

# **The Difficulties of Presenting Sustainable Development in an Exhibition**

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## **SUMMARY**

Sustainable development is a complex concept. It involves understanding links between different domains and applying some unusual notions. To prepare an exhibition requires knowledge of the visitor's conceptions about the subject presented. How do individuals deal with complexity and understand interactions? Which particular obstacles are linked to a process of this kind? What are the reasoning modes for envisaging sustainable development? Is it necessary to adopt a complex approach in order to be motivated to participate actively to this process?

## **KEY-WORDS**

Sustainable development, Complex approach, Complexity, Exhibition, Conceptions, Museology

## **How to present sustainable development**

This presentation is connected with three questions:

- \_ Why present sustainable development in an exhibition?
- \_ What is the difference between sustainable development and other exhibition subjects?
- \_ How can the issue of sustainable development be transformed into an exhibition subject?

To answer the first question, it's necessary to know that, when the research began (between 1997 and 1998), 76 % of the people affirmed they had never heard about this concept. For the others, it was often assimilated into a new environmentalist or ecologist approach, often linked to emerging popular initiatives. It's true that in 1992, just after the convention of Rio, newspapers talked a lot about the different ecological aspects (climatic change, biodiversity, desertification) and less about social and especially economical aspects.

Considering the importance and urgent nature of the subject, its social consequences and the modifications it implies, an adequate "mediatization" is essential. Where the media contribute to conveying information about this subject, we notice that its inherent complexity is very poorly transmitted.

Moreover, contrary to what a museum can offer, interactions between the source of information and the learner are either not possible or not easy. That's why this subject needs a really new museological approach, going beyond the museology of "the point of view" as defined by Davallon<sup>1</sup> or the "interpretative," as Schiele<sup>2</sup> and Montpetit<sup>3</sup> call it. This new kind of museology must offer the visitor the possibility of involving himself, and give him not only the tools but also the desire to engage in concrete action for sustainable development. The need to plan a new approach of the museology demands development of the second question:

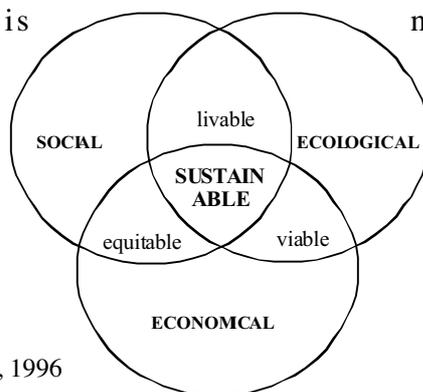
### **What is the difference between sustainable development and other exhibition subjects?**

The answer is simple. Sustainable development is a complex concept. But what does it really mean? If we look at the definition of sustainable development given by the Brundtland's Commission in 1987, we find just a really simple sentence:

*"Le développement durable satisfait les besoins des générations présentes sans compromettre la possibilité pour les générations à venir de satisfaire leurs propres besoins."*<sup>4</sup>

On the surface, this can be understood by everybody. In reality, it remains a declaration of "good intentions" on a philosophical level, without clearly showing the relationships between the different domains, or even between the different social actors who form the basis for the entire process. To counter this difficulty, sustainable development is often schematised by means of the intersection of three circles in interaction.

But this schema is not sufficient. First, we have to realise that each domain is a system. The systemic approach is not only compels us to its specific context but organisation of the element.



Villain, 1996

necessary to understand them and consider each element within also to consider the overall context through its links with

<sup>1</sup> J. DAVALLON, (1992) Le musée est-il vraiment un média? in *Publics & Musées* no 2, Presses Universitaires de Lyon

<sup>2</sup> B. SCHIELE, (1996) Les musées scientifiques, tendances actuelles in *Musées & Médias*, sous la direction d'A. Giordan, Georg éditeur

