

Preface

In two and a half centuries of industrial civilisation there has been a tenfold growth in global population, great increases in economic activity and food production, a markedly enhanced life expectancy, and generally huge achievements in material prosperity, employment prospects and human well-being.

But the price of this progress has been widespread land and water degradation, loss of species biodiversity and inequalities in resource distribution both between and within industrialised and developing countries. The excessive combustion of fossil fuels which drive agriculture, city construction and maintenance, manufacturing industries and transport is also contributing to significant climate change which, in turn, is threatening the very ecosystems on which all humans depend for life.

As human numbers have increased and technology improved, terror and war have escalated to new heights of inter-racial and inter-religious barbarity.

It has been estimated that humans now appropriate over 40 per cent of the planet's photosynthetic activity and that the biosphere passed its regenerative and absorptive capacity a quarter of a century ago. Depletion of non-renewable resources such as phosphorus, fossil fuels and the rich biodiversity of old-growth forests and marine ecosystems has reached a critical stage. Governments define progress in terms of economic growth. Yet if ecological costs exceed economic benefits, growth is making us poorer rather than richer. A transition to sustainability is a no less important chapter in human history than the agricultural and industrial transitions, whose excesses have contributed to the environmental crisis which we now confront.

In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development published a report 'Our Common Future' which defined sustainable development as 'that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations'.

Since that time, the word 'sustainability' has been widely used by environmentalists, government agencies and politicians. The word has become so extensively and rhetorically used through a decade of further decline in real sustainability, that it is in danger of becoming meaningless.