

# Narratives of sustainability: a lesson from Indonesia

Bernice Maxton-Lee

Global institutions are seeking to shape an understanding of sustainability that undermines its challenge to their world view

---

In a world facing mounting environmental problems, from climate change to plastic waste and species loss, there remains considerable confusion and contradiction in narratives and policies surrounding sustainability. Alongside apparent commitments to climate change action, activities that increase economic growth at the cost of climate stability remain unquestioned. A failure to recognise that there is a contradiction between sustainability and neoliberal policies promoting growth has meant that we live with recurrent environmental crises, while dominant economic and social norms remain unchallenged.

What is the reason for this confusion and what can we learn from it? Do the contradictions of environmental socio-policy and climate change politics tell us anything about wider problems of inequality, North-South relations and the balance of power between business, politics, and society?

This article traces the evolution of sustainability politics: it explores the ways in which flawed logic and bad ideas have become part of the common psyche, not just on a national, but on a global scale; and it identifies those who benefit from these ideas. Drawing on my research into narratives framing efforts to conserve

# Soundings

tropical forest in Indonesia, I show how climate politics is dominated by elite, vested interests in business, finance and politics. Far from saving nature, conservation more often acts to save capitalism and to perpetuate deep inequalities between classes and countries. The key to this is the ways in which ideas about sustainability have been framed.

## How the debate is framed

Sustainability is considered here mostly in the context of climate change, because it is by far the most dangerous ecological problem we face. Other environmental issues - such as toxic waste, pollution of groundwater, rivers, lakes, and oceans, air pollution, and species loss - are extremely serious, but none of these presents the existential threat of climate change. Climate change, if allowed to accelerate as it is currently doing, will not only threaten economic stability (the focus of much international rhetoric); it will eventually kill large portions of the Earth's population.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this danger, few in the political, business, or NGO establishment seem to understand what sustainability really means, or to recognise the need for profound and urgent change. Proposed solutions often appear to be radical, innovative and active, but they hardly ever call into question dominant ideas about the fundamentals of economic, political and social arrangements. This means that the language and focus of on-the-ground activities mostly reinforce the logic of current economic - neoliberal - ideology. This ideology has become an unquestioned 'common sense', reinforced by institutions such as the media, religion and education, and it penetrates deep into the way societies think, feel, and behave.<sup>2</sup> The logic and discipline of the market, the concept of competition, and the idea that almost all human activities should make a profit, appear so natural that to question them seems almost unimaginable. But what appears to be inherent common sense is in fact a construction, and one which plays a key role in controlling the norms and ideas of capitalist societies.

Because of the unquestioned logic of the neoliberal model, responses to the sustainability crisis have reinforced the conditions that have produced it. Policies and initiatives undertaken in the name of sustainability have done little more than re-legitimise the market-first, profit-is-king thinking that has made it

## Narratives of sustainability

economically attractive to burn rainforests, dump plastic in the oceans and emit enough greenhouse gases to take us back ten million years in planetary history.<sup>3</sup> In the dominant narrative, sustainability and business go hand in hand. Almost all countries have pledged to meet the Paris climate change commitments on greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, however, economic policy will allow global air travel to double over the next twenty years, and a carbon-emitting flight from London to Amsterdam can be bought for as little as £17 - thereby truly democratising access to climate destruction.<sup>4</sup> An island of waste plastic larger than France is adrift in the Pacific Ocean, poisoning sea birds, fish and marine mammals. Meanwhile the British parliament celebrates their debate of a legal ban on plastic drinking straws, while ignoring the vast distribution of much larger and more destructive plastics throughout the wider economy.

So where does this contradictory narrative that frames sustainability as a few tweaks to an otherwise logical and robust system come from? Who is promoting it, and why?

