Sustainable Development
An exposition of a pervasive, polysemous and vigorously contested concept as articulated in multiple approaches to addressing the polycrisis

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Module: Sustainable Development I
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Due Date: 26 March 2012
Word Count: Part A (5012); Part B (4961); Combined (9973)
“I hereby confirm that the assignment is the product of my own work and research and has been written by me and further that all sources used therein have been acknowledged”
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Individual Assignment 1 (Part A): Literature Review

1. Introduction

As alluded to in the title of this study, sustainable development (and sustainability) represent two of the most pervasive, often quoted and widely discussed concepts in contemporary political, economic, social and ecological discourse. Nonetheless, the concepts and various interpretations thereof remain highly contested and divisive.

The study will focus on the evolution of the concept sustainability/sustainable development in response to the limitations of conventional notions of development in the context of the unfolding global polycrisis. The emergence and evolution of the concept has not gone unchallenged and is characterised by vigorous debate about its significance and applicability. This debate also spawned various approaches, all with their fair share of adherents and proponents.

The above-mentioned approaches range from Deep and Shallow Ecology, Eco-feminism, Social Ecology, Bioregionalism, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Systems Thinking and Complexity, to name but a few. The study briefly considers some of the more prominent approaches in order to highlight some of their central tenets. The study then focuses on Systems Thinking and Complexity and Deep Ecology examining these approaches from the points of view of some of their major proponents. It also briefly reflects on these two approaches' applicability in terms of furthering the sustainability/sustainable development debate.

Next, the study considers the plea by Sneddon et al. (2006:259) for embracing pluralism as one possible solution to the ideological, methodological and epistemological stalemate preventing the advancement of the Sustainable Development debate and hindering the formulation and implementation of an actionable agenda for research and implementation. They contend that this is the only feasible option to facilitate pragmatic governance aimed at addressing the overwhelming array of increasingly complex and inter-related social and environmental problems in a world plagued by growing inequity and declining environmental quality.

In conclusion, the study remarks on the urgent need for a significant paradigm shift away from the current substantively anthropocentric approach towards pluralism focused on the approaches of Systems Thinking and Complexity and ecocentrism as espoused by Deep Ecology.

2. Conceptualisation

The scope of this study covers two core concepts namely the global polycrisis and sustainability/sustainable development. These two concepts serve to both ground and inform the evolving sustainability/sustainable development debate.
2.1 Global polycrisis

Although popularly referred to as the global polycrisis, the symptoms of the crisis feature at all levels from the local, regional, national and global and manifest in different guises including ecosystem degradation, climate change, energy shortages, poverty and unequal access to resources such as food and shelter, all of which share linkages in terms of both cause and effect.

Sneddon et al (2006:253-254) argue that the concept and practice of sustainable development as “policy goal, guiding institutional principle and focus of political struggle” remain as relevant as ever in navigating the global polycrisis set against the background of a world firmly in the grip of neo-liberal economic globalisation. They contend that this holds true despite criticism that the concept and practice of sustainable development have lost their saliency in confronting the multiple challenges of a new and rapidly changing global context.

A significant aspect of the polycrisis concerns the fact that it is in effect “distilled” from the crisis of justice and the crisis of nature, which stand in an inverse relationship to one another. According to Sachs (1999:28) the very nature of this relationship implies that attempts to ease the crisis of justice threatens to aggravate the crisis of nature, and vice versa.

At the current juncture, humanity’s only recourse in dealing with the collective global polycrisis remains the fragile, multi-lateral global governance system, the latter which traces its genesis to a number of high-profile global events. These events include the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and numerous other international sectoral policy conferences during the period 1972 to 2002 (Swilling and Annecke, 2012:26).

2.2 Sustainability and Sustainable Development

It has become progressively evident that the conventional notion of development is hamstrung by a fundamental disconnection between the imperatives of economic development and environmental protection and as such, it has to increasingly contend with a mounting crisis of legitimacy and survival. Amid growing recognition of the existence of the global polycrisis and manifestation of its myriad effects, the search for alternatives is growing in scope and urgency.

In terms of the ‘disconnection’ between development and environment, it is significant that, despite repeated and increasingly urgent calls for the integration of developmental and environmental objectives from the national to international level, this quite simply has not materialised. At the national level, this is evidenced by the fact that macro-economic policies continue to be largely focused on the maximisation of economic growth while issues such as population growth and concentration, resource exploitation and pollution remain the primary responsibility of specialised government departments and agencies (Bartelmus, 1994: 7). Although Bartelmus’ article dates back to 1994, I
maintain that this disconnection more than ever reflects the current status quo in respect of both global and national developmental governance regimes.

Given this reality, many if not most observers contend that “development, as a way of thinking, is on its way out”. They further argue that the crux of the development dilemma relates to the fact that the two founding assumptions of the development promise have lost their validity. This promise was firstly premised on the belief that development could be spatially universalised and secondly that it would persist over time. Development has however revealed itself as finite in both respects and this very insight represents the fundamental dilemma in relation to the conventional notion of development. This realisation led to ever-increasing calls for an alternative model of development and the meteoric rise of the concept of sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development was in effect canonised by the Brundtland Commission report and its consensus-seeking formulation based on the notion of inter-generational justice. Although it remains the subject of criticism and contention, the definition coined in the Brundtland report appeared to have at least managed to “construct a conceptual bridge” between the two dominant camps of political discourse, representative of the environment and development (Sachs, 1999: 27-28).

Thus, at the conceptual level, the disconnection between the integration of developmental and environmental objectives provided the impetus for the emergence of the new paradigm of sustainable development which gained real traction after the publication of the WCED (Brundtland) report, Our Common Future in 1987 (Bartelmus, 1994:7). In essence, this report sought to reconcile the opposing views on ecological limits to growth, as articulated by the green movement in the developed world, and the imperative for poverty-alleviating growth in the developing world. The report introduced the term “sustainable development” together with the by now iconic definition: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Swilling & Annecke, 2012: 26). Some commentators, the likes of Sneddon et al(2006:253) regard the publication of Our Common Future as representing no less than a “watershed in thinking on environment, development and governance”. Despite its prominence and the fact that it undoubtedly constituted a major political turning point for the conceptualisation of sustainable development, Mebratu (1998:496-503) reminds us that the Brundtland report however represents neither the genesis nor conclusion of the conceptual development process.

