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When the sustainability they want is just unsustainable

By S. Ismat Shah

There is enough for everyone's need but not enough for anyone's greed, so said Mahatma Gandhi, the great humanitarian and leader.

You mix amoral technology and profit-based economy and the result is unchecked greed.

Sustainability is as much psychological and ethical as it is environmental.

A profit-based economy butts heads with nature. It is not constrained by any value system, particularly human values. Humans and their values both become expendable, as does the nature itself.

Technology feeds on this greed.

Nature has its own capacity to tolerate the extensions of technology. However, this tolerance has its limits.

The economist and philosopher E.F. Schumacher called these limits the "tolerance margins." They become stretched so thin that the very fabric of nature starts to give in. Consequences are horrifying. The changes that take place are not measured in eons any more. Finite-time transformations become apparent. Glaciers melts, smog engulfs metropolitan cities, extreme weather plays havoc with humans, etc. Obviously, talk of sustainability in such an atmosphere is futile.

The mantra of sustainability is being sung to the tune of environmentalism. From being marginal and a mere fad, it is now mainstream.

Instead of being run over by this mainstream, let's take a side step and look to see where we are coming from.

Most of the dramatic changes in and around us came about within the last century. Humanity has been in existence for 300 generations, which is approximately 6,000 years.

The extreme changes in such a short time should be alarming to all, regardless of what walk of life you are from. The word "sustainable" with reference to technology is very recent and came about almost as a knee-jerk reaction to the environmental mayhem in which we find ourselves.

There is a very well-known law in the electronic industry, the Moore's law, which predicts that the number of transistors on an electronic chip will double every two years. This law is not a mere forecast any more. It has acquired a life of its own and the health of the whole industry is judged by how closely it follows this law.

It is not what is producible; it is what has to be produced. The success of alternative energy technologies has started to be governed by a similar curve. If the curve starts to flatten, it is doomsday. God forbid if we fall off the curve!

We look for new formulas for making energy according to what the "curve" projects and not in accordance with our capability, capacity, or nature's tolerance. If a company does not make its projected profit margin, it is considered a loss, and there are related dire consequences.

So, what is the solution?

A generally acceptable definition of sustainability is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." You see, the most emphatic word in this definition is "need."

The question then becomes, how do we define "need" and who should define it?

The need easily scales up to "greed" but that extreme case is obvious and can easily be detected and eliminated. Current technology's amorality disqualifies it a priority.

No doubt it can be used and has been used time and again for solving the problems of humanity, but once the problem is solved, it does not have any built-in limits to restrict itself.

It has to go on, whatever the cost may be.

Economics, in its current profit-based apparition, also has no self-limits. Just like technology, it devours its own products for the sole sake of growth. Many shattered world economies and "Enronesque" corporations are testimony to this self-feeding phenomenon.

Morality and ethics are neither part nor the parcel of technological or economical discourse.

Small is unstable and disappears but big is also unsupportable and collapses.

The current system does not allow us to remain somewhere in the middle, away from these two extremes.

In this picture, what is the answer for survival? To be just big enough. ...

How can we have just enough, and stop there? If technology is the problem, can technology be the answer?

Perhaps, only if we could learn how to constrain it in some way. Instead of proliferating technology, we ought to confine its use for the sole purpose of erasing the recent past mistakes and not as a means to satisfy future greed.

Unnatural growth is unsustainable and cannot and should not be tolerated.

Likewise, the economy cannot be allowed to control our destiny or the destiny of our children. Scientists and technologists, the class I belong to, and economists have to take a back seat.

They cannot take the lead in defining real sustainability protocols. We have been there and done that and do not have good grades to show for what we did. It is time to give someone else a chance.

Of course, we have to remain engaged and be a part of the solution. We will be involved, but only as a cleanup crew.

The leadership, however, has to come from somewhere else. Philosophers, ethicists, policy- makers, educators, psychologists – the list is long, and available.

But be careful, there is only one "broth" and the humanity is 7 billion strong (or weak).