Neoliberalism has increasingly appropriated the language of sustainability for its own purpose, but it has done so with the consent of the majority, building public acquiescence over time through TV, newspapers, social media and education, until there appears to be no reasonable alternative to the hegemonic way of thinking and behaving. In this case, it helps that the term sustainability does not have a universally agreed definition. This is partly a linguistic issue, because societies only started talking broadly about sustainability in the 1980s. But it is also because its meaning has been subject to contestation and political capture ever since the term was coined. Journalists, politicians, academics and corporate marketing buffs have decided according to their particular interests what facts and background to include and what to ignore, and, taken together, the resultant mix of selective context, strategically-chosen details and unquestioned assumptions has built up a narrative which shapes the way broader society thinks.

Reducing the activities that cause greenhouse gas emissions, through strengthening regulations and government oversights - which is the only viable response to the climate crisis - represents a threat to the most profitable sectors of capitalism. It is therefore unthinkable to most people in neoliberal society. This common-sense idea of seeking profit maximisation at almost any cost is an essential element in the dominant framing of sustainability, and it is this that robs it of any

# Soundings

capacity to engage with genuine ecological sustainability. Since the 1980s, the term sustainability has been increasingly appropriated, as it has been twinned with ideas about economic and social sustainability that reflect neoliberal norms. These ideas are succinctly set out in the vision and strategy section of the World Bank's Comprehensive Development Framework documents of 1999-2000.<sup>5</sup> The World Bank regards environmental sustainability as a 'facet' of poverty, while poverty itself will be eliminated by 'faster, sustainable development' - to be achieved only by implementing '*all*' (their italics) the document's principles, which are built on 'a sound macro-economic framework and institutions - good government, an effective legal system, a well-organized and supervised financial system, social safety nets and social programs'. According to such ideas, sustainable 'development' involves the promotion of commercial growth, the expansion of production, and the spread of neoliberal ideas throughout the 'developing' world. And it also requires the suppression of moves which might restrict profit maximisation and limit capital accumulation. In these and other ways, calls for sustainability that initially presented a challenge to the system were gradually transformed into a narrative that reinforced the neoliberal world view.

The apparently inexorable connection between economic growth and socio-economic stability has become deeply embedded in the subconscious minds of policy-makers, economic planners and corporate empire-makers, as well as to most people in general - and this applies to no less a degree to conservation and sustainable development gurus. This is evident throughout the sphere of environmental conservation, not least in Indonesia, where its programmes to reduce tropical deforestation are reflective of neoliberal common sense.

## **Deforestation in Indonesia**

Indonesian deforestation has come to global prominence because of its perceived role in climate change, as well as through widespread concern about accelerating species loss. In 2012, Indonesia had the highest deforestation rate in the world, higher even than Brazil, which most people see as the world's biggest deforestation demon. And the pace has continued since then. In just three weeks in 2015, coinciding with the United Nations climate change conference in Paris, forest fires in Indonesia released more CO<sub>2</sub> than Germany emitted in a whole year.<sup>6</sup>

## Narratives of sustainability

The way this situation is framed - which also involves the exclusion from the general narrative of much background and detail - reveals a great deal about the underlying causes of Indonesian deforestation, and about climate politics in general. Deforestation in Indonesia is directly caused by expanding industries, including oil palm plantations, mining, and forestry activities such as logging. However, this process of deforestation has always, for more than two centuries, been intimately connected with capitalist development in the global North. That modern Java (previously part of the colonial Dutch East Indies) is almost entirely deforested owes much to the Dutch cultivation of export crops, which underpinned Dutch domestic capitalism in the nineteenth century.

Indonesian independence from colonial rule in 1949 created only a temporary pause in deforestation (independence was declared in 1945, but sovereignty was formally transferred only in 1949). In the twenty years after independence, the country struggled with two particular legacies from Dutch colonial rule. The first was an enormous debt to the Netherlands, because the Indonesian republic had had to take on the Dutch East Indies' debt of 4300 million guilders (equivalent to approximately €18.5 billion in 2016), to be paid as compensation for Dutch loss of territory and income. The second was a political economy structured almost entirely around the extraction of resources. In the immediate post-independence era, partly because the economy during those first twenty years was under reconstruction and lacked cohesion, deforestation was negligible. But Dutch rule had already created an economic base which drained resources and extracted profits for the benefit of foreign corporations and governments. During those years independent Indonesia struggled to keep at bay powerful foreign corporates who wanted to retain their access to valuable Indonesian resources and continue the process of resource extraction.

