Sustainable Work – Concepts and Elements of Practice

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__Abstract:__ Work is almost totally absent in the debate about societal sustainability and the development of sustainable forms of production. However, social orientations related to work and workplace practices contain underestimated and overlooked possibilities which could be used to enhance efforts towards sustainability. Likewise changes in the direction towards sustainability can contribute to the quality of work.

The link between the world of work and sustainability is examined by studying the origins of institutional changes and organisational renewal towards socially and environmentally sustainable production among environmentalists, business and labour. A common vision of sustainable environmentalism and social sustainable working life development is provided through a rough outline of a concept of sustainable work. The concept of sustainable work will be pinned down by confronting the current concept of sustainability with a classical, ontological, concept of work, were work is seen as the core element in individual and social development.

The article provides suggestions for the development of a sustainable work practice illustrated by a reflexive transition management practice for sustainability and a trade union practice where labour policy and handling of workers interest is linked to efforts to bring about societal change in the direction of sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainability, Work, Participation, Sustainable Labour.

1. Introduction and point of departure

Sustainability is a holistic concept which includes environmental, social and economic issues. Academic discussions of how to enhance sustainability have, however, not involved the importance of work and the shaping of future work. Our point of departure is that work is essential for sustainable development due to work's active, creative and developing nature. Work is the source of production as well as reproduction – work is where both environmentally friendly and unfriendly products and processes are developed. Work is the central factor for both welfare and poverty, for integration and exclusion, for sickness and well-being as well as the source of by far the majority of all technological innovations.

Social orientations and values related to work also have a great importance for the extent of consumerism, for the use of the car, for the well being of the family, for time and resources available for participating in political and social activities. Work plays an important part in the shaping of individual's identity (authority and self-consciousness).

Work is also an important factor when it comes to people's integration into society, in which work plays a considerable role in providing individuals a place in society. It is mainly through work that individuals contribute to the development of their society. It is through our work that we create the basis for our own existence, and it is through our work that we contribute to changing our material surroundings and the institutions we live in. It is therefore reasonable to view work as the single most important link between mankind and nature. Houses, cities and landscapes have been created through work. The supply of goods offered in the supermarket has been created through creative and conscious work processes. The institutions we live in – schools, rest homes and cafés have been created and are being maintained through conscious human work. Also the more informal, but nonetheless important, institutions, such as the family, local community and voluntary associations are developed and maintained through work processes – through cooking, cleaning, laundry work, welfare work etc. Informal and unpaid work interacts with paid work – it is, to a greater extent, paid work which sets the material boundaries and time frames for the, very important, unpaid work.

Work has always affected and changed humans, their values, goals and social orientations. People experience new dimensions of reality and life through their work. In order to elaborate the relation between the world of work and sustainability we need to take a closer look at the origins of the movements towards sustainable development.

2. Sustainability and the missing link to work

The concept of sustainability is still being developed. Here we will not provide a detailed reading of the content and development of the concept, but merely mention some key discussions and viewpoints which have arisen during the short history of the concept, and we will relate the different conceptions of sustainability to work.

2.1. First efforts to integrate the environmental and social dimension – the creation of the concept of sustainability

When sustainability was first mentioned in the 1987 UN report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Report), it was defined as the ability to 'ensure that it (development) meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Sustainability has, according to the report, both an environmental and a social dimension, and as it is pointed out in the report, these two dimensions are clearly related. It is senseless to ask poor peasants in the third world, living in hunger and having a high mortality rate, to act sustainably. Survival is their first priority. Access to fundamental material requirements – economic growth allocated to poor people – is a precondition for sustainable development in the third world. However, similar problems arose in the highly industrialised world where people are living well above the line of absolute poverty. Also in our part of the world, the experience of the environmental movement was that it is impossible to implement radical environmental improvements that threaten short sighted economic interests: Companies and industries threatened by environmental demands have proved to be very effective at defending the status quo, supported by employee's and trade unions. When the environmental movement suggested environmental improvements that threatened the existence of any kind of business or any specific jobs, both business and trade unions reacted so strongly that the environmental

movement lost the battle. Consequently, in the 1970s and 1980s a tension arose between business and labour on one side and environmental movement on the other. Labour saw environmentalism as a social threat, and the environmentalists saw labour as a reactionary force.

The Brundtland commission suggested a concept of sustainability that integrated environmental improvement, social justice, and economic growth. This integration seemed, however, quite illusory when the strongest movement for social justice, the labour movement, fought the environmental movement and the strongest movement for growth, the business community, did what was possible to undermine the environmentalists. As a result, many environmentalists saw the harmony between environmental improvement, social justice and economic growth, which the Brundtland commission argued for, as a mere construction of ideology. An ideology which could water down the visions of the environmental movement and would subordinate the environment to interests of business and economy.

For the environmental movement there were two roads to reach the goals of real environmental sustainability: firstly, the 'negative road' that introduced new restrictions on production and consumption to relieve the pressure on nature, and secondly the 'positive road' that leads to alternative forms of production and an alternative economy, creating organic farming, alternative energy, alternative retail trade etc. The integration of the concepts of the environment, social justice and growth was, until recently, a paper tiger created by the Brundtland commission with no practical implications, at least not in the industrialised world. This situation has, to a certain extent, changed in the recent years as the concept of sustainability has had a strong revival. There have been two decisive steps in creating the revival: The movement of ecological modernisation and the appearance of a business orientated concept of sustainability. These two steps will briefly be outlined in the following.

