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The word sustainability means different things to different people, this said we are all on the same boat, or should I say spaceship.

This spaceship, that we call Earth, is no ordinary spaceship. It has existed for an estimated 4.5 billion years and is likely to carry on existing for possibly a few more billion years unless it collides with another spaceship, or planet as we commonly call them. Many would argue that this is unlikely to happen in our life time therefore why should be care? Indeed, why?

If we look at the history of our planet from it birth to today, and compare that to the first 6 days of the week, we realise how insignificant our presence as Homo Sapiens Sapiens, Wise Wise Men, is on the earth timescale. If the earth was born on Monday night at the stroke of midnight, we appear on Saturday night barely a minute before midnight, and modern civilisation as we know it appears just a few milliseconds before midnight. It took 4.5 billion years to prepare the earth so that we, wise wise men, could live on it and enjoy its endless generosity. Well so we thought until recently at least.

In these few milliseconds we have managed, wise men that we are, to destroy 30% of the earth's capacity to support us. So what? It still does not tell us why we should care.

For many people around the world, busy going about their lives, busy being busy, nothing really seem to matter simply because the lag between our actions and the consequences are still too great. Imagine we are just starting to feel the consequences of the discovery of coal and oil, over 200 years ago. What are the immediate consequences of buying a new car, a new TV, etc... none that we can see, feel or experience! In fact, marketers would have us believe that it makes us feel and look 'good'.

As the world becomes more and more urbanised, we lose the connection with the very system which supports our lives, nature. How and when did nature become something we must conquer, exploit, excavate, spoil, plunder...

When did we start living off our planet rather than in harmony with it? When did we become a parasite to mother earth? Have we become a cancer, slowly but surely taking over every single healthy life form on earth? What is the cure? Is there a cure? Or are we going to have to go through a lot of pain to treat this cancer?

Not so wise after all, are we? Surely there must be another way...

Thankfully, there is, it is nature's own way. That does not mean we need to go back to living in caves and hunt for food, although there is nothing wrong with that. It means learning again, or remembering, how to live with nature, to live within its limits/constraints and abide by its laws.

In the mid-eighties a Swedish cancer researcher, Dr Karl-Henrik Robert, decided to find, through scientific consensus, which were the conditions for a society living on this earth, to be sustainable. After numerous attempts, he managed to obtain consensus on 4 basic principles which were: *scientifically based*, *necessary & sufficient* to achieve sustainability, *general* to cover all aspects of societal activities, *concrete* to guide action and serve a directional aid and, *non-overlapping* or mutually exclusive to enable comprehension and structured analysis of issues.

The four constraints constitute the four basic principles for sustainability:

In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing...

- 1... concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust,
- 2... concentrations of substances produced by society,
- 3... degradation by physical means,

And in that society...

- 4... people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.

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What does that mean for us today, and how can we apply these principles to our everyday lives, to our communities, to our business practices to our government policies will be the subject of the next article.