In 1965, in the culmination of this battle for control, foreign capitalism supported the overthrow of the post-independence government, and helped to install a more capitalist-oriented one. By 1973, Indonesia had become the world's leading supplier of tropical timber, which was its biggest source of foreign exchange after oil. In cooperation with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, there was a rapid rise in foreign investment, logging and large-scale resource exports. The form of capitalism that evolved in Indonesia during the following thirty years was a cocktail of patronage, cronyism and clientism, and this allowed foreign

# Soundings

corporations and quasi-government institutions to conduct development projects and investments that were highly profitable for an alliance of foreign contractors and local elites.

A similar model developed in conservation. The early foundations of conservation in Indonesia were laid down in the colonial period, when the Dutch East Indies government set up nature reserves that were designed to restrict access to the commons by indigenous people, who from this period onwards have been depicted as the main offenders in environmental destruction. These exclusion zones remain an important conservation tool; they are surrounded by fences, 'protected' by armed guards and overseen by a minority elite who decide who may enter and how the land is used. Indigenous forest dwellers are ejected on the basis of their 'unsustainable' practices.<sup>7</sup> Concern about the much larger-scale unsustainable activities of industrialists and agricultural developers is re-directed through this narrative, and policy, allowing such activities to be continued elsewhere.

## Conservation framing

Indonesian deforestation today is very often presented as a problem that began in the 1970s: there is amnesia about the destructive legacies from the colonial past, and the global North's role in promoting, and profiting from, the post-independence commercial exploitation of Indonesia's natural resources. It is also presented almost exclusively in terms of market functions and market failures, a framing which retains assumptions of delinquent local behaviour: corruption (which allows transactions to happen outside the legal framework of the market); the lack of proper institutions to support the market; lack of clarity over private property ownership; incorrect pricing of resources (making it economically attractive to over-extract); and the failure to enforce the legal frameworks that underpin the rational functioning of market dynamics. This focus on internal institutions, corruption and ineffective law enforcement has framed Indonesia as renegade and irresponsible, ignoring the powerful global political, economic and social factors that are driving the environmental destruction. As one World Bank executive in Indonesia put it: 'we work hard to formulate policies that will help', but 'people don't do as they should'.

Framing the deforestation problem in market terms has made it logical for

## Narratives of sustainability

the solutions to be framed in market terms too - and in terms that overlook the continuing role of the North in maintaining the larger-scale structures from which it benefits, while focusing in on smaller-scale projects. Conservation initiatives in Indonesia have included participation in international systems of certification that guarantee that resources have been produced sustainably; participating in the global carbon market by turning forests and peat into tradeable commodities; and the setting up of nature reserves. There has also been a major drive on improving governance structures, in the belief that Indonesia's legal and government infrastructure is not capable of addressing the issue.

The introduction of certification codes of conduct in particular resource sectors is designed to sell higher volumes of 'sustainable' products. For example, certification for wood and paper is provided by the Forest Stewardship Council (an international organisation), while another international body, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, provides certification that palm oil has been produced according to its rules. These certification systems are designed to enhance the competitiveness of 'sustainable' products in the market, thereby helping to drive demand and therefore production of forest-friendly goods. (One of my interviewees, the CEO of an oil palm company in Jakarta, blamed European consumers for demanding increasing volumes of biscuits and French fries. The oil palm companies, he suggested, are helpless in this and are simply responding to demand.)