2.2. The ecological modernisation movement

When 'ecological modernisation' took over the agenda in the 1990s, environmental policy became widely accepted. Hajer has described how ecological modernisation realised itself in a huge institutionalisation of environmental policy (Hajer 1996). The environment has been institutionalised in national policies and regulations, local authorities have developed environmental regulations, companies have introduced environmental management more or less successfully as a reflexive institutional reorganisation of industrial society in an attempt to overcome the ecological crisis (Mol 1995). The environment has been one of the most important issues in international regulation organised around a handful of significant international conferences. Ecological modernisation institutionalised environmentalism, and what was a movement of opposition was to a certain extent integrated in the established economic and social structures.

The leading spokesmen of ecological modernisation argued for a growth and technology optimistic approach. They argued for a practice with a focus on expert knowledge to find solutions to ecological problems. At the organisational level, the integration of environmental issues is viewed as a plus-sum game. Environmental initiatives will, according to this approach, be converted to productivity gains while societal needs are subordinated. Management practice in this approach is closely linked to strategic market and product considerations in relation to the new competitive conditions created by environmental discourses. Ecological modernisation at the organisational level is primarily handled as a question of finding the right management tools. Therefore, workers have met ecological modernisation in the form of new technical requirements in the workplace. Sometimes as formalised environmental management systems (ISO 14000 series or EMAS), but most often as less

prestigious changes in procedures and work tasks related to the saving of resources, handling of waste, registration of the use of chemicals etc. (Mayer-Johansen & Stauning 2001; Lund 2001). Ecological modernisation at company level is generally a continuity of already known principles and activities. Environmental modernisation fits in very well with quality control and quality development. Often environmental control implies further control of the employees'. This has frequently been experienced as a further degradation of work, because the enterprises' new orientation towards more environmental friendly production forms are deeply rooted in the Tayloristic tradition of creating a more effective work organisation. This is legitimated by discourses concerning new competitive conditions and consumer preferences. Environmental improvements therefore have been introduced and experienced as unpleasant necessities, which the employees had to adjust themselves to.

On the other hand, ecological modernisation at company level opened up new possibilities for social relations at company level, and in the relation between work and society. We will elaborate on this theme in the section concerning reflexive transition management towards sustainability.

However, ecological modernisation led to a downgrading of the former conflict between the environmental movement and the labour movement. Gradually, the labour movement gained a positive view of the environmental movement because environmental modernisation could create new jobs. Furthermore, collaboration regarding environmental issues could give the labour movement a new platform for political influence. Therefore, the labour movement changed its strategy towards the environment seeing opportunities in environmental improvements to ensure long-term employment interests. The labour movement also wanted to use the environmental agenda in the development of the members' working conditions and strengthen the prevention of health risks at the workplace level. Furthermore, trade unions' reorientation towards sustainability provided an opportunity for the movement to strengthen its societal engagement and to maintain the movement as an organisation with a project for societal change. When, at the beginning of the 1990s, Scandinavian trade unions introduced the strategy of the developmental work, it was the first time sustainability was taken into consideration in relation to the members' interests. Since then, sustainability has been linked to the question of workplace democracy and a proper union strategy for sustainable development has been developed (LO 2001). However, in recent years the labour union's support for sustainable development seems to be totally outdistanced by business.

3. Business for sustainability

A new wave is rising to overflow business. A wave that seems to be just as strong and perhaps even stronger than the quality wave, which started to rise in the 1980s. The wave still does not have a definite name, but several nicknames: Corporate social responsibility, triple bottom line, sustainable business, and the civil corporation. The wave started to rise in the middle 1990s. It was a movement that went beyond the regulatory oriented and formalised ecological modernisation. A movement that went for new partnerships for environmental and social improvements with leading multinational companies as a driving force. John Elkington, one of the pioneers of that movement, explained why he, as a former environmentalist, turned to business:

> "A key message [for the environmental movement of the 1980s] was that unless and until the environmental community learned to work with business and through markets, many of the changes we wanted to get simply would not happen" (Elkington 1997, p.ix).

For environmentalists like Elkington, it became clear that business had become the most powerful institution at the expense of the national states and social movements and therefore business is the only actor with enough resources to address the required changes. This dominant role of business called for self-critical reflection concerning businesses' responsibility towards nature and society as a whole.

The new business strategy for sustainable development goes beyond the greening of industry. This was expressed by Stuart L. Hart in Harvard Business Review as follows:

> "The roots of the problems [related to sustainability] are political and social issues that exceed the mandate and the capabilities of any corporation. At the same time, corporations are the only organization with the resources, the technology, the global reach, and, ultimately, the motivation to achieve sustainability" (Hart 1997).

3.1. New governance driven by sustainable business

The wave of business oriented sustainability is still new, but it has already made some significant marks in business policy and in national and international policy. One of these has been the establishment of several high profiled partnerships between authorities, NGOs (including labour organisations) and businesses.

In 2000, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) under UN's auspices published the first version of 'Global Reporting Guidelines on Economic, Environmental and Social Performance' (Global Reporting Initiative 2000). These guidelines were made after three years of dialogue with stakeholders and business. The guidelines are continuously under revision, and in 2002 an outline of new guidelines was presented to the public. The aim of the guidelines is to give companies a tool that can create a clear and reliable picture for the company's internal and external stakeholders of how the company affects social conditions, the environmental conditions, and socio-economic conditions. Hundreds of big international companies are now reporting in accordance with GRI guidelines.

GRI is not the only newly established partnership between business and NGOs to promote sustainability. Dozens of such partnerships have been established in recent years such as 'The Nordic Partnership'. In the partnership, there are 17 large Nordic companies with around half a million employee's worldwide, and a turnover of more than 73 billion EURO. These companies have, in their common statement, committed themselves to sustainability. In compliance with the traditions and background of the Nordic welfare states, the 17 companies promise to integrate sustainability into their strategies, organizations and business models. They, furthermore, promise to stay in open dialogue with stakeholders and society as a whole and to act responsibly (The Nordic Partnership 2000).