Narrowing the focus to the actual concept of sustainability/sustainable development, Gallopin (2003:5-6) characterises the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development as among the most complex, ambiguous, controversial and contested in the literature. Sachs (1999:28) echoes these sentiments by noting that, although the 1987 Brundtland Commission’s formulation of the concept apparently succeeded in “constructing a conceptual bridge” between the two camps of political discourse allied respectively to the environment and development, it is clear that the resulting formulation is “designed to maximise consensus rather than promote clarity”.
Gallopin (2003:7) notes that the pursuit of sustainability and sustainable development requires an integrated approach comprising the economic, social, cultural, political and ecological dimensions of development across the entire spatial (local to global) and temporal (intra- and inter-generational) spectrums. Gallopin (2003:19) also stresses the fact that, although regularly used in conjunction, the concept of sustainable development is actually rather different to that of sustainability. He argues that the word “development” clearly indicates the presence of directional and progressive change while “sustainability” on the other hand, is sometimes taken to signify the maintenance of a steady state system, although this is strictly speaking scientifically incorrect given that all living systems are subject to constant change.

Given all of the above, Sneddon et al (2006:253) remark on the need for scholars and practitioners alike to “embrace a plurality of epistemological and normative perspectives on sustainability” as well as “multiple interpretations and practices associated with the evolving concept of development”. They contend that embracing pluralism offers a solution to the ideological and epistemological impasse frustrating attempts at distilling more cohesive and politically effective interpretations of sustainable development. Mebratu (1998:493-494) also weighs in on the issue by remarking that the vagueness of the concept lends itself to “a political battle for influence over the future of humankind by linking interpretation to the concept”. Despite persistent criticism of vagueness and ambiguity, the terms sustainability and sustainable development have prevailed and since spawned a multitude of perspectives underlying and informing initiatives at local, national and global levels, all of which share the goal of addressing different environmental and developmental challenges.

Thus, despite being heavily contested in respect of different meanings and interpretations attributed to it, the concept of sustainability/sustainable development has undeniably managed to engender some measure of global consensus on the major drivers and risks of non-sustainable development (Bartelmus, 1994:8). Notwithstanding this consensus, Blewitt (2008:28) remarks that the quest for developing a common conceptual framework of sustainable development inclusive of social, economic and ecological problems continues to be hampered by a general lack of genuine consensus among experts in each discipline as to how these three systems relate to one another.

3. Approaches to Sustainable Development

In dealing with the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development, one is confronted by a multiplicity of approaches which ranges from the purely anthropocentric to the fundamentally ecocentric. These approaches advocate and support a range of positions from weak to strong sustainability, all of which have their fair share of proponents and detractors. This diversity in itself serves to further confound the debate as to the way forward in achieving a balance between the need for development and growth to address the crisis of justice while remaining within the limits of the finite carrying capacity of the biosphere in recognition of the crisis of nature.
3.1 Overview of some dominant approaches to Sustainable Development

In a comprehensive exposition of the major approaches (and attendant literatures), to sustainable development, Blewitt (2008:27-28) notes that it may be most appropriate to consider the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development as “a dialogue of values” viewed and interpreted from different perspectives. It is also vitally important to distinguish between trivial or populist and more meaningful conceptualisations. As already noted, the lack of genuine consensus as to the inter-relation of social, economic and ecological systems remains one of the major obstacles to developing a common conceptual framework of sustainable development.


- **Deep Ecology**'s central tenet revolves around the need for harmonisation of human life and nature and respect for the principles of ecological limits. The distinction between Shallow and Deep Ecology is essentially one of anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism (Blewitt, 2008:29-32);

- **Eco-feminism**, which incidentally criticises Deep Ecology as being gender blind, has as its guiding principle the study of relations of oppression and exploitation affecting women and the environment and the quest for fostering a respectful attitude to both (Blewitt, 2008:32-33);

- **Social Ecology**, in criticising Deep Ecology, notes the critical mistake of trying to separate ecological and social problems. It also emphasises the underlying human problematic of hierarchy and inequality and the resultant exploitation in terms of class, race and gender which is in turn linked to humanity’s exploitation and degradation of nature (Blewitt, 2008:33-34);

- **Bioregionalism**'s essential characteristic is its emphasis of “the intricate and inextricable relationship between human social organisation, economic production and ecology, which if properly managed could result in an appropriate balance between human institutions and natural, regional resources” (Blewitt, 2008:35-36);

- **Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)** encompasses the cultures, spirituality and ‘ways of knowing’ of aboriginal peoples across the globe and provides models of alternative ways of being and living in harmony with the Earth. TEK is becoming increasingly appealing to many who share an ecocentric perspective and seek to rediscover a sense of belonging, connectedness and value (Blewitt, 2008:36-39);

- **Latour’s Relations and Networks** posits that “the essentially political division between this nature and the social is both subjective and contestable” and must be done away with in the quest for connectedness and coalition in addressing matters of
common concern. The increasing influence of connectedness on political thought and policymaking is likewise highlighted (Blewitt, 2008:40-41);

- Systems Thinking and Complexity proceeds from the premise that “many phenomena do not easily lend themselves to a linear, reductionist or classically scientific method of analysis and explanation” and instead requires an appreciation of complex connections and relationships which characterise complex, non-linear, adaptive systems. Capra is indicated to have “carefully re-articulated systems thinking and complexity theory” to facilitate a new scientific understanding of living systems and a new science for sustainable living. One of the possible consequences of adopting a systems analysis approach is the embrace of a policy of precaution and prudence (Blewitt, 2008:41-44);

- Gaia Hypothesis/Theory as first formulated by Lovelock and Margulis represents a clear example of systems thinking. The hypothesis holds that the Earth acts as a dynamic self-organising and self-regulating system which perpetually seeks accommodation and balance amid internal and external inputs (Blewitt, 2008:45-46);

- Ecological Modernisation (EM) entered the policy discourse with a focus on technological developments with environmentally beneficial outcomes and initially came to be seen as a way of reducing costs and improving business competitiveness rather than as a proposal for any major changes in respect of political, public or corporate values. The 1990s and beyond saw the emergence of a more radical approach with references to ecological emancipation and the emergence of a new belief system, which in turn initiated a split into strong and weak versions of EM. Despite the differences among advocates of weak and strong EM, it has nonetheless succeeded in placing the environment more firmly onto community, business and government agendas (Blewitt, 2008:46-47).