Making forests and peat into tradeable commodities on a global carbon market works in a number of different ways. The UN's Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) programme offers financial incentives for not cutting down trees. As well as carbon trading it also offers payment for 'ecosystem services'. Through the auspices of REDD+, owners and guardians of ecosystems that produce oxygen, stabilise the water cycle, or store carbon in trees or peat, are paid by polluting industries, in order to 'offset' their emissions. Carbon trading is of course a classic form of market-based response to climate change, but there is another problem here. For it to work, ownership rights must be formalised, so that sellers clearly own the trees and peat, and can thus negotiate with buyers an appropriate price. But these ideas ignore the reality of the situation on the ground and set a false framework for tackling the problem. Land- and property-ownership are not fixed assets in much of rural Indonesia. Many people have access to land, and rights to use it, without formally owning

## Soundings

it. There may also be a number of overlapping or conflicting claims to the land. When global North-style notions of property ownership are imposed on this structure it creates conflict. More powerful claimants may have greater means to formalise their claims through lawyers and administrators, giving them the chance of a land grab.

Many of the people who promote these approaches insist that they are not market tools. They do not recognise that introducing global property norms is a key part of inserting the local economy into the international system. The setting up of nature reserves is also implicated in the imposition of property arrangements derived from models operating in the global North, though they are ostensibly there to protect ecosystems and the animals in them from unsustainable activities: to do that you have to buy and sell land ownership rights. Many nature reserves are funded by eco-tourism, which sells the idea of nature to paying tourists. But some are funded by international investments in exchange for carbon offsetting, such as the Rimba Raya Biodiversity Reserve in Indonesian Borneo, which was funded by the fossil-fuel companies Gazprom and Shell. There has been a concerted effort in Indonesia to improve governance, legal frameworks, and property ownership in order to enclose the commons and facilitate the optimal functioning of the market - something that is supported even by apparently non-interventionist Norwegian programmes.<sup>8</sup>

The framing of market-friendly solutions conceals the unbalanced power relations, and the injustices that they perpetuate. It does not allow space for non-market solutions. This framing, of course, conceals who, in the North, would most benefit from the creation of new commodity markets and international investment opportunities. It ignores the history of trade flows and resource extraction established by Northern countries, which has created path dependency for Indonesia as well as the North: the economic structures, consumption habits and expectations of Northern societies are now rooted in Indonesia's model of economic growth, which is based on the extraction of resources, without fully accounting for ecological damage or the cost to future generations. It fails to address the need for Northern countries to restructure their economies so that the demand for resource extraction could stop. That solutions to deforestation should prioritise economic growth and economic efficiency, on the grounds that sustainable behaviour and ecological (and social) balance will follow, seems to be



## Narratives of sustainability

the only logical possibility. Unfortunately none of these ideas has made a lasting impact on stopping deforestation.

### **Common sense will not save the planet**

Contemporary global conservation has partly focused on Indonesia because tropical forests are now being framed as cost-efficient 'sinks' or sponges for carbon emissions. Tropical forest conservation is presented as a 'win-win' solution to both climate change and biodiversity degradation: keep the trees growing and they will suck up the emissions. Better still, Indonesia's forests, like most other tropical forests, are in the poor world, where 'development' problems exist. (This is another framing which ignores the glaring development problems of the rich world, such as obesity, unemployment and rising levels of inequality.) If people in poor, tropical countries can be paid to leave their forests standing and absorbing carbon, pollution emitted elsewhere can be 'offset', allowing business to continue mostly as usual. The people of the poor world also become richer as a result, reinforcing mainstream ideas of development, through the simple expediency of a wealth transfer from Global North to Global South.

There are two major problems with this thinking. First, societies are encouraged to think of nature as a form of capital, just like financial, human, intellectual or social capital. This only adds to the sustainability problem. Second, the forests' absorption of carbon has no chance of offsetting enough emissions to avoid runaway climate change.

Superficially, the notion of valuing nature can seem helpful. If societies can put a price on the natural world, they can appreciate what they have in a language they are supposed to understand. According to proponents of the idea, the value of 'ecosystem services' to the world economy was roughly €120trn in 2011, more than double global GDP at the time.<sup>9</sup> This is what it would otherwise cost for societies to obtain fresh water, clean air and pollution absorption - assuming of course, that humanity is able to replicate all the natural functions of planet Earth.