Sustainability defined as the 'triple bottom line' is not only used by business. The EU has adopted the concept (European Commission July 2001). Local authorities are using the concept to evaluate their own activities and the performance of the whole location. Sustainability seems to be a new rapidly growing common point of orientation for companies, public and private organisations. In 1987, the Brundtland Commission suggested a holistic concept of sustainability integrating environmental, social and economic issues. However, it turned out to be very difficult for NGO's and national and international authorities to achieve this integration. What was not possible for NGOs and public authorities seems however to be possible for business. Ten years after the Brundtland Report, business realised the vision of a holistic approach to sustainability. Businesses work out strategies for integrated

sustainable development, make partnerships on that issue, and measure themselves according to the strategy.

An overall assessment of the rhetoric and debate of business orientated sustainability sounds promising, however, the reality and substance of actual change is still to be examined. Wide gaps between programmes and reality are often reported in case studies on environmental management, social responsibility, and human resource management. Triple bottom line reporting can be combined with business as usual.

To understand the potentials of the new movement for business orientated sustainability it is necessary to understand why companies commit themselves to sustainability.

3.2. Sustainability and Business Incentives

John Elkington, and many with him, presents us with a kind of macro functionalism as an explanation for the widespread interest in sustainability among business actors: Business is threatening nature and society, and without a living nature and a vital society there will be no business. The nation states are, under the pressure of globalisation, too weak to ensure the necessary responsibility. Because of that, businesses have to take responsibility for nature and society, for their own sake (Elkington 1997).

No matter how rational, and morally correct this argument seems to be, it is in conflict with the basic ideas of the market economy. The moral foundation of the market economy has for centuries been an utilitarian point of view saying that man following his private interests best serves the common good. Economic man is organised in companies, and the moral obligations of the companies generally say that companies are serving the common good best when they are following their own private interests. Company behaviour and market institutions are built on that fundamental point of view. It would be astonishing if a public concern for the environment and social relations by themselves would be enough to change the fundamentals of the market institutions without any political pressure and conflicts.

Simon Zadek, one of the pioneers of the triple bottom line, gives another more sophisticated explanation of why companies are moving in the direction of sustainability. According to him 'the new economy' based on knowledge, organisational development, networking and global orientation, opens up opportunities for a moral orientation of the companies. 'The new economy' is not moral in itself, but an important factor in 'the new economy' is trust – internally and externally. Trust is necessary to create openness, commitment and learning among the employee's, and externally trust is a necessity for a functioning network. Trust can be strengthened through partnerships with NGOs because NGOs generally are highly trusted. Trust can also be strengthened through visible sustainable conduct of the companies, because it shows the company to be a responsible and caring organisation. However, the company's sustainable behaviour will not only give the company legitimacy. Partnerships and contacts with stakeholders also provide the company with new opportunities for learning and new opportunities for developing its strategy (Zadek 2001). Partnerships and contacts give the company a better understanding of the world in which it operates. The new economy will, however, not necessarily lead to civil, sustainable orientated companies. According to Zadek, the creation of new governance beyond the single company is a precondition for sustainable business development. The single company can only be sustainable if it moves in that direction together with others. The partnership between companies and NGOs supported by national and international regulation is the foundation for a new type of sustainable governance. A company joining that kind of partnership will have four types of advantage:

1. The company will prevent itself from uncomfortable and often also very costly criticisms. Contact with the NGOs and the public gives the company an understanding of what could be expected.
2. Money can be saved, because the partnership gives the company access to knowledge about how to save resources, how to make a good deed by occupying low paid disabled or minorities etc.
3. The company develops its strategic capacity through the partnership. It can create new orientations for the company and open new markets.
4. Responsibility creates new opportunities for learning, which are essential in the new economy. It develops new relations and new insights.

However, there are also other reasons for business oriented sustainability which will hardly improve the environment. Zadek refers to a critic of UN's 'Global Compact' where business orientated sustainability is criticised on three points:

1. The companies move the limelight from their weaknesses to their strengths, and the company's orientation towards sustainability makes it more complicated for NGOs and labour organisations to bring the weaknesses to light. Examples include McDonald's and Philip Morris who have succeeded in becoming recognised as highly social responsible companies among fund managers, although McDonald's is providing people with an unhealthy diet and Philip Morris supplying customers with cigarettes that are killing thousands of people each month.

2. Business seeks to avoid public regulation that forces business to make environmental improvements by establishing a voluntary collaboration with NGOs controlled by business.

3. The drive towards globalisation and liberalisation is further legitimised through partnerships and social responsibility of the companies. Through them the business orientated sustainability strengthened a development which is fundamentally destructive seen from a sustainability point of view.

Big money is used to lobby against public regulation, and partnerships can be used as a means in the lobbying for deregulation. A company can produce a product which is damaging for both man and nature, and at the same time have a personal policy that gives high priority to diversity and the company can support animal rights and create partnerships with NGOs on these issues.

According to Zadek, this criticism is relevant. On the other hand, partnerships with NGOs are a double-edged sword, both for the companies and for the NGOs. A certain legitimacy can be created through the partnerships, but if the company does not perform in accordance with the established legitimacy it will be hit harder by bad public relations. Likewise, if NGOs make partnerships with companies with a bad reputation it will harm the legitimacy of the organisation.

'Social responsibility' can be used to avoid public regulation. Nevertheless, companies with a certain level of responsibility have an interest in a strict public regulation. Following strong criticisms, Nike found itself forced to oppose strict rules for the working conditions in their supplier companies and control that the suppliers observed the rules. It would have been much cheaper for Nike to have an effective public regulation of the working conditions of their suppliers.

