability” now. Should the history of the success of “sustainability” focus less on the dictionary use of “sustainability” over the ages, and more at its place within a chain of dogmatic concepts influencing ruling elites? More research is needed.

The horizontal analysis showing that “sustainability” is a perfect fit as a magic concept raises interesting implications for the usability of “sustainability” for research. As a magic concept it is more usable as a rallying cry for action than as a measuring stick.

Finally, this study “sustainability” as a magic concept raises the intriguing possibility that magic concepts might not be a product of late modernity, as Pollitt and Hupe argue, but as a semantic strategy of policy elites stretching back much farther into the past. Further research is needed to clarify this.

About the author

Trond Ove Tøllefsen teaches and supervises in the master programmes of Euroculture and Peace and Conflict Studies (NOHA and HAC) at Uppsala University, as well as Conflict, Peace and Security at the Open University of Catalunya (UOC / UNITAR). He has a Ph.D. in History from the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. He is a Norwegian and likes to fish, sustainably.

Sobre el autor

Trond Ove Tøllefsen enseña y supervisa en los programas de maestría de Eurocultura y Estudios de Paz y Conflicto (NOHA y HAC) en la Universidad de Uppsala, así como Conflicto, Paz y Seguridad en la Universidad Oberta de Catalunya (UOC / UNITAR). Tiene un doctorado en historia del Instituto Universitario Europeo de Florencia, Italia. Es noruego y le gusta pescar de forma sostenible

Derechos de autor

Los derechos de autor (para la distribución, comunicación pública, reproducción e inclusión en bases de datos de indexación y repositorios institucionales) de esta publicación (*Cuadernos Europeos de Deusto, CED*) pertenecen a la editorial Universidad de Deusto. El acceso al contenido digital de cualquier número de *Cuadernos Europeos de Deusto* es gratuito inmediatamente después de su publicación. Los trabajos podrán leerse, descargarse, copiar y difundir en cualquier medio sin fines comerciales y según lo previsto por la ley; sin la previa autorización de la Editorial (Universidad de Deusto) o el autor. Así mismo, los trabajos editados en CED pueden ser publicados con posterioridad en otros medios o revistas, siempre que el autor indique con claridad y en la primera nota a pie de página que el trabajo se publicó por primera vez en CED, con indicación del número, año, páginas y DOI (si procede). Cualquier otro uso de su contenido en cualquier medio o formato, ahora conocido o desarrollado en el futuro, requiere el permiso previo por escrito del titular de los derechos de autor.

Copyright

Copyright (for distribution, public communication, reproduction and inclusion in indexation databases and institutional repositories) of this publication (*Cuadernos Europeos de Deusto, CED*) belongs to the publisher University of Deusto. Access to the digital content of any Issue of *Cuadernos Europeos de Deusto* is free upon its publication. The content can be read, downloaded, copied, and distributed freely in any medium only for non-commercial purposes and in accordance with any applicable copyright legislation, without prior permission from the copyright holder (University of Deusto) or the author. Thus, the content of CED can be subsequently published in other media or journals, as long as the author clearly indicates in the first footnote that the work was published in CED for the first time, indicating the Issue number, year, pages, and DOI (if applicable). Any other use of its content in any medium or format, now known or developed in the future, requires prior written permission of the copyright holder.