The problem is that this approach turns nature into a market-based commodity that can be bought, traded and sold. It makes it easier for businesses to argue that there is greater financial value in destroying a forest and planting oil palm plantations, or eradicating the habitat of an orangutan and building a shopping mall.

# Soundings

The palm oil and the shopping mall can easily be shown to generate a higher income than the rainforest or the home of another species.

Natural Capital(ism) is a market-based approach to tackling the world's ecological troubles that cannot work, precisely because it requires the same market and money-based approach that is their cause. There is, of course, no such thing as natural capital, only nature. The idea that societies should put a financial value on nature only adds to the sustainability problem, reinforcing the common sense of the market as the arbiter of all life, and an acceptance that almost anything goes as long as it can be justified in financial terms.

As a measure to mitigate or minimise climate change or spread the benefits of economic 'development', the concept of natural capital is ineffective and dangerously misleading. It is not a win-win solution. The winners are the shareholders of polluting companies and the bankers who trade in polluting and destructive industries. Everybody else loses, from the poor in the global South to current and future generations who will experience the full and frightening effects of climate change.

Proponents of the natural capital concept argue that although the system is imperfect, it is the best idea we have, and we just need to get the pricing right. But this is thinking inside the bubble: the market is seen as the only sensible regulator of its own activities. The environment remains an externality: we just need to work out how to commodify it correctly. But leaving the fate of the planet in the hands of commodity traders and bankers is like letting small children regulate their own meals. Given the choice, most children will choose sweets and ice cream over fresh fruit and vegetables any day, regardless of the fact that these choices will cause future health problems and rot their teeth. The market does not care about nature or future generations. Putting a price tag on oxygen will not change that.

## **Environmental framing as a tool for dispossession**

The political and social consensus underpinning the current socio-economic system is also maintained through the framing of environmental 'goods' and 'bads' (those who behave responsibly, whose example can be followed, and those who behave recklessly, whose behaviour should be corrected), while all the while the responsibility of the Global North is concealed. This makes it easier to justify - in the name of climate

## Narratives of sustainability

stability and sustainable development - interventions that embed neoliberal ideas and remove even further the chance for poor countries to plan their own development.

As Indonesia's first post-independence leader, Sukarno, recognised, hegemonic projects need an enemy to be absorbed into the prevailing common sense, in order to assert the dominant group's supremacy. In colonial Indonesia the supremacy of the white race was asserted over the brown-skinned one.<sup>10</sup> In sustainability, it is poor countries, with their burgeoning populations and polluting industrialisation, that are blamed for the destruction, pollution and waste. Meanwhile powerful and wealthy economies such as the US and Europe, which are the main drivers of the destruction - through direct ownership of corporations and investments, or their own, sometimes state-directed activities - have repeatedly failed to change their own economic practices. It is in the main poor countries, such as Indonesia, that are framed as environmentally irresponsible, and put under pressure to reduce their ecologically damaging behaviour.

Among the multiple injustices of this framing, there is the historical injustice that much of industrial and economic policy in the Global South has been coerced by the economic and political institutions of the Global North: institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF have historically pushed energy, infrastructure and extractive technologies as conditions for loans. A decontextualised understanding of geography, demographics, development strategy and political ideology (democracy, freedom, and free markets) is presented as the basis on which Indonesia should decide on policies for reducing GHG emissions.