According to Zadek, institutionalisations over, besides, and across the individual company are necessary to create a sustainable development. However, institutions related to sustainability cannot create sustainable development without the involvement of business. Business is the most important element in the development towards sustainability, because the behaviour of business is crucial for society and the environment:

> "The role of business in society is the 21st century's most important and contentious public policy issue. Business is increasingly moulding societal values and norms, and defining public policy and practice, as well as being the dominant route through which economics and financial wealth is created. How business is done will underpin how local and global communities of the future address social and environmental visions and imperatives. This is true whatever one believes to be critical in creating a just and sustainable world. Economic welfare, peace and security, global warming, human and animal welfare – to name just a few – are and will continue to be deeply informed by business practice" (Zadek 2001, p. 1).

Business is, according to Zadek, the decisive element of social and environmental development. However, one must ask what he actually means by 'business', and who is driving business. Business is not just what is going on in the market, which actually seems to be a minor element of 'business'. What seems to be the most important factor when it comes to sustainability is the process of production and policies related to it namely technological innovation, the use of raw materials and the distribution of products, personal policies, learning, public relations, networking etc. Business therefore represents the huge productive forces of our societies. The productive forces are not developed by themselves and the production processes is not a 'perpetual motion machine'. The processes of development and practice in production are ultimately driven by working people – skilled artisans, semi-skilled workers, engineers, clerks, marketing people, designers etc. Networks exist by virtue of people with knowledge, values and will. New ideas are not created under the command of the CEO but in social processes founded on mutual trust and creativity.

In most management oriented literature, there is no subject or personal perspectives. Companies are doing this and that, and the CEO is quoted for goals and experiences of the company. Even the CEO is no real subject. He (usually it is a he) is just a representative for the company and its strategic decisions. This is also the case in the management oriented literature on sustainability. Sustainable development seems to be a result of rational, necessary and unavoidable decisions made by the company. The literature ignores the fact that sustainability comes out of experiences, knowledge, values and will of people related to the company. The CEO can perhaps create frames, which are fertile for sustainability, but he cannot create sustainability. Sustainability is created by thousands of productive workers. The same can be said for the sustainable governance that, according to Zadek, will create the basis for the sustainable company. Without active support from both producers and users, neither business nor NGOs can create powerful governance regarding sustainability.

Employees, and in particular shop floor workers, are almost absent in the literature about the environment and sustainability. In the business oriented literature on sustainability, workers do not exist as an active subject. However, the literature emphasises that occupational health, diversity management, minimum wages etc. are important elements of a sustainable business. These improvements do, however, not involve workers as active subjects. The improvements are obligations for management to improve the reputation of

the company and to increase commitment and loyalty among the employee's. Workers are viewed as those who are doing what they are told to do – or manipulated to do!

4. Work and sustainability

The lack of focus on work is according to our view, the vulnerable point of the current movements which promote sustainable development. Without active involvement of work as a creative process in the development of sustainability, the movement will block its access to the main creative force of society. Instead, sustainability will, at best, be ignored by working people or at worst be considered as a threat for working and living conditions. Steps in the direction of sustainability are almost impossible if people can't see those steps as improvements of daily life, and without involvement and participation steps towards sustainability will be considered as a threat to the quality of daily life. Experiences from the introduction of environmental improvements at company level suggest four important issues affecting environmental changes:

Work as a possible obstacle to environmental improvements
Management, wanting to improve the environmental conditions of the company, can find insuperable hindrances in the industrial relations and culture of the company. Environmental improvements will always have effects on the tasks and performance of the employees. Minimising the use of resources will change work practices and often complicate the tasks of the employees. Substitution of harmful chemicals with less harmful will change the tasks of employees. Changing the products in accordance to environmental considerations can be a threat to future employment. If management attempts to impose environmental changes in a climate of social uncertainty and conflicts, related to the performance of the employees, the implementation will meet resistance and perhaps even sabotage from the employees. The implementation will possibly be modified or finally abandoned, because it could threaten industrial peace in a company (Kamp 2000).

Work as a creative factor in environmental improvements
On the other hand, if industrial relations allow the involvement of the employees in the idea creation and implementation of better environmental conditions, the employees can be a tremendous force in the change process. If workers' concerns related to changes and potential negative impacts are handled through collective bargaining, it is possible to establish a platform for a successful participatory approach. If the employees play an active part in the creation of ideas of environmental improvements and their ideas are taken seriously by the company, the employees can be a remarkable source of creativity. Employees will, at the same time, develop a stronger connection with work because work is becoming more meaningful and challenging (Lorentzen & Remmen 2000).

The 'work community' as a barrier braking force in environmental development
Quite often an individual company and even a whole industry have a too narrow approach to environmental improvements, and consequently more extensive environmental improvements must arise from the 'work community' across companies. This can be illustrated by an example: For many years, good environmental arguments for the reduction of the coal based energy supply had no effect in Denmark, because energy companies thought the reduction would increase costs, and the metal workers feared it would cost jobs. Those who were working with coal had no experience with other more environmentally friendly energy sources, and this made them unwilling to make a radical change and use a more sustainable form of energy production. Only because of a popular movement which was made up of small entrepreneurs, engineers and skilled workers, was coal gradually replaced by renewable energy as the main source of energy. This took place during the

1990s. Renewable energy and energy saving is now an important sector in the Danish economy. This development was a result of skill and will among thousands of workers and engineers. This case shows the necessity of a product policy related to skill and work, which stretches across companies and branches. A product policy in which labour unions, professional organisations and business organisations would play an important role.