Although all of these approaches have made significant contributions to the debate about sustainability and sustainable development by offering a wide range of insights and perspectives, this study will focus on two approaches deemed to have the most to contribute to the quest for sustainability and sustainable development amid a worsening global polycrisis, namely Systems Thinking and Complexity and Deep Ecology.

3.2 Review of selected approaches

3.2.1 Systems Thinking and Complexity

The study contends that systems thinking and complexity is uniquely positioned to facilitate analysis and understanding of the polycrisis because it engenders a multiple focus which serves to better highlight the increasing inter-connectedness of the entire socio-ecological system and the human system’s increasingly destructive impact on the life-sustaining ecological system. It furthermore emphasises the growing element of unpredictability amid the imperative of evolving from reductionist, linear thinking towards an increasing focus on connections and relationships.
The crux of the matter as articulated by Blewitt (2008:41-42) is that humanity is being increasingly confronted by the necessity to move from reductionist thinking towards synthesis as exemplified by integrative science. This “new reality” is the result of increased systems complexity amid the continued emergence of new properties at higher levels of complexity. Whereas linear organisation is associated with a large measure of predictability, emergence as a property of non-linear systems is characterised by unpredictable and even surprising consequences. In extending the notion of complexity to ecological systems, it is noted that these systems are quite resilient to external stressors but are nonetheless subject to limits and thresholds. Amid the recognition of this reality, it is becoming increasingly clear that human activities are exceeding certain of these thresholds, in the process causing undesirable changes to not only ecosystems but other systems in the biosphere, troposphere and stratosphere.

In addressing the fundamental attributes underlying the sustainability of whole socio-ecological systems, Gallopin (2003:17-18) identifies a number of generic system properties, some of which arise from both the ecological and human sub-systems and others from only the human sub-systems. What these basic system properties have in common though is their importance at the whole socio-ecological system level. These basic properties inter alia relate to the availability of resources, general homeostasis and the adaptability and flexibility of the system in terms of detecting, interpreting and responding to changes in the external environment.

Narrowing the focus to the quest for an appropriate approach to sustainability and sustainable development, Gallopin (2003:7) emphasises the systems view as being uniquely positioned to accommodate the essential requirements of an integrated approach because it represents “a way of thinking in terms of connectedness, relationships and context”. Clayton et al (1996:18) emphasises the fact that a systems approach pays equal attention to the identification and description of objects and events and the description of the connections between and among objects and events. Reinforcing this notion of connectedness, Macy et al (1998:43-44) notes that, as opposed to the mechanistic view of reality which led to a fundamental separation of “self from other, substance from process and thought from feeling”, the systems perspective regards apparent separate and self-existent entities as inter-dependent and part of the evolving web of life. She also remarks that insights from systems theory revolutionised the way humanity regards the planet and that the ‘hypothesis turned theory’ as posited by Lovelock and Margulis and named after Gaia caught people’s poetic imagination and fundamentally transformed their thinking.

Focusing on the actual debate about sustainability, it is noted that it essentially occurs along a continuum between the extremes of pure anthropocentrism and pure ecocentrism and as such is informed by a number of positions. At a basic level, these positions coalesce around the particular referent object the sustainability of which is being pursued. Three positions are distinguished namely sustainability of only the human system, sustainability of primarily the ecological system and sustainability of the entire socio-ecological system (Gallopin, 2003:13).
- Sustainability of *only the human system* is consistent with the classical economic view and by extension the notion of "very weak sustainability" which regards the economy as the sole system of significance with the sustainability of ecological systems relegated to the subservient position of provider of resources and a sink for wastes. The very weak approach is premised on the perfect substitutability of natural and manufactured capital but critics stress the need for precautionary approaches to cater for appropriate levels of risk aversion in the face of uncertainty (Gallopin, 2003:13);

- Sustainability of *primarily the ecological system*, even if this entails “displacement or elimination of the human component” as pursued by proponents who value ecological sustainability above economic and social sustainability. This extreme ecocentric position is consistent with the notion of "very strong sustainability" and the contention that natural resources are not substitutable. It also advocates for a steady state economy operating within the limits of the biosphere amid the imperative of ecological solidarity with the Earth and all forms of life (Gallopin, 2003:14);

- Sustainability of *the entire socio-ecological system* is proposed as the only long-term viable alternative and is based on the recognition of the vital inter-linkages between the ecological/biophysical component (nature) and human society. This position is consistent with the notion of "strong sustainability", which maintains that different types of capital are not necessarily substitutable, with the resulting imperative that "minimum amounts of different types of capital need to be independently maintained in real physical/biological terms". It is also accepted that "some environmental components are unique and that the compromise or loss of some environmental processes may be irreversible over relevant time horizons" (Gallopin, 2003:15-16).

In terms of the practical relevance of a systems approach for policy development, adaptation and adoption, Clayton *et al* (1996:12) note that a systems approach to sustainability enables policymakers, who are essentially in the business of regulating patterns of interactions between and among various open systems such as ecological, human social and economic systems, to more thoroughly consider and understand the complexities involved in these interactions. Blewitt (2008:44) adds that, given the fact that knowledge about such interactions is limited, a systems analysis also lends itself to the development and adoption of policies of prudence and precaution. As to the process of implementing sustainable development, Gallopin (2003:23) suggests that a systems approach be complemented with the consideration of multiple perspectives.

### 3.2.2 Deep Ecology

Whereas a systems approach represents a rational approach to the identification and description of objects and events as well as the connections between and among objects and events (Clayton *et al*,1996:18), Deep Ecology as both a philosophical platform and movement represents more of an intuitive approach to the challenges of anthropogenic ecosystem degradation and destruction.
As an essentially ecocentric value position, the central tenet of Deep Ecology relates to the acknowledgement of the principles of ecological limits amid the need for humans to harmonise their activities with nature. Because of its strong moral orientation, DE is in many respects regarded as the touchstone of the environmental movement (Blewitt, 2008:29).