It is, of course, overly simplistic to blame resource over-extraction, and over-production, entirely on international business. Plenty is being driven by regional and local businesses too. But such over-extraction, over-production and over-consumption represents the common sense instilled and maintained by a system in which the Global North is still overwhelmingly dominant. Indonesia's economic and geo-political stability depends on its continuing to provide investment opportunities for international and domestic capital. Yet its limited political control, given its fragile economic and industrial base, itself the result of the historical and continuing pressure of international capital, is ignored. So too is the socio-economic framework of the Global North; the consumption which underpins social perceptions of success; the doctrine of shareholder value maximisation; the addiction to economic growth; and the resulting dependence

## Soundings

on cheap production and industrial processing facilities, raw material extraction and cheap waste processing in the Global South. The flip side to the 'bad South' framing would be a recognition that over-production by companies and investments from the Global North requires ever-increasing consumption by everyone.

Deforestation in Indonesia is not being stopped, and global climate change is not being effectively addressed at the international level, because structural realities, interests and expectations have locked societies into fixed ways of thinking and behaving. The networks of economic exchange, wealth generation, and material and cultural expectation and understanding, have created a powerful and unquestioned belief system that reinforces the status quo.

The failure of the system's solutions to the climate change problem also stem from this narrative. Responses to climate change have proved inadequate because they have mostly focused on maintaining economic growth, and not on reducing carbon emissions sufficiently to avoid a dangerous increase in average global temperatures. There has been no transition to sustainability because of powerful entrenched and interlinked interests, and because complex networks of education, communication, consumption and socio-economic experience reinforce this common sense. People are led to believe that the current economic model is mostly fit for purpose; that it requires only a few modifications; and that more complete and efficient participation in market dynamics will help the transition to a sustainable path for global society. The lack of an alternative is made real by this belief system: while the assumed logic of current thinking is supported by elites, intellectuals and the masses, there can be no significant transition. Only a radical change to the objectives and assumptions of the economic system will make a difference.

Today's societies are at the epicentre of a clash between two abstract, intangible concepts: neoliberalism and sustainability. (An interviewee from Unilever told me that the company's two greatest challenges were 'defining what "sustainable" means and showing value to shareholders'.) Unfortunately for us, the less dominant of these abstract concepts is the one that, if ignored, will have the most tangible long-term effect. For if we do not arrive at an understanding of what sustainability is in the not-so-long run we are all dead (to paraphrase John Maynard Keynes).

**Bernice Maxton-Lee** is a PhD Student at City University of Hong Kong.

# Narratives of sustainability

---

## Notes

1. J. Kanter, 'Scientist: Warming Could Cut Population to 1 Billion', *New York Times*, 13.3.09: <https://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/13/scientist-warming-could-cut-population-to-1-billion/>.
2. See Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea, 'Common-sense neoliberalism': [www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/03\\_commonsenseneoliberalism.pdf](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/03_commonsenseneoliberalism.pdf).
3. I. Dunlop and D. Spratt, 'Facing Reality: Reframing Climate Change as an Immediate Existential Risk', 3.7.17.
4. IATA, '2036 Forecast Reveals Air Passengers Will Nearly Double to 7.8 Billion', Press Release, International Air Transport Association, 24.10.17: [www.iata.org/pressroom/pr/Pages/2017-10-24-01.aspx](http://www.iata.org/pressroom/pr/Pages/2017-10-24-01.aspx); Jetcost, 'Cheap Flights Comparison', 6.8.18: <https://www.jetcost.co.uk/>.
5. [http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01013/WEB/IMAGES/CEXP\\_WEB.PDF](http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01013/WEB/IMAGES/CEXP_WEB.PDF)
6. Guido van der Werf, 'Global Fire Emissions Database (GFED)', 16.11.15: [www.globalfiredata.org/updates.html](http://www.globalfiredata.org/updates.html). In Indonesia fire is used as a tool to clear forest for agricultural development.
7. For excellent analysis of these historical dynamics, see various works by Tania Murray Li.
8. The Norway-Indonesia Bilateral Partnership gives management and financial assistance to strengthen legal frameworks, institutions, and data transparency.
9. R. Costanza et al, 'Changes in the Global Value of Ecosystem Services', *Global Environmental Change* 26, May 2014: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2014.04.002>.
10. C. Adams, *Sukarno: An Autobiography*, Gunung Agung 1966, p44.