Unpaid work for the environment
Work is however not only a phenomenon carried out within companies and the formal economy. Outside the formal economy work is also performed within in families and in local communities. People must be activated so that work carried out in the informal economy will support sustainability and not become a burden on daily life. If, for instance, attempts are made to reduce the quantity of garbage from the private households through high taxation, a new problem is created: people throw garbage onto the roadside or into the forest. If, instead, people were involved in making garbage usable by grading it in different sorts and qualities they would be active and engaged in creating a cleaner society (Hoffmann & Kofoed 1999).

4.1. Back to the classical concept of work

Work is the force that creates sustainability and work is the missing link between the three elements (environment, social conditions and economy) in the business oriented concept of sustainability. Therefore reintroducing the classical concept of work can help us to develop the concept of sustainability. The classical concept of work comes from Hegel, was developed by Marx, and later on was taken up by the labour movement (beside more restrictive concepts of work as well). It was also used by the corporative movement, peasants organisations, self-employed craftsmen and professionals. (Even Zadec could be included in this category if he substituted the word 'business' with 'work'). Marx defines the concept of work as follows:

> "Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. We are not now dealing with those primitive instinctive forms of labour that remind us of the mere animal (Marx 1972, p. 302).

Human work activity is the core element in the relation between man and nature, and, furthermore, the core element in the creation of man as a social being, the creation of social relations and society. It is the main media for reproduction (and destruction) of individuals, social relations, social institutions and the relation between man and society. Sustainability is a matter of reproduction, and work must be a core element in the concept of sustainability.

How can it be that work, as an obvious, indeed core, element, has been forgotten in the context of sustainability? How can it be that hard working academics, consultants and managers, who commit themselves to sustainability, have overseen work as the core element of sustainability? The main reason is the development of work itself in the 20th century. Work characterised by Taylorism, Fordism and bureaucracy is considered as an instrumental activity managed by managers, markets, politicians, life style or culture. Workers are (or are supposed to be) alienated from nature, from technology, from the product, and even from their own body.

It is however questionable how far the processes of Taylorism, Fordism and bureaucracy have evolved. Even in the most Taylorised industries the active involvement of workers is a precondition for a smooth production process. Even in these kinds of industries employees have visions and productive ideas about how production can be developed to be more sustainable. Documentation of this can be found in studies of the Danish fishing industry carried out by Kurt Aagaard Nielsen, Peter Olsen and Steen Birger Nielsen (Nielsen 1996, Nielsen et al 1999, Olsén & Clausen 2000).

The classical concept of work, which we referred to above, implies a kind of work, which differs fundamentally from the principles of Taylorism, Fordism and bureaucracy. Work is, from this point of view, a conscious, empowered, socially organised and needs orientated activity, which differs fundamentally from the brutish kind of work developed in the process of industrialisation in the 20th century. The classical concept of work is built on the idea that free work is a fundamental and deeply rooted human need.

There is a link between the choice of road towards sustainability and the underlying theoretical concept of work and view of human nature. 'High road' approaches for organisational development towards sustainable production are characterised by the use of theoretical frameworks and perspectives from: 1. An emancipationist and classical concept of work, and: 2. A participative and emancipationist concept of sustainability. 'Low road' approaches for organisational development towards sustainable production are characterised by the use of theoretical frameworks and perspectives from: 1. An utilitarian concept of work, and 2: An instrumental and technocratic concept of sustainability.

In the recent decades, endeavours have been made to develop work so that workers become empowered, competent, value oriented and involved. However, until now, this development has not been merged with the development of sustainability. On the contrary, realising sustainability at company level is often attempted through instrumentally rational approaches e.g. Tayloristic inspired management systems. Sustainability could give the empowerment of the employees a social perspective beyond the individual workplace and the individual company (Nielsen 1996). Generally, empowerment has been a matter of organisational development inside the frame of the company, and as such basically controlled by management through new techniques of human resource management.

However, it isn't necessarily so. Dunphy and Griffiths (1998) argue convincingly for the potential of the humanistically oriented reform movement related to socio-techniques and what they call the Organisational Renewable Movement for a sustainable development, based on active and participating workers. The Danish (and Scandinavian) vision of the 'Developmental work', which has had a profound influence in the labour market discourses and practices in the 1990s, also includes elements of sustainability.

A concept of sustainable work and a practice related to sustainable work can also draw on existing knowledge and practice in developing the work. One important source is participative oriented science and participative oriented practices related to Occupational Health and Safety, development of skills and qualifications, technology development, workers participation in management. Another source is network oriented development of production and work including organisations of skills and professions, business organisations, networks between companies and networks between companies and public agencies (schools, agencies related to environment, technology, quality etc.) and consultancies.

4.2. Sustainable work – on the road to a definition

Definitions can be objects for endless discussions. Never the less development towards well defined concepts is an important part of transdisciplinary and problem orientated research related to sustainability. Here we will make a short discussion of the conceptualisation of 'sustainable work'.

The concept 'Sustainable work' can be misused as a 're-labelling' of already known and institutionalised activities. Sustainability is currently a concept with a great deal of legitimacy. By using sustainability in the re-labelling of occupational health and safety, socio-technical work systems, training and education, organisational development etc. it could perhaps for a time give these activities a higher degree of legitimacy. The gain of legitimacy would properly only be temporary, and it will be on the behalf of the concept of sustainability – it will contribute to a watering down of the concept. Instead of using sustainability in the PR of already known activities, it is in our view important to find and emphasise what new perspectives and practises the concept of sustainability gives to occupational health and safety, socio-technical work systems, training and education, organisational development etc.