Deep Ecology proceeds from the fundamental understanding that humanity’s interdependence with all life on Earth has profound implications in terms of human attitudes and actions towards nature. As such, DE as both a movement and a philosophical platform, arose in response to the dire need for liberation from humanity’s outmoded anthropocentric notions of “separateness from nature”. In contrast to reform environmentalism’s focus on treating the symptoms of environmental degradation, DE instead questions the fundamental premises of the Industrial Growth Society as well as assumptions of human superiority vis-à-vis the rest of creation. The term “ecological self”, as coined by Arne Naess is in stark contrast to human-centredness (anthropocentrism) and refers to a wider sense of identity resulting from a natural maturation process and evolution from the narrow and competitive ego to a social, metaphysical and even an ecological self. Despite the fact that DE is neither ideology nor dogma, the ideas connected to it have coalesced into what may be termed a DE platform which includes principles related to the recognition of the intrinsic right to existence of all life forms. Related movements not necessarily associated with DE such as ecofeminism, ecojustice and ecopsychology share many of the platform’s premises and its criticisms of the Industrial Growth Society (Macy et al, 1998:45-52) and as such offer valuable supplementary insights and perspectives.

In outlining the principles of the Deep Ecology Movement (DEM) perspective, Naess retained the shallow ecology movement’s principal concerns in respect of pollution and resource depletion but also incorporated principles external to the dominant social paradigm, e.g. “ecocentrism, wide sustainability and complexity as opposed to complication”. In 1984, Naess and George Sessions proceeded to compile a platform for the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement. Despite Naess’ insistence that the ‘platform’ was simply intended to develop a set of very general principles or statements to stimulate discussion and assist people to articulate their own deep ecological view, many proponents continue to assert that the platform represents the “heart of deep ecology” (Devall, 2001:19-22).

The “Eight Points Deep Ecology Platform” as articulated by Devall in 1988 may be summarised as follows: 1) The well-being and “flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth” have intrinsic value independent of its utility value to humans; 2) the “richness and diversity of all life forms contribute to the realisation of these values and also represent values in themselves”; 3) humanity has no right to reduce this “richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs”; 4) the “flourishing of human life and cultures “remains possible amid a substantial reduction in the human population whereas the “flourishing of non-human life” necessitates such a reduction; 5) the current anthropogenic impact on the non-human world is excessive and rapidly worsening; 6) policies in respect of basic economic, technological, and ideological structures must be
changed to both facilitate and reflect a radically different state of affairs; 7) the ideological change envisaged relates mainly to a greater emphasis on an appreciation of the quality of life (intrinsic worth) as opposed to striving for an increasingly higher standard of living and 8) those who “subscribe to the foregoing have an obligation” to contribute, via direct or indirect participation, to efforts aimed at implementing the necessary changes (Devall, 2001:23).

Proponents of the DE Platform accept that operationalising the values and ‘intuition’ of DE amid the dominance of the industrial civilisation will require purposeful, collective action and focused attention on the “ecological self”, defined by Naess as “broad identification with nature. Although the platform does not address the question as to what constitutes the principal causes of the ecological crisis, a variety of views about the major causes are advanced by proponents of approaches such as Social Ecology and Eco-feminism (Devall, 2001:26).

Amid waning prospects for a “conscious, collective movement of rapid social turn-around”, some supporters of the DEM suggest that anthropogenic impacts have already surpassed natural systems’ limits and adaptive capacity and given that human society will have to contend with radical challenges during the 21st century. Some visionary writers contend that the fundamentally interdependent nature of the world dictates greater co-operation and that humanity will need to start consciously developing a “planetary-scale, species-civilisation” able to harmoniously co-exist with the rest of the web of life (Devall, 2001:32-33).

4. Towards a new Paradigm: Promise of Pluralism

In addressing the quest for a new development paradigm, Bartelmus (1994:1-7) remarks on the large-scale failures of international strategies and approaches in the areas of growth, development and the environment. He also observes that this failure is reflected in the widespread and growing frustration with the international community’s inability to effectively merge environmental issues and socio-economic planning and policy imperatives.

It is my contention that the only viable long-term option for addressing the polycrisis is the adoption of a pluralist paradigm distilled from a range of approaches but nonetheless guided by the recognition of the centrality of the principles of complexity and inter-connectedness and ecocentrism as respectively espoused by Systems Thinking and Complexity and Deep Ecology. Although these approaches to my mind provide the best foundation for formulating a response to the global polycrisis, most if not all of the other approaches have equally valid contributions to make. The principal challenge however remains the initiation of a fundamental paradigm shift away from anthropocentrism and linear thinking towards a more balanced approach thoroughly cognisant of the demands of complexity amid explicit acknowledgement of the urgent need to respond to the ever-growing challenges of anthropogenic ecosystem degradation and destruction.
In line with the above contention, Sneddon et al (2006:254-264) assert that the concept and practice of sustainable development remains as relevant as ever in navigating the global polycrisis. Significantly, the authors propose the “embracing of pluralism as a starting point for the normative construction and analysis of sustainable development”. They argue this to be one way out of the ideological, methodological and epistemological stalemate hampering the advance of the sustainability/sustainable development debate towards the genesis of a practicable research and action agenda. A pluralist conceptualisation should ideally draw on trans-disciplinary approaches such as ecological economics, political ecology and related social sciences. They propose this as the only feasible option to facilitate pragmatic governance to address an overwhelming array of increasingly complex and inter-related social and environmental problems/crises in a world characterised by an unrelenting decline in equity and environmental quality. In terms of the performance of governments and multilateral institutions in giving effect to sustainable development, the authors remark on a general and fairly widespread lack of progress amid a few exceptions of mainly developed nation governments’ successful attempts at incorporating at least some sustainable development principles in their policy frameworks.

Reiterating their stance on the necessity of embracing pluralism, Sneddon et al (2006: 264) propose the declaration of a “truce among the epistemological and methodological schisms between defenders and critics of the concept in favour of a pragmatic, pluralistic middle path”. In terms of prospects for achieving sustainability in the post-Brundtland global order, it is thus argued that sustainable development needs to be revitalised along the lines of a pluralist conception of the broadest possible spectrum of contexts subsuming the entire array of local-global human communities all the while remaining cognisant of the more abstract and universal notions of justice and equity.

