

TRANSCRIPT

Sustainability Myths: Part 1

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Dr. Goodall and Professor Sachs have laid out some of the key sustainability challenges we face. The global effort to address these challenges are diverse, but they're not always effective. There are many myths and misconceptions around sustainability which can confuse governments, businesses and the average person alike. It's important to identify and clarify these misconceptions because they shape policymaking and regulation from government, strategy and investment decisions in business, and ultimately, the way our economies are managed and run.

The four main myths which Dr. Goodall and Professor Sachs both alluded to are one, that there is a universal understanding and implementation of sustainability. Two, that consumption-driven growth can be sustainable at all. Three, that market mechanisms can effectively solve sustainability challenges. And four, that technological development is a panacea for sustainability.

In this chapter, we'll explore the first two, a universal understanding of sustainability and the unsustainable nature of consumption-driven growth.

The timeline of sustainability's origins mainly highlights Western thinkers and institutions and overlooks the broader global context. The belief that Western nations and institutions are the sole leaders in sustainability efforts, or that their approaches are universally applicable, has persisted for decades. In fact, there is a wealth of knowledge and approaches from around the world that differ from mainstream understandings of sustainability that originated in the West.

The reality is sustainability is inherently contextual. Local factors, including development levels, socioeconomic needs, cultural norms and political systems all greatly influence how sustainability is defined and pursued. What may be a sustainable practice in one region might not apply elsewhere.

For example, in higher income countries, children increasingly need access to laptops or other devices to enable their education. This is something that the One Laptop Per Child initiative sought to bring to lower income nations starting in 2005. The aim was to give children access to education that would improve their life outcomes. But put simply, it failed. Training was not provided to use the laptops, nor were curriculums designed around the sudden injection of technology like this. As one dignitary from Cameroon said about the initiative, "What is needed first is clean water and real schools."



Source: One Laptop per Child

To foster true global sustainability, it is imperative to not only recognise that local conditions will dictate the decision-making of governments and businesses, but also to acknowledge and respect the diversity of approaches that different countries adopt. Instead of imposing one-size-fits-all standards or overly criticising alternate practices, international cooperation should support nations on their distinct sustainability journeys.

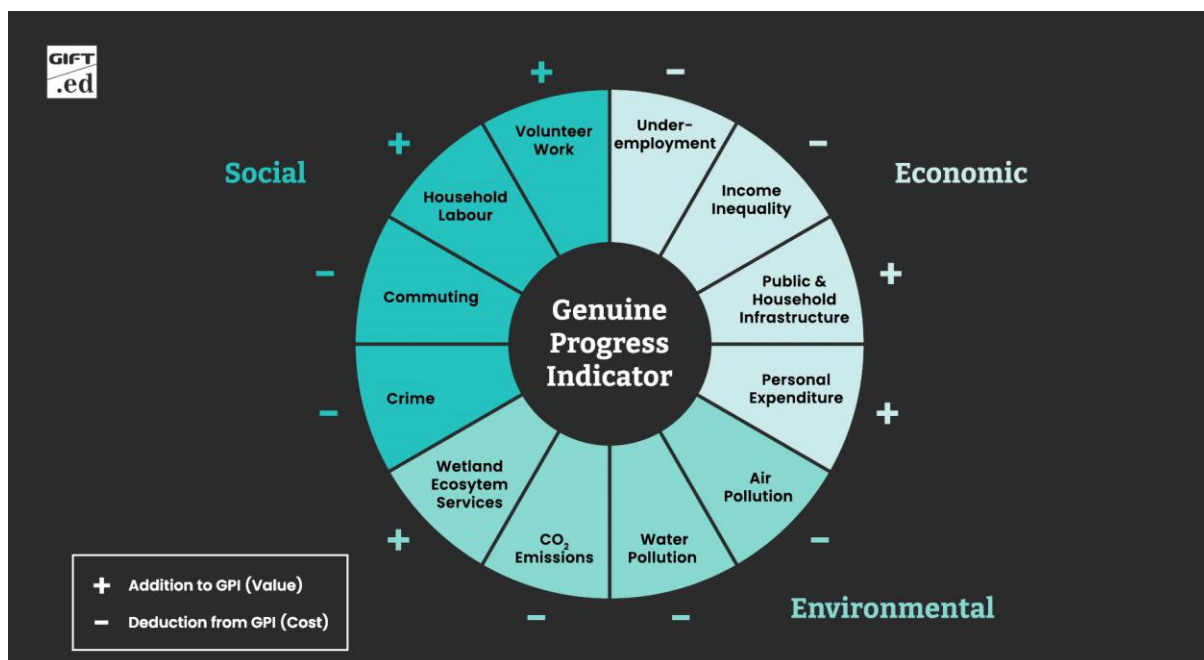
Criticism can inadvertently hinder progress by failing to consider local realities and alienating governments and entire populations. After all, it is the government's mandate to create conducive conditions that incentivise and enforce sustainability. States will only agree to international sustainability frameworks if they respect national sovereignty and believe it will result in a net benefit for their people and economies. This is an especially important point because international efforts to address sustainability challenges, from tackling climate change to reducing poor working conditions in supply chains, have repeatedly fallen short of achieving desired outcomes. A major reason for this shortfall is because governments have either been unwilling or unable to make the trade-offs needed to accelerate sustainability.