A different question is how many perspectives and how many interests should be included in the definition of 'sustainable work'. It is obvious, that sustainable development cannot be met without the formations of coalitions between different interest groups and institutions. It could however be questioned whether the interests of different core groups should be included in the definition of 'sustainable work'. Seen from a perspective of sustainability growth and efficiency is not a goal in itself. Growth and efficiency could be a mean for sustainable development, but isn't necessary so. Growth in transport, growth in the fertiliser industry, growth in printing is not sustainable. However growth in the energy efficiency, growth in the production of organic food and growth in public transport, is sustainable.

The whole idea of business-oriented sustainability is to make alliances between those who want growth and those who want sustainability. To make that alliance clear it is necessary that each part in the coalition keeps its own perspective clear. The environmentalist has to keep their perspective on improving natural environmental clear. The business has to keep their perspective on finding business opportunities in the move towards sustainability. Like that sustainability can be seen from the perspective of the creating living work, promoted in collaborations and conflicts at company level, by trade unions and by professional associations.

From this discussion and the previous sections we can conclude that a definition of 'sustainable work' must at least include three elements:

a. *An element of regeneration and reproduction*. Natural as well as human and social resources must be sustained and reproduced to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (The Brundtland Commission). A sustainable working life must include work activities, which sustain and regenerate natural resources. Sustain and regenerate health, skill and employability of the employees. Sustain and regenerate vital social relations and institutions: the social community of the workplace, family and local community, political institutions that can maintain and develop sustainable systems.
b. *An element of participation*, because participation create public support to sustainability and because participation in itself is productive in finding solutions to environmental and social problems. In a working life perspective that means not only participation in the arrangement and performance of daily work, but also participation in decisions about what to produce and how.

c. *A holistic perspective in the local work activities*, because sustainability deals with the reproduction of nature and society and not only survival and growth of the company. Sustainable work does because of that go beyond the single company and relate to networks, coalitions, professions and skills across the single company.

We can now sum up our provisional suggestion for a definition of sustainable work, which is not very exact, but gives a certain perspective to look for sustainability in different kind of practises and institutions:

> *Sustainable work is a conscious, goal oriented and corporate activity, which both involves the working persons and external stakeholders in the fulfilment of social and environmental needs for those who are working, the society they are a part of, and the natural environment.*

This definition provides a certain perspective with which to look at other phenomenon important for work and for sustainability.

5. The development of sustainable work practices among key actors

The efforts to promote a development towards a sustainable society involve a struggle which has several fronts and takes place on many levels. Successful changes require the involvement of a broad variety of agents who are committed to the concept of sustainability. NGOs, governments, corporations and related institutions need to raise awareness and build skills and capabilities to address the challenge of sustainability. To realise the potentials of sustainable work, a development of new forms of practise among the central change agents within the development of working life is necessary. In this section we will sketch out and elaborate some elements and suggestions for a participative management practice and a new trade union practice which will support sustainable development.

5.1. Reflexive transition management towards sustainability

The increasing expectations from firms' surroundings which demand that enterprises are acting in a sustainable manner indicate that internal company conditions and management practices cannot be cut of from the surrounding society. From the perspective of sustainability, the traditional management structures and the power allocated to management represent outdated structures, which are barriers to organising work according to human and societal needs. In order to comply with the demands for sustainable production, it is necessary to develop, from a normative point of view, a kind of 'reflexive management of change´ which is able to cope with the challenge of sustainability, and the problems related to production in modern society. Reflexivity should be understood as reflections on the consequence, related to existing practices from a sustainability perspective. Reflexive management based on a self-critical rationality is a prerequisite for the creation of a sustainable practice at the local level. It is in particular the complicity within the questions related to sustainability that call for a local reflexive practice. Modern reflexive management must, through the use of communicative practices, be able to meet different demands from stakeholders and interests concerning sustainability in a context where solutions are unpredictable. The solutions become unpredictable because these demands are often based on different rationalities (Larsen 2000) such as instrumental oriented rules as opposed to social and cultural approaches. The democratic form of management is superior in creating a process of reflexive modernisation resulting in successful organisational change, which leads to the implementation of production methods, which are more sustainable (Fricke 1997).

The development of local practice as a means to attain sustainability is all about establishing living and self-providing activities in everyday life at the workplace, these activities should focus on the interaction between individual, organisational and long-term societal needs. The employees at all levels should be provided with opportunities to contribute their knowledge, wishes and suggestions in order for them to become recognised actors. This is the very heart of developing a sustainable workplace (Jones and Welford 1997). This does however imply recognition of the importance of workplace democracy because questions regarding sustainability are always of a political nature. There are no definitive answers about what the most important questions are in the struggle for sustainable development. Because of the complexity of the concept, it will, in the end, always be a political process which decides which problems are prioritised and addressed.

Sustainable work calls for reflexive management characterised by a high degree of autonomy in production, a high degree of democracy in decision discussion making and development of values through a free dialogue. Many elements of such a reflexive form of management are already developed, mainly in relation to three different traditions (Hvid and Hasle 2002, Hvid and Møller 2001):

• Autonomy within production: The socio-technical approach that has fostered a vision and practices of a productive work, which gives equal consideration to the human system and the technical system. Work is performed by autonomous employees, who have an important say in their work. That tradition emphasises that work develops the individual employee, in terms of work as well as personally, it emphasises that work is collectively organized. In a sustainability perspective it is also important that the usefulness of work to the surrounding world is clearly manifest. This perspective has, perhaps, not been strongly emphasised in the socio-technical approach even though the creation of meaning and learning though direct contact to customers and users, and through networks which stretch across companies could be an important source for adding a sustainable dimension to the production process.

