

# BIOPOLITICS: BEYOND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

[Christos Efthymiopoulos](#)

Physicist

Biopolitics International Organisation

Greece

## Comparison between biopolitics and sustainable development

### *Sustainable Development*

According to the United Nations Commission for Environment and Development, sustainable development is: "the development that satisfies the needs of the present generation, without jeopardising the right and ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs."

In recent years, sustainable development has become a concept parallel to environmentally-friendly development. Different aspects of sustainability have been incorporated in almost every field of environmental policy. Given this parallelism, it is worth noticing that the term environment is absent from the very definition of sustainability as given by the UNCED. The focus of sustainability is on development, not the environment.

The report *Our Common Future*<sup>1</sup> refers to sustainability as "a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of ecological development and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations." While the above definition makes reference to "ecological development" as one of the elements of a sustainable world, the context makes clear that the concern for the environment - ecological development - extends insofar as to serve a well stated objective: meeting human needs and aspirations. The perspective to protect the environment arises from the value of nature mainly as a resource to be "reasonably" exploited for the sake of meeting human needs. But the inner value of the bio-environment is not equally appreciated.

Thus, we conclude that sustainable development is an anthropocentric concept. A recent reconfirmation of this anthropocentrism, as pointed by Max Oelschlaeger,<sup>2</sup> is to be found in Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration: "Human beings are at the centre of concern for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature."

### *Biopolitics*

Since the inception of the Biopolitics International Organisation in 1985, the concept of biopolitics has been growing world-wide very rapidly. No short definition of biopolitics has been given so far, to the best of our knowledge. In *Biopolitics. Dimensions of Biology*<sup>3</sup> by Agni Vlavianos-Arvanitis, biopolitics is presented as a quest for new values for the next millennium; this quest can be achieved by placing respect and appreciation of bios (life) at the core of every human endeavour.

Obviously biopolitics is a biocentric concept. Biopolitics stresses the inner value of the gift of bios and the need to respect and protect the environment and all forms of life.

### *Comparison*

Three key elements distinguishing biopolitics from sustainable development are shown in Table 1:

**Table 1.** A comparison of sustainable development with biopolitics

	<b>Sustainable development</b>	<b>Biopolitics</b>
Core	anthropocentric	biocentric
Focus	on development	on values
Time Scale	one generation interval	millennium

*First*, the core of sustainability is centred at the needs of human beings, i.e. it is anthropocentric while the core of biopolitics is biocentric.

*Second*, the focus of sustainable development is mainly on development. The most important issues dealt with by sustainable development

concern the sustainable exploitation of natural resources in all sectors of production, and especially in agriculture and industry. Sustainable development also addresses the structural changes in the economy and in the accompanying social institutions necessary to ensure a continuously self-maintained balance between development and the preservation of environmental resources.

In biopolitics, the focus is on the need to provide a new value system for society. Mobilising all sectors of society towards a biocentric value system invokes an ongoing action, aimed at the grassroots of society, not just at the authority level. This action covers fields such as bio-education, bio-diplomacy and bio-culture and it is very different from environmental activism.

*Finally*, the characteristic time-scale of sustainable development is the interval between two successive human generations. Namely, each human generation is responsible for protecting the ability of development of the immediately following generation. In this way, the responsibility passes from generation to generation so as to continuously maintain the chain of sustainable development. On the other hand, the characteristic time scale of biocentric development is the millennium. The millennium approach is set by considering the evolution of bios on our planet. If the lifetime of bios is compared to a 24-hour day, then the whole of human history takes place only in the last few seconds of the day. This reveals the deep ethical responsibility that humans must carry towards protecting bios on our planet.

### **Beyond sustainability**

The means to achieve sustainable development and biopolitics are not totally different. There is a degree of overlapping. The principal tools used to implement sustainable development are the ones of economic policy. The idea of sustainable economics is to internalise the external costs, i.e. to incorporate all the negative output to the environment during the production, consumption and disposal of a certain product into the price of the product. In this way, both producers and consumers are forced to pay the cost of the negative output to the environment.

A definition of appropriate methods to estimate, quantitatively, the environmental cost poses a difficult scientific problem. It is to be stressed, also, that sustainable economics is a two-dimensional economics, i.e. one based on finding points of balance between supply and demand, although the environmental cost and our willingness to pay for it differentiates sustainable economics from traditional economic theories.

Biopolitics proposes a three-dimensional model of growth in which profit is also measured in terms of the progress of society in education, culture and quality of life, elements which become measurable parts of a nation's wealth.<sup>4</sup>

There are many common features between the two models, since both are in favour of technological innovations - cleaner production, recycling, new agricultural methods etc. - or changes in our lifestyle aimed at reducing the negative impact on the environment. Nevertheless, there is also a qualitative difference in the two models.

Although we are still far from the implementation of a biocentric model of three dimensional growth, the concept of sustainable development has an inherent contradiction. The process of internalising the external costs does not imply, as could be erroneously believed, that the negative output to the environment would be diminished to zero as a result of its incorporation into the cost of products. In fact, there will be some "tolerable" environmental cost, i.e. one that consumers and producers do not wish to pay for in order to avoid. But this, contrary to the goals of sustainability, will create a cumulative extra load to the quality of life of future generations. The causes of this contradiction are very profound. A verbatim translation of sustainability leads to the so-called strong definition, zero use of non-renewable resources,<sup>5</sup> and to a strict target, zero emissions.<sup>6</sup> Any other alternative leads to the compromising of the future of the next generations. But neither of the above goals would be feasible within the framework of an anthropocentric model, which considers the bio-environment as a resource tank and, at the same time, as a negative output tank for human activities. In other words, a key problem is the misunderstanding of the position of human beings within the bio-environment.

Thus, the need for biocentric reforms in society becomes apparent. Sustainable development has been a very successful model and has led to a wide spectrum of technological innovations related to environmental policy. In the long run, the global community needs to move beyond sustainability, towards biocentric values leading to our harmonious coexistence with the bio-environment.

### **References**

1. United Nations Commission for Environment and Development (1987) Our common future.
2. Oelschlaeger M. (1995) Reconciling profit with biodiversity. An inventory of resources ready to hand. In: A. Vlavianos-Arvanitis (ed.), Business strategy for the bio-environment III. Biopolitics International Organisation, Athens, pp. 48-57
3. Vlavianos-Arvanitis A. (1985) Biopolitics. Dimensions of biology. Biopolitics International Organisation, Athens, 16 pp.
4. Vlavianos-Arvanitis A. (1996) Biopolitics. A new dimension of the concept of profit. In: A. Vlavianos-Arvanitis (ed.), Business strategy for the bio-environment III. Biopolitics International Organisation, Athens, pp. 11-25
5. Simonis U. (1993) Structural economic change and the bio-environment. In: A. Vlavianos-Arvanitis (ed.), Business strategy for the bio-environment I. Biopolitics International Organisation, Athens, pp. 27-42
6. Pauli G. (1996) How to compete in the 21st century. The importance of an ethical and environmental corporate commitment. In: A. Vlavianos-Arvanitis (ed.), Biopolitics - the bio-environment V. Biopolitics International Organisation, Athens, pp. 108-116

**Christos Efthymiopoulos** is a physicist currently completing a Ph.D. in Astronomy at the University of Athens, and working on a research project at the Department of Astronomy and Applied Mathematics of the Academy of Athens. He has received a full scholarship award by the Foundation of State Scholarships of Greece. An active member of the Biopolitics International Organisation since 1988, he is also a Junior Member of the Hellenic Astronomical Society and of the United Nations Association of Greece.