5. Conclusion

My review of the selected literature on sustainability/sustainable development led me to conclude that the approaches of Systems Thinking and Complexity and Deep Ecology represent the best articulation of a response to the sustainability crisis and also offer the most viable alternatives for integration into policy responses to the global polycrisis. It is also clear that there is merit in adopting a pluralist approach as this will ensure the consideration of other approaches (inter alia those noted in 3.1 above) all of which have both valuable and valid contributions to make in the quest for solutions to the polycrisis.

To reiterate, Systems Thinking and Complexity is judged to be the most effective option currently available to deal with the twin challenges relating to the unpredictability and complexity of the sustainability crisis, especially in relation to rapid and increasingly widespread ecosystem degradation. The Deep Ecology platform could in turn provide the indispensable impetus towards extending the dominant social paradigm by including principles of the deep long-range ecology perspective as espoused by Naess and Sessions.
In Part B, I will set out to provide a brief overview and review of the South African government’s efforts at incorporating principles of sustainability and practices related to sustainable development in the national legislative and policy framework governing sustainability and sustainable development.
Individual Assignment 2 (Part B): Application

1. Introduction

This part of the study essentially consists of an overview and review of what I consider to be the core elements of the South African legislative and policy framework serving to guide the country’s approach to development and more particularly sustainable development.

In this endeavour, the focus will essentially be on the legislative foundation comprising the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the Bill of Rights as well as the National Environmental Management Act of South Africa (NEMA). In terms of policy, I will provide an overview of the key policy document informing the government’s approach to sustainability and sustainable development namely the National Framework for Sustainable Development.

In reviewing the legislative and policy frameworks, I will essentially focus on the two critical aspects of formulation and implementation. In terms of formulation, I will highlight what I term the “anthropocentric bias” of South Africa’s legislative framework governing sustainability and sustainable development. On the issue of policy implementation, I will highlight critical instances of the disconnection between formulation and implementation and the implications of this in terms of the deterioration of the country’s natural environment. I further contend that the rapid decline of some of the country’s vital natural systems serves to jeopardise the prospects for realising the quest of placing the country on a path towards sustainability and sustainable development.

Proceeding from this, I will provide brief pointers in terms of the way forward for South Africa’s in terms of its approach to sustainability and sustainable development. These pointers are distilled from my review of the literature as well as practical examples gleaned from the case studies and issues highlighted in the media.

2. The policy environment

In the twenty-five years since the Brundtland report introduced the key statement and definition of sustainable development to the public discourse, it may be safely argued that the policy environment has become infinitely more complex on all levels, ranging from the global to the regional and national policy domains.

Policy formulation and implementation in respect of development present a myriad challenges, one of which is the balancing act required to address the two complementary challenges presented by the crises of justice and nature. Sachs (1999: 25-28) notes that the Crisis of Justice and the Crisis of Nature is not restricted to the global arena where it plays out between developed and developing countries but that this polarisation also manifests at the national socio-economic level where the dominant dynamic leads to an economically ambitious middle class on the one hand versus ever-growing sections of socially excluded populations on the other. The crisis of nature
relates to the ecological predicament which has seen economic expansion exceeding earth’s bio-physical limits in terms of serving as a source of inputs and a sink for wastes. It is prudent to remain mindful of the fact that the crises of justice and nature, together with the received notion development, find themselves in an inverse relationship with attempts to ease the crisis of justice threatening to aggravate the crisis of nature, and vice versa.

With globalisation proceeding apace amid ever-increasing challenges like climate change, ecosystem degradation, increased competition for scarce resources and growing poverty, the policy environment is becoming ever more complex and policymakers will increasingly need to also consider dynamics at the regional and continental levels. The latter contention is supported by the growing interest in Global Environmental Change Research (GECR) which focuses on the inter-linked issues of political, economic, social and technological changes and their impact on land surfaces, water systems, oceans and the atmosphere as well as the resultant changes in climate. Also included in the scope of GECR is the impact of all of the above aspects on the twin elements of biodiversity and human well-being. In the International Council for Science, Draft Science Work Plan dealing with Global Change in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is noted that Africa is particularly vulnerable to global change, attributable to both its geographical location and its limited adaptive capacity (ICS, 2006:1).

2.1 South African policy environment: Overview

South Africa, not unlike most other countries, is faced with increasingly exacting challenges in terms of the characteristic demands of its policy environment. Needless to say, the country’s domestic policy environment witnessed what can only be described as monumental changes in the period since the advent of a democratic dispensation in 1994. The developmental and environmental policy environments were no exception and major policy shifts were articulated in a range of critical policy documents.

As is the case with many other countries, especially in the developing world, South Africa confronts the daunting challenge of trying to balance the pursuit of solutions to the crisis of justice and crisis of nature in the quest for development. However, given the unique challenges facing the country at this juncture in its history, policy formulation and implementation present particularly complex demands. I contend that there are some indications that both these crises are threatening to spin out of control amid a widespread disconnection between formulation and implementation.

3. South African legislative and policy framework governing sustainable development

3.1 Overview (SA Constitution, NEMA, National Framework for SD)

This section comprises an overview of the core elements of the South African policy and legislative framework with both a direct and indirect influence on the governing of sustainability and sustainable development in South Africa. The selection, although by
no means exhaustive, is to my mind representative enough to facilitate a credible review and to highlight certain crucial characteristics, including the purported anthropocentric bias amid limited and inferred references to the environment. The documents selected for review include:

- The National Environmental Management Act (NEMA), Act No. 107, 1998;
- People, Planet, Prosperity: A National Framework for Sustainable Development in South Africa;


The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, inclusive of an environmental clause in the Bill of Rights establishes the foundation for environmental management in South Africa. As such, Article 24 of the Constitution guarantees the right of everyone to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being; and to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations. This goal is to be achieved via the implementation and application of “reasonable legislative and other measures that (i) prevent pollution and ecological degradation; (ii) promote conservation; and (iii) secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development” (Hattingh, 2001:1). These rights are further ‘unpacked’ and given effect in the National Environmental Management Act (NEMA: Act 107 of 1998).

It is significant to note the predominance of a clearly anthropocentric view as articulated in Article 24 of the Constitution with a clear emphasis on the rights of humans to live in a safe and healthy environment both intragenerationally and inter-generationally. In almost direct contrast, the Ecuadorian Constitution goes as far as enshrining the Rights of Nature in “an unprecedented biocentric turn from the anthropocentrism of modernity”(Swilling et al, 2012:314).