• Democracy: The tradition of industrial democracy in the work place has created a vision of companies that are led by a coalition of diverse interests and view points, and where the employees have high control over their work. Co-Leadership where production tasks, resource consumption, strategies, and societal roles become a political concern to the employees. At the same time, it is necessary to maintain and develop collective rights, but adapted to the local situation, because a levelling of power differences is necessary for democracy. Finally, it is necessary that the viewpoints concerning the 'Common Good' are represented in decision making – the concern for health, environment, ethnic and gender equality must be represented in the democratic structure.

• Dialogue: Finally, a reflexive management relating to sustainable work can derive inspiration from the 1990s great interest in the creation of common values through dialogue - a free and open dialogue, as a basis for development of values and attitudes in the company. Value must be developed in a social climate where diversity is accepted. Where there is time and space for open dialogue.

A reflexive management system like that described above will never be perfect. The system has to deal with a lot of conflicts and with difficulties in dialogues and decision-making. It will, however, also have some productive advantages: a high degree of commitment, flexibility, learning and low control costs.

A reflexive management system will, seen from a sustainable point of view, have many advantages. Many important priorities and decisions concerning sustainability are taken at the company level. It is also the location of much of the knowledge, skills and commitment which are necessary to solve the problems related to sustainability. Therefore, it is among the workers' ideas and perspectives on sustainable production that it is possible to find the kind of social orientation that can initiate the needed changes. The workers' direct, subjective interpretation of the dimensions of sustainability and values based on personal life experience are of the greatest importance in all environmental and OHS change processes (Nielsen 1996, Nielsen et al 1999, Stauning & Mayer-Johansen 2001). These arguments are based on the idea that sustainable development is created through changes in values and social relations which legislation and expert systems alone cannot provide. A reflexive and democratic management must be able to handle many complex problems. It must allow for a development of:

- A business policy, which gives priority to a participative oriented sustainable development of the organisation.
- An incentive policy, which supports the development of quality products and services by focusing on rewards through competencies, learning, meaning and influence.
- A technology innovation policy that involves the workers that must operate technology, the technicians that construct technology and the society that will live with the technology in order to make sustainability a direction finder for the technological development of the organisation.
- A product policy to contribute to the development of products resulting in environmental improvements and which meet social needs.
- An environment policy that focuses on making this area an integral part of the development of the work, career path and an integral part of participation strategies, agreements and education.
- An environmental policy which emphasises preventive work as political, lively and self-supportive activities in people's everyday lives in the work places.
- An industrial relations policy were workplace democracy plays a central role in the reorganisation of work towards sustainable production forms.

5.2. Sustainable work – towards a new paradigm for labour policy

The trade union movement is a central player in terms of creating sustainable development. It has the best opportunities of associating sustainability with everyday life because it is the broad, social movement, which historically is oriented towards work. Potentially, the challenge of sustainability holds a number of new possibilities for the trade union movement in terms of redefining the movement's objectives and opportunities for making sustainability a stepping stone for a strong union profile in post-industrial society. However, this requires the collective formulation of independent worker perspectives on the sustainability challenge. Perspectives on improved work and living conditions for ordinary workers. A German research group from the Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung, the Wissenschaftszentrum für Sozialforschung and Wuppertal Institut have examined trade unions new opportunities and political role in the process to enhance sustainability. In their conclusion they advocate a more proactive role for the labour movement:

> "Due to their experience in the shaping and assimilation of the consequences of social and economic change, the unions are particularly well placed and able to face up to the challenge of formulating a process for the transition towards a sustainable society. In fact, given the processes of change required to move towards sustainability in the workplace, their participation is essential Alongside

companies and their interest groups, they are the central players, whose task it will be to integrate the work of the future into sustainable development and to structure it in a manner, which will make itself felt for a long time to come"(Hans Böckler Stiftung 2001, p. 3)

The business approach to sustainability contains new methods, tools, concepts and involves more stakeholders in its efforts to develop and document social and environmental performance. This will have a decisive influence on the nature of the cooperation among the parties and thereby influence the power structure and workplace democracy. The new business oriented approach to sustainability challenges the political practice of the trade union movement because this approach is accompanied by management systems that often exclude independently defined and organised workers' interests. The changes following the new management methods will undoubtedly have an influence on the working conditions and quality of work. The corporate management sets the objectives for the efforts to attain sustainability in connection with its general business strategy, and subsequently controls the success of these objectives through a top-down control system. The content of the sustainability efforts of the businesses have primarily been defined and planned by the corporate sector, independently, without the trade union movement seeking to obtain influence with worker perspectives.

In spite of the many good intentions, the trade union movement has failed to develop a positive strategy as a base for their position and participation in the debate about sustainable development (Le Blansch 2001). Under the general title 'just transition' the approach of the trade union movement has been characterized by a give-and-take attitude, with the demand for concessions in the areas of pay and occupation in return for a positive participation in the sustainability efforts. This approach leaves little room for the workers' participation in the development of a vision of what should follow the transition process (Roelofts 1999)

A visionary, political trade union sustainability strategy, as an alternative to the mainstream reductionist management approaches to sustainability, must link the development of a sustainable production to improvements in the everyday life of the employees by reintroducing the classical concept of work as point of departure for trade union work. With such a positive concept of work, sustainability becomes a perspective and a developmental trend for work. The full meaning and far reaching potential for the worker's everyday life that sustainability holds can only be seen by associating the trade union's political sustainability strategies with such positive understandings of work. A general and positive understanding of work as a pivot and a vision for change contains far more potential for radical changes in the direction of sustainability than the organisational changes that the business oriented sustainability initiates. The latter only contains minor adjustments to previous practice.