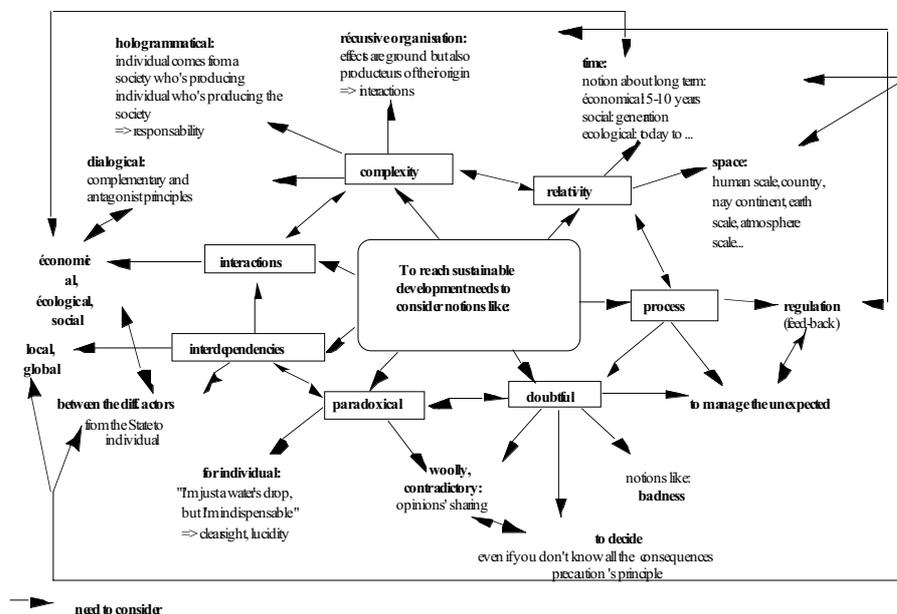
<sup>3</sup> R. MONTPETIT, (1998) Du Science-Center à l'interprétation sociale des sciences et des techniques in *La révolution de la muséologie des sciences*, sous la dir. de SCHIELE et KOSTER, éd. PUL et Multimondes, Lyon - Ste-Foy (Québec)

<sup>4</sup> CNUED (1993) *Action 21: Déclaration de Rio sur l'environnement et le développement, Déclaration des principes relatifs aux forêts* Nations Unies, New York-Genève, No de vente: F 93I11

One of the particularities of sustainable development derives from the fact that these different systems, also complex in themselves, must be seen in perpetual interaction. This notion of system will be not developed here, because there are already a lot of publications about it. On the other hand, it's important to realise that to broach this notion, as well as the concept of sustainable development, several factors linked to an analytic approach, typical of the Cartesian thinking, have to be rethought. Cartesian thinking is the kind propagated by school. To give an example, the new, so-called “active” pedagogies promote “problem solving.” But we know that THE solution never exists! Sometime there is no solution. Sometime there are perhaps several solutions, offering some advantages and also some disadvantages. Their consequences are often doubtful, being subject to the relativity of time and space. Moreover, there may be an amplification of the effects when several different factors come together. We find this kind of reaction inside the dialogical and recursive principles, typical of the complexity<sup>5</sup>. With effects and basic feed-back acting together, we can observe an evolution, a history of the elements which are changing through the irreversibility of time.

In turn, these will create links with other factors, implying interactions and even interdependencies. And these links will continually modify the entire context. That is why we have to give up with the idea of finding THE solution. What we have to do is to think in terms of “fluctuating optimums,” if we want to deal with paradoxical, contradictory, woolly or doubtful elements. These optimums try to achieve a form of regulation, to find a balance. They need a perpetual readjustment or refitting, depending on the evolution of the process and its environment.

environment.



Sustainable development: example of complexity

<sup>5</sup> E. MORIN, (1977) *La Méthode 1: La nature de la nature*, Seuil, Paris and E. MORIN, (1990) *Introduction à la pensée complexe*, ESF éd. Paris

But why this interest in understanding the concept of sustainable development as a matter of complex reasoning? Simply because, at the time of the Rio convention, each government signed a commitment to promote this kind of development. To realise this aim, it is not enough to decide on laws and issue orders. The active participation of all the individuals is required. To achieve this aim, information alone is not sufficient. Creating an exhibition about this subject, one in which the visitor can really enter into responsibility and action, is the way we chosen. To know if this project is workable or not, we have to answer a third question.