**National Environmental Management Act (NEMA): Act 107 of 1998**

The National Environmental Management Act (NEMA), Act 107 of 1998 represents the cornerstone for environmental management in South Africa. In the preamble of the Act, it is stated that:

“Whereas many inhabitants of South Africa live in an environment that is harmful to their health and well-being:

Everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to his or her health or well-being;

The **State must** respect, protect, promote and fulfil the social, economic and environmental rights of everyone and strive to meet the basic needs of previously disadvantaged communities;

**Inequality** in the distribution of wealth and resources, and the resultant poverty, are among the important causes as well as the results of environmentally harmful practices;
**Sustainable development** requires the integration of social, economic and environmental factors in the **planning, implementation** and evaluation of decisions to ensure that development serves present and future generations;

**Everyone has the right** to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that –

- prevent pollution and ecological degradation;
- promote conservation;
- secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development;” *(emphasis added)*

*(RSA, 1998)*

In line with Article 24 of the Constitution, the Act also makes clear mention of the central need for a healthy environment as well as the right of everyone (human beings) to expect to live in an environment that is not harmful to their (human) health. As noted by Hattingh (2001:10) it is clear that NEMA is primarily intended to ensure the proper and prudent management of natural resources for the benefit (read health and well-being) of humans. He also explicitly states that “it is clear that our national policy framework about environmental matters is dominated by an anthropocentric view that gravitates towards a minimalist interpretation of sustainability/sustainable development”.

Chapter 1 of the Act deals with national environmental management principles and states in:

(4) “(a) Sustainable development requires the consideration of all relevant factors including the following:

(i) That the disturbance of ecosystems and loss of biological diversity are avoided, or, where they cannot be altogether avoided, are minimised and remedied;

(ii) that pollution and degradation of the environment are avoided, or, where they cannot be altogether avoided, are minimised and remedied;” *(emphasis added)*

*(RSA, 1998)*

Although the Act is to be commended for stressing the importance of an inclusive approach to sustainable development by considering all relevant factors, the phrasing “where they cannot be altogether avoided, are minimised and remedied” serves to in a sense ‘dilute’ the imperatives of avoiding the disturbance of ecosystems and biodiversity as well the pollution and degradation of the environment. It does so by providing for an option of minimisation and remediation which once again reflects an anthropocentric bias with human interests taking precedence.

**National Framework for Sustainable Development (NFSD) 2008**

The **National Framework for Sustainable Development in South Africa** dated July 2008 is intended to articulate the national vision for sustainable development. As such, it is by own admission short on detailed strategies and action plans. It does however propose a national vision and sets out principles, strategic priority areas and a set of measures aimed at implementation, all of which are intended to enable the ultimate development of a national strategy and action plan. In the introduction to the NFSD, it is noted that the framework is intended to address ‘a critical void’ resulting from the fact that the
country has as yet no coherent and overarching national strategy for sustainable development. In response, the NFSD is intended to facilitate the establishment of a broad framework to serve as basis for developing a national strategy and action plan. The section dealing with the context for sustainable development displays a clear anthropocentric focus with references to the consumption of resources and degradation of habitat framed in terms of the anthropocentric concern that the negative impacts of the current course of action will be prejudicial to future economic growth and the attainment of developmental objectives (RSA, 2008:6-7).

The statement of purpose of the strategic framework makes it clear that it is intended as a visionary, strategically framed document with a long-term focus. As such, the framework seeks to facilitate the integration of sustainability imperatives in the development discourse and to show the country’s commitment to the principles resulting from international conferences such as the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development(RSA, 2008:7). I wish to remark that this long-term, strategic focus, albeit necessary, nonetheless serves to detract from the urgency of the immediate task at hand, especially given the dearth of detailed strategies and actions plans.

The vision, statement of principles and priority areas (pathways) to achieving sustainable development all have a predominant anthropocentric focus with references to the fundamental needs of people, responsible and efficient management of limited ecological resources for the benefit of current and future generations, human dignity and social equity and justice and fairness (RSA, 2008:8-10).

Although this overview of the NFSD is limited to the Executive Summary, I contend that there is ample proof of a clear anthropocentric bias and that the few references to ecosystems e.g. “socio-economic systems are embedded within, and dependent upon, eco-systems” are made within the context of the eco-system services required to sustain all human enterprises. The acknowledgement of this aspect is at least a step in the right direction as it serves to recognise the fundamental dependency of human enterprises on ecosystem services.

3.2 Review

As stated earlier, this review of the legislative and policy framework guiding sustainable development in South Africa is focused on two critical and inter-related aspects of formulation and implementation.

In terms of formulation, I therefore contend that both the legislative and policy frameworks guiding issues of sustainability and sustainable development display a clear anthropocentric bias. I further argue that this bias leads to a disproportionate focus on the crisis of justice (developmental objectives) to the neglect of the crisis of nature (environmental objectives). By extension, this neglect of the crisis of nature also serves to affect inter-generational justice issues due to the degradation of essential ecosystems and the resultant collapse of vital ecosystem services. Conventional
notions of development and predominant economic models in a sense serve to “mortgage the future” due to the neglect of the crisis of nature.

In focusing on implementation, I argue that there is evidence of a clear disconnection between the enacting of legislation and developing of policy and the subsequent imperatives of application and implementation. I further contend that this fundamental disconnection impacts on both the crisis of justice and the crisis of nature and if not addressed could serve to derail most of government’s well-intentioned efforts at achieving sustainable development in South Africa. In support of this contention, I will henceforth highlight some of the more pertinent examples of this disconnection.

3.2.1 Formulation

Even a cursory review, as undertaken in this study, serves to reveal a clear anthropocentric bias in respect of South Africa’s legislative and policy framework guiding sustainable development. In terms of formulation, both the legislative and policy frameworks guiding issues of sustainability and sustainable development display patent anthropocentric bias, largely to the neglect of ecocentric considerations, the latter which seem to feature as nothing more than an afterthought.