The trade union movement's perspective on sustainability has been – and still is – closely connected to the issue of employment. The point of view that because production creates jobs, it is therefore, by definition, positive, illustrates the movement's lack of a product policy that reflects the organisation's wish for an ideal product development. A product policy defined by the trade union movement means that it does not only have a policy that relates to the sale of labour, but also a policy concerning the products that the members are to produce. A product policy will contribute to reflecting more sides of the quality of the work in the trade union movement's efforts. To the movement itself, the development of a product policy will represent a radical change in terms of looking after the interests of the members, because it means reducing the focus on the conditions for the purchase and sale of labour, in favour of a more sustainability oriented view of production, work, working

life and the subjective importance of work. The lack of a product policy is the Achilles heel of the declared sustainability policies of the trade union movement. The movement still supports a development where the gain of the productivity development, which reduces the necessary paid work needed by society, is converted into the production of yet again more rubbish – of a dubious value to society – as long as the production is as consistent as possible with regulations to promote the environment and occupational health and safety.

It is necessary for the trade union movement to find a new foundation for and perspective on the foreseeing of the member's interests in the light of the changes in conditions for trade union policy which are the result of the business-oriented version of sustainability. The trade union movement has yet to come up with its own agenda in this area instead of letting itself be exploited by other interested parties (employers, authorities and environment organisations) and their wish to use the trade union movement's political strengths and the employee's expertise to promote their own interests (Manson & Morter 1998). The workers will have to become active representatives for their own interests in sustainability, and thereby also influence the way in which the corporate sector works with sustainability. The workers and their organisations must develop a sustainability policy that relates to their everyday lives, in which work plays an important role. If this is done in a way that focuses on society's needs, i.e. a way which is credible in relation to the substance of sustainability, then it will contribute to renewed legitimacy and trust being accredited to the trade union movement as an organisation that acts in accordance with what is best for society as a whole.

The trade union movement's efforts towards sustainable development must naturally take place through coalitions and partnerships with many other organisations: NGOs dealing with environment issues, corporate organisations, public authorities, consultants, etc. If the trade union movement is to be more than just a body for legitimating changes, it must develop an independent angle on sustainability with work as its point of departure. Such a policy will both be an advantage in the daily work of the members and to society's conversion to sustainability.

The main challenge that faces trade unions is the need to bring the individual policy areas in accordance with a general sustainability strategy. Below we will mention some traditional trade unions policy areas, which could and to a certain extent already do contribute to supporting society's efforts at achieving sustainability. The trade union movement needs to further develop:

- Policies of reward: It is necessary for unions and employers' organisations to develop policies of reward further in a way that gives lower priority to material prosperity and higher priority to other forms of reward: time, qualifications, learning, influence, working conditions, security and meaning.
- A policy for working environment and occupational health and safety that gives priority to participation, influence, control over own working conditions, job development.
- A technology policy that involves both the workers that must operate the technology, the technicians that construct technology and the society that will live with the technology in order to make sustainability a direction finder for the technological development.
- A labour market policy that puts the focus on a synergy between the different kinds of work for society. Balancing different types of work, creating synergies between paid work, caring work, voluntary work in the community, work as self-provider and self-educator. In relation to that a 'cradle to grave' working time policy must be developed that considers the need for variable working hours throughout workers' working life.
- An education policy that attaches importance to the development of qualifications and

competences in relation to environmental and social change. This means the development of 'orientation knowledge' for the sustainable use of natural resources, attitude towards the social need of the products, and competences to change environment and living conditions.

- A policy for skills and profession that emphasises the social goals of the professions. A problem oriented development of the professions related to environmental and social sustainability and with open contacts with other professions.
- An educational policy that emphasises the development of a connection between production-related qualifications and competencies to act on social and ecological issues. That is an educational policy that emphasises the development of skills for the sustainable handling of natural resources and taking an active stand on the products and their uses and influence on environment and living conditions.
- A policy on skills and professions that focuses on the social goals of the professions. A problem-oriented development of the professions related to environmental and social sustainability and with open contact with other professions.

6. Summary and perspectives on work related politics to sustainability

In this paper we have examined the question of how sustainability and the world of work are related. Theoretically, the classical ontological understanding of work offers an analytical framework concerning how to integrate work and sustainability in order to develop a concept for sustainable work.

Business practices regarding the use of sustainability strategies are narrowly linked to organisational needs regarding trust and licence to operate. This approach has a number of unintended consequences. First, the results are inadequate to address societal needs for sustainable development. Secondly, there is a lack of qualified and constructive input from the employees because the strategies fail to integrate the development of work from a wage-earners perspective. Thirdly, the management systems are not being sufficiently integrated and rooted in companies' everyday life because the employees do not gain ownership of the systems. Therefore, the business oriented approach to sustainability cannot generate the dynamics necessary for the efforts to become self-providing activities without input from ordinary workers, trade unions, working life scientists and NGOs.

However inadequate business oriented sustainability may be, it opens a room of possibilities for professions, trade unions, NGOs and researchers to influence to participate and influence the road to sustainability. Only with a wide rang of agents will it be possible to combine business strategies for sustainability with a change in societal development towards sustainability. However, this can only be realised through the development of communities of practices in the working life, with active participation of workers, were the company's sustainability strategy is made an object of reflection and negotiation.

We have argued that the active inclusion of work in the policy for sustainable development is necessary if sustainability should become a reality. That means that work, as an active, creative, and participatory process must be a part of the development of sustainable companies, as argued above. However, no company is an island. Companies are highly influenced by network relations, institutions and politics in their surroundings. Sustainable work at company level can hardly develop on a great scale without a work policy in society that is committed to environmental and social reproduction and an environmental policy that is committed to the development of work.

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