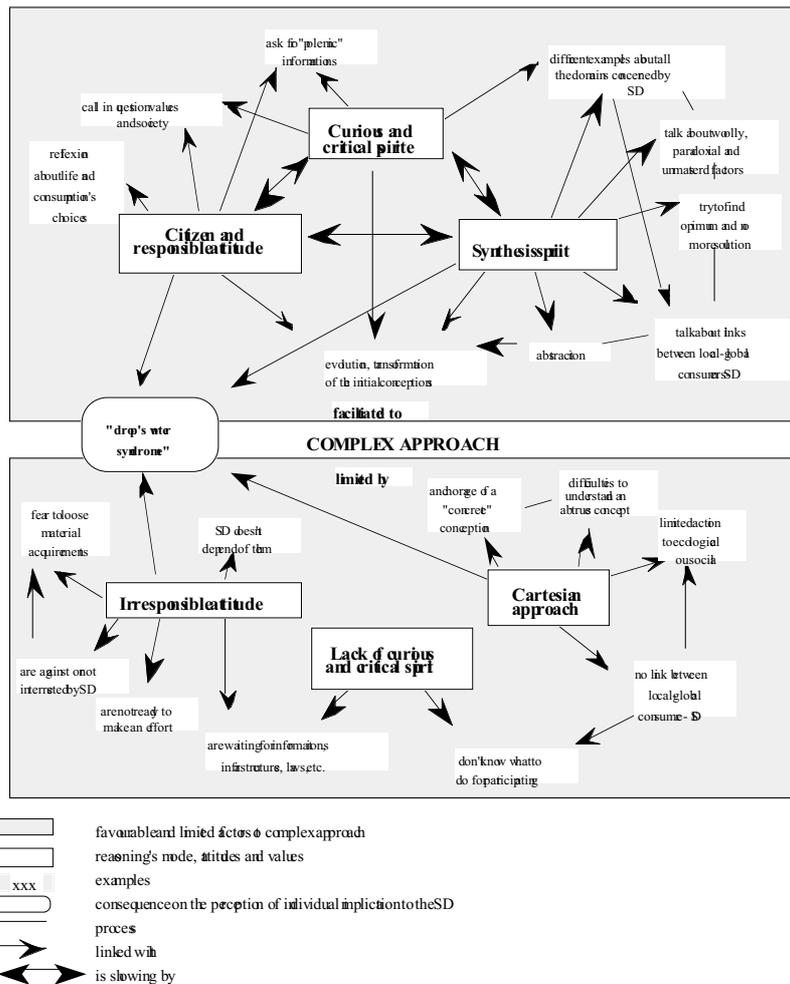
### **How can we transform sustainable development into the subject of an exhibition?**

First of all, by asking the principal potential public of the exhibition, Mr. and Mrs. Everybody: “What do people understand about this concept?” More particularly, “In which areas are they ready (or not) to contribute through their own actions within this process?” The complexity inherent in the concept plays an important role in the way people approach this field of enquiry.

We have to realise that, even though the idea of complexity was accepted about 30 years ago in some circles of research, it is not yet part of our everyday life. Since Bacon - in the 16th century - humans have always wanted to control and deal with reality. Sciences and technologies are certainly the best examples. The entire school system, with its disciplinary and summative evaluations of knowledge, comes from this Cartesian fragmentation, in spite of some essays in environmental education. This kind of thinking is used every day in our life. It distinguishes the individual from the collectivity, promoting the liberal approach to the notion of individual liberty which characterises our industrialised and economically well-to-do countries. “To do what I want, when and where I want” could summarise this vision of the individual liberty, which is close to what Guichet<sup>6</sup> calls “free arbitrator.”

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<sup>6</sup> J-L. GUICHET, (1998) *La liberté*, éd. Quintette, Paris



This is not without consequences for the vision people have of their responsibility with regard to the process of sustainable development and also for the attribution of their own power within a democratic system. Through the answers analysed during this research, a lot of different parameters are found. In the first part, these define some factors facilitating or obstructing the approach to complexity; secondly, the factors clarifying or obscuring the individual's implication inside sustainable development's process. If this second point is not developed, this schema presents the different parameters facilitating or obstructing the approach to complexity.

We see some reasoning modes in the spirit of synthesis or its Cartesian antonym; certain attitudes such as curiosity and critical spirit, or the lack of them on the other hand; some values united in a citizen, leading to a responsible attitude where favourable to the complex approach, or an irresponsible attitude when they obstruct it. These factors are expressed through different examples. If these examples can be easily categorised in two Cartesian parts (because to approach complexity, we are using this method, but it is not sufficient), there is a special phenomenon traversing these dichotomic frontiers which is called the "drop of water syndrome," with reference to the most often-heard expression used by people to express how they feel when acting in the face of the collectivity. This expression can mean either of two different attitudes:

- \_ I'm just a drop of water in the ocean and I can't do anything. Or:
- \_ I'm just a drop of water in the ocean, but each drop is necessary.