In conclusion, the misconception that sustainability efforts are pioneered exclusively by Western or higher income societies, neglects the diverse and contextual nature of sustainability. Appreciating different types of knowledge, embracing localised approaches, respecting national sovereignty, and exchanging best practices can pave the way for a more inclusive and effective global sustainability movement.

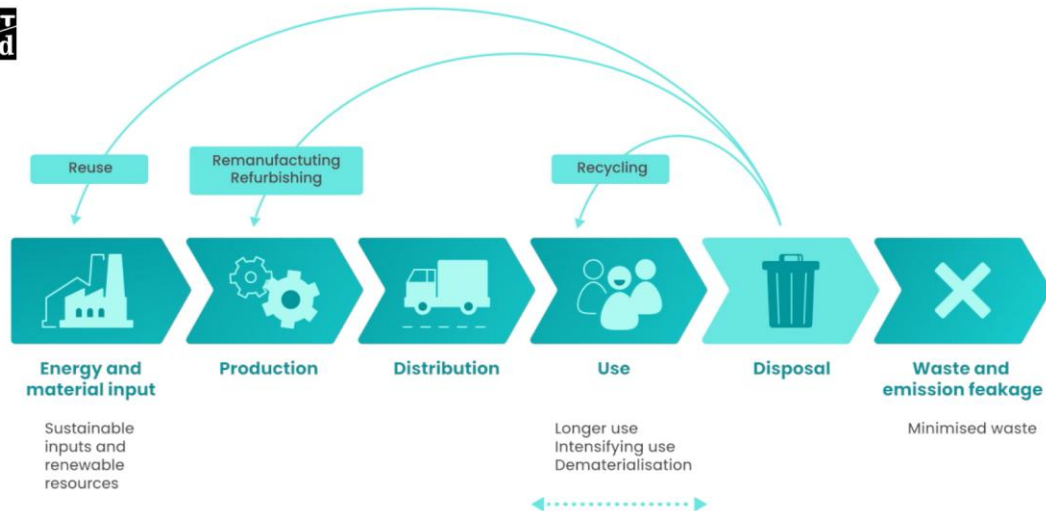
A core element of this lies in how economic growth is perceived to be inextricably linked to consumption of resources. This is what we'll explore in the next myth.

The second big myth to debunk is that consumption-driven growth can still be green or sustainable. The reality is, on a planet of finite resources, infinite growth is a physical impossibility. Economic growth is one of the few universal political objectives. From Albania to Zambia, global governments and the businesses they regulate all focus on growth. This is not an inherently bad thing, as economies and societies should be growing in a positive direction. The challenge is to decouple economic growth from the consumption of finite resources.

One strategy is to reconsider our metrics for economic success. GDP, while a valuable indicator, fails to capture unpaid work and non-market activity that contributes to wellbeing, such as homemaking and childcare, as well as the impact of economic growth on the environment. Alternative metrics such as Gross National Happiness, GNH, or the Genuine Progress Indicator, GPI, incorporate wellbeing, equity and environmental sustainability into their calculations. By prioritising these metrics, nations can pursue policies that promote sustainable practices, equitable growth and improve overall quality of life.



Another approach to decoupling growth from resource consumption is the adoption of a circular economy. The circular economy seeks to minimise waste and make the most of existing resources by emphasising recycling, reusing goods and reducing waste. This approach shifts the focus from a linear "take-make-dispose" model to a circular one where resources are conserved and the lifespan of products is extended. Importantly, circular economies go beyond simply improving the efficiency of our consumption.



Source: Martin Geissdoerfer et al (2020). Circular business models: A review. Journal of Cleaner Production.

Many of us believe that resource efficiency will help address the issues associated with consumption-driven growth, but it remains a short-term solution. In fact, there's an economic theory that describes why. The Jevons Paradox, named after the 19th century economist William Stanley Jevons, illustrates how increased energy efficiency can lead to an unexpected and counterintuitive outcome - higher consumption of fossil fuels.

Jevons Paradox

An increase in efficiency in resource use will generate an increase in resource consumption rather than a decrease



William Stanley Jevons
19th Century Economist

Source: Frontiers in Energy Research, 2018

Here's why. When technological advancements lead to increased efficiency in resource use, the overall consumption of that resource tends to rise rather than decline. In other words, as we make our processes and products more energy-efficient, it becomes cheaper to use energy, leading to its greater consumption. For example, consider the development of more

fuel-efficient cars. While these vehicles consume less fuel per mile, they often become more affordable to operate, thereby encouraging people to drive more frequently. Consequently, the initial gains in energy efficiency are offset by the increased consumption, resulting in a higher overall demand for fossil fuels.

In summary, sustainable prosperity does not mean unlimited growth, but rather growth that enhances wellbeing while respecting planetary boundaries.

In the next chapter, we'll look at the remaining two big myths of sustainability, which focus on markets and technology.