In order to highlight this anthropocentric bias, I focus on examples as contained in NEMA and discussed by Hattingh. In discussing the assumptions underlying and qualifying the moral content of sustainability/sustainable development, Hattingh (2001:8) notes that apart from the obvious quantitative notion of something that can last indefinitely, the concept also embodies pertinent qualitative elements which involve answers to pertinent value questions. Different answers are possible to these questions depending on whether one adopts an essentially anthropocentric or ecocentric position. From an anthropocentric position, human life (not merely limited to survival but rather quality of life) would represent the referent object whereas an ecocentric position would focus on life in general with all of its richness and diversity.

As to the value question relating to the object of merit to be sustained, the anthropocentric bias becomes patently clear. In reviewing the notion of sustainable development as applied in NEMA in the context of its position on the continuum between anthropocentrism and weak/minimalist sustainability and ecocentrism or robust sustainability, it is clear that the country’s national policy framework governing environmental matters is “dominated by an anthropocentric view that gravitates towards a minimalist interpretation of sustainability/sustainable development”. The predominant principle guiding NEMA (as explicitly stated in its preamble) is that environmental management needs to afford predominance to people and their needs and then more specifically the poorest and most marginalised sectors of society. Although it is acknowledged that NEMA in many respects represents a significant step forward in the development of South Africa’s national environmental policy framework, there is still much room for improvement. This applies especially to the need for an explicit articulation of the notion of natural limits to resource exploitation in order to protect the country’s vital ecosystems against the negative effects of what is often presented as
“development and economic growth but which in reality translates into organised and institutionalised unsustainability” (Hattingh, 2001:9 -11).

In dealing with the question “with a view to what or who is sustainability pursued” the response once again depends on one’s inclination towards either anthropocentrism or ecocentrism. From an anthropocentric perspective, it mainly relates to the issue of equitable distribution of resources and livelihoods between rich and poor (intra- and inter-generationally). From an ecocentrist position, the pursuit of sustainability and sustainable development simply for the sake of humans and to the detriment of ecosystems and other species, would be equally arbitrary and unjustifiable. Based on these considerations, a review of NEMA reveals that policymakers opted for a “broad, robust and egalitarian interpretation”. The Act is clearly egalitarian in terms of its patent preference for addressing the developmental and environmental needs of the poor, marginalised and vulnerable members of society. Significantly however, this preferential focus also means that fewer resources, if any, are available to invest in ensuring and maintaining quality of life or to pay serious consideration to the rights of future generations and the survival and integrity of nature. Critically then, future iterations of South Africa’s national environmental policy should pay special attention to clearly articulating the mutual relationship among the elements of intra- and inter-generational justice, quality of life and the integrity of nature in order to clearly focus efforts at ensuring sustainability (Hattingh, 2001:11-13).

The clear anthropocentric bias in favour of a weak or minimalist interpretation of sustainability/sustainable development leads to an under-emphasis and neglect of critical aspects such as ecosystem integrity and environmental degradation. As such, it is my view that the current minimalist interpretation needs to be expanded towards a pluralist conception which also takes into account elements from approaches such as Systems Thinking and Complexity and Deep Ecology. This is in line with the contention by Sneddon et al (2006:254-259) that a move towards pluralism represents the only feasible option to facilitate pragmatic governance in order to address an overwhelming array of increasingly complex and inter-related social and environmental problems/crises in a world characterised by an unrelenting decline in equity and environmental quality.

Such a shift in focus will serve to counter-balance the current anthropocentric bias and facilitate a move in the direction of a more radical interpretation of sustainability and sustainable development which may just lead South Africa onto a developmental path that, amid the pursuit of intra- and inter-generational justice, manages to remain within the limits of supporting ecosystems. Hattingh (2001:20) highlights one such version of a radical model as the one espoused by Michael Jacobs who advocates for a combination of the strong, robust, egalitarian, bottom-up and broad interpretations of sustainable development as typically found among environmental activists and development-oriented community-based organisations.
3.2.2 Implementation

There are numerous pertinent examples of what I contend to be a fundamental disconnection between policy formulation and implementation in the context of the South African environmental and developmental policy domain. Non-compliance also extends to the domain of environmental legislation with consequences impacting both the natural environment and the most vulnerable in society. What is of further significance is that these incidences of non-compliance reflect negatively on the country’s status in terms of some key indicators relating to the country’s environmental asset endowment and environmental performance.

One of the most recent and prominent examples of non-implementation concerns the 2012 Environmental Performance Index (EPI 2012) as produced by the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy, Yale University and the Center for International Earth Science Information Network, Columbia University in co-operation with the World Economic Forum. Critical for South Africa, the report found that, out of a total of 132 countries, South Africa’s natural environment displayed the most rapid decline over the past twenty years. In terms of total EPI ranking, South Africa occupies the 128th position whereas Iraq that ended last is ranked at 132. The researchers compared the state of the natural environment in 132 countries between 1992 at the time of the Rio Earth Summit and the present day by measuring performance in respect of 22 indicators. The report states emphatically that South Africa’s air and water quality, biodiversity, ecosystem vitality and functioning as well as its agricultural and fishing industries all display serious and rapid deterioration (www.epi.yale.edu).

![Figure 1: Relationship between country scores in the 2012 EPI and the Trend EPI for Ecosystem Vitality.](image-url)
In its response to the EPI, the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) issued a statement expressing shock at the findings. Mr. Garth Barnes, Director of Conservation at WESSA indicated that this dismal state of affairs is especially concerning given the fact that South Africa has some of the most progressive environmental legislation in the world and yet, as clearly indicated by this study, implementation of this legislation is woefully inadequate. He added that he considers this report to be a true reflection of the real state of the nation and that it corroborates WESSA’s contention that a degrading environment impacts directly on human health and well-being. Barnes noted that South Africa’s natural ecosystem were being degraded and destroyed at an extensive rate and rapid pace due to the country’s continued reliance on a coal-driven economy. He further remarked on the current clear disconnection between government’s social upliftment programmes and environmental management. This trend also flies in the face of international accords to which South Africa is a signatory, including the Convention on Biodiversity which the country ratified in 2010 committing itself to halving the current rate of biodiversity loss (www.wessa.org.za). South Africa’s extraordinarily rich biodiversity endowment places even greater emphasis on the need for a developmental approach which takes serious heed of the infinite complexity and inter-dependence of systems and more especially ecosystems. In order to arrest these disturbing trends, implementation of South Africa’s existing environmental legislation, albeit heavily skewed in favour of anthropocentric goals, represents the absolute minimum requirement.