These two attitudes are not only the expression of the individual's conceptions, but they are directly linked with the reasoning modes and the values which are the bases for mastering or not mastering a complex approach. This paradox is very interesting and needs development through some examples derived from the interviews of this research.

If we are looking at the negative aspect of this "syndrome," we observe that it can be linked to a global vision. It offers the possibility, for example, to understand the interactions between the supply and demand, and it is on the basis of this law that individual action as consumer could have an impact. In spite of this understanding, the people who consider this "syndrome" as a factor making the sustainable development process impossible use it to prove the inefficacy of their own action, or to assign the responsibility to another instance, often a political one.

*"When I had a restaurant, I always bought supplies through Max Havelaar<sup>7</sup> and I always paid attention to that. But it didn't change anything in the society."<sup>8</sup>*

In the other parts of the interview, this person presented a really good approach of complexity. But he didn't see the real consequences of his actions. For example, in Switzerland, 5 years ago, you could only find Max Havelaar's coffee, and only in specific shops. Today, you have a lot of different products and in almost every supermarket.

But this kind of argumentation can also come from people who don't understand anything about market law, or any other interaction between local and global action, or between the different domains of sustainable development.

*"Sustainable development must be developed by the authorities. I can't do anything by myself."*

*"It must come from 'the top,' from the government. We can just have a local influence and only in the ecological domain."*

If we now look at the positive aspect of this "syndrome," where the people say that the drop is necessary, the arguments given by persons with a good approach to complexity use a parallelism between the democratic system and the consumer's choices. Individual civil responsibility is in evidence in all the answers.

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<sup>7</sup> Max Havelaar is a foundation promoting ethical exchange.

<sup>8</sup> All the interviews are made in French. These examples have been translated.

*“Our choices can influence the whole chain, beginning with the means of production. The law of the supply must follow the demand, and we are the demand.”*

*“We farmers have to produce with respect for the environment and in abidance with the laws imposed about that. But everybody, even if he is not a farmer, can participate, if he thinks about the consequences of his acts.”*

For the people who don't understand the complexity of the processes but are nevertheless firmly convinced of the utility of their actions, the argumentation is principally built on the well-being they can procure and the influence they can have on their immediate surroundings.

*“First, it's possible on a family level, through education, and in a village. It's more difficult if you are thinking on the scale of a town, a country, etc. In my situation, I can do something as a consumer, if I begin to refuse some products like polluting sodas for washing, for example, but also if I sort out aluminium, paper, iron, etc. But that's only in my little individual sphere, it never goes further than the limits of my immediate surroundings.”*

We could deduce that the vision of the impact of individual action on sustainable development does not depend on complex thought, since, ultimately, it depends primarily on a general attitude in life.

## **Conclusion**

“But then,” you will ask, “is the complex approach really important, especially to promote sustainable development?” We have no doubt about it. Nevertheless, we notice that in the particular case of sustainable development, the mere capacity to make links between its different domains is not sufficient. In this specific case, complex thought can be achieved only if the interactions between the social actors are integrated. But these are rarely presented. If somebody talks about different actors (international instances, government, industries, etc.) it is not to show the importance of their synergy, but to designate them as responsible for everything.

We can see a real comprehension of this complementarity only on the part of persons who are both positive about the impact of their action, while at the same time recognising that their own action alone is insufficient.

*“Yes, even if I am conscious that my own action alone cannot change the whole world.”*

Symptomatic of this lack of interaction, neither the governmental actions, nor the efforts of some business which are setting a new system of certification and environmental management are ever described. Even the effect of direct consumers' action upon the boom of the biological and ethical products market is rarely mentioned.

If we really want to prepare an exhibition about the sustainable development, we have to consider all of these factors. They are precious information if we really want to offer to individual the possibility to proceed from theoretical knowledge to action. To show him the interactions between the different domains and actors, but also his individual power to influence his way of life, to offer him a specific museological environment where he could “live” what it means in reality – all these are paths to be pursued, elements to be elaborated to give the visitor the strong desire to become a “Consum’ Actor.”

Towards this end, we developed some “implication elements”... But that’s another story, for another article...