Other examples related to the lack of implementation of environmental policy guidelines and legislative prescriptions abound. These clearly reflect the effects of the disconnection (as already referred to in 3.2) in terms of compounding the impacts of the

Figure 2: Relationship between country scores in the 2012 EPI and the Trend EPI for Environmental Health.
crises of justice and nature. Recent pertinent examples include the effects of non-implementation on agriculture and the provision of essential services and more specifically water. In the province of Mpumalanga, home to some of the country’s most fertile, high-yield agricultural land, both legal and illegal coal mining operations, play havoc with the area’s land and water resources due to increased acidity of surface and ground water resources. In this instance a critical aspect is the continued non-compliance of large and small-scale mining operators with policy and legal prescriptions and proscriptions as inter alia contained in the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act 2002 and National Water Act of 1998 (Beeld, 22 March 2012). The same problem also impacts urban areas where the effects of acid mine drainage already affect the water supply of towns like Carolina. Tests of the municipal water supply to the town revealed very high acidity levels (pH level of 3) and heavy metal contamination (Beeld, 15 February 2012).

On the score of implementation or rather lack thereof, it is imperative that government in its pursuit of particular developmental policies remains cognisant of the imperative of adhering to the letter and spirit of the Constitution and more specifically the principles articulated in Article 24. I contend, and the examples cited prove the numerous instances where these principles are being flouted amid increasing pollution and ecological degradation and neglect of conservation imperatives, all of which disproportionately impact the poor and marginalised sections of society. This once again supports my assertion of a fundamental disconnection between the formulation and implementation of policy and the enactment and enforcement of legislation.

4. Way forward

In addressing the country’s developmental challenges in a sustainable fashion, the South African government will need to take serious heed of a number of critical pointers indicating a slide towards unsustainability as inter alia briefly highlighted in 3.2.2 above. The country will need to find a way to effect a viable transition towards sustainable growth and development as opposed to the current destructive track which in effect serves to address neither the crisis of justice nor the crisis of nature. This contention is supported by Bond (2012:147) who highlights the negative consequences of a range of neo-liberal policies by successive post-1994 administrations which (I contend) served to aggravate both the crisis of justice and crisis of nature. He maintains that some of the more prominent effects of these policies include a rise in income inequality, a doubling of the official unemployment rate and increased levels of poverty. All of this amid ever-worsening environmental problems as inter alia highlighted in government’s 2006 Environmental Outlook research report which noted “a general decline in the state of the environment”.

The fundamental challenge remains the converting of policy goals into action in order to resolve the problem of disconnection as highlighted in 3.2.2. In dealing with this issue and with particular reference to the National Framework for Sustainable Development, Kranz (2011:79-84) notes that “the issue of implementation points to one of the potential weaknesses of the NFSD process”. She further notes that, “as in the case of other
ambitious government-led programmes, implementation is expected to be challenging if not impossible. In the case of the NFSD, complexities inherent to sustainable development are aggravated by the challenging task of implementing policies in the South African context”. She furthermore notes that this challenge gives rise to what some observers refer to as “weak or limited statehood in respect of implementation of regulation in selected policy fields”.

Geels (2010: 7) also addresses the difficulty of meeting the challenge of converting policy goals into action and notes that it becomes especially challenging if the environmental problem under consideration does not yet negatively affect the immediate functioning of existing systems and processes thus still allowing for business-as-usual. He contends that under this scenario, there is less of a sense of urgency than in the case of functional problems such as those related to energy security that serve to directly affect energy systems A related challenge as highlighted by Hattingh (2001:2) concerns the fact that bureaucrats describe sustainability and sustainable development as vague and ill-defined concepts of “little or no use for practical decision-making and real-life policy implementation”. The latter clearly illustrates the urgent need for a fundamental paradigm shift in terms of policy formulation and approaches to implementation.

Amid a dire need for coming up with solutions to the myriad complex challenges briefly highlighted in the above sections, Swilling et al (2012:313-314) advocate a return to the “values of generosity and restoration” as a critical step towards effecting the profound changes that will be required to effect a just transition to a viable alternative to the current seemingly unassailable and destructive growth path and the associated global ecological and social challenges. In so doing, they contend that humanity may well have no other choice but to look beyond modernity and consider more earnestly the kind of “relational worldviews expressed in the 2008 Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions”. Both these countries seem to have effectively transcended the dualisms (and disconnect – own emphasis) between society and nature, individual and community, us and the ‘other’ as well as science and other ways of knowing and sense-making that are considered to be indispensable to the so-called ‘modern way of thinking’. In a similar vein, Harding (2006:15) also advocates for a reconnection between rational explanation and intuitive understanding in the quest for making sense of this “complex and systemically inter-connected world”.

5. Conclusion

I am strongly of the opinion that South Africa’s approach to sustainability and sustainable development is far too minimalist in focus. This minimalist model lacks real potential to place South Africa on a path to sustainability and sustainable development and could instead divert the country onto a catastrophic developmental path. Such a development track could see the country’s ecosystems being seriously and in some instances, even irreparably degraded to the point where they lose all utility and intrinsic value attributes. This will leave the country in a position where it is neither able to attend to the imperatives of a structural transformation of current patterns of production and
consumption in the economy nor to address the critical issue of (re)distributive justice, the latter which is especially pertinent given the country’s history amid a steady rise in the number of desperately poor.

I further contend that South Africa’s policy and legal framework speaks fairly adequately to the crisis of justice but almost to the total neglect of the crisis of nature, except for ‘references in passing’ and for the sake of broad contextualisation of issues. In reviewing the government’s performance on the scores of policymaking and implementation, there is ample evidence of a focus weighted in favour of justice issues coupled with a serious neglect of justice of nature issues. It is granted that the latter is no doubt attributable to the fact that the major focus of government is on addressing critical socio-economic issues which continue to negatively impact the majority of the country’s population. Amid growing and worsening levels of poverty and all the related social ills, the improvement of peoples’ lives do need to take priority but I contend that this singular focus will prove disastrous in the long run and that this will only become clear once nature is degraded to such a point that vital ecosystem services irretrievably decline and eventually collapse.
Bibliography


Beeld, Johannesburg, 15 February 2012.

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