What kind of growth is sustainable?
By Martin Siecker

The central question of today is what kind of growth is sustainable. That depends upon de definition of growth. Growth as we know it, as it is defined in the industrialised world, means more. More demand. More production. Wage increases, more consumption. More use of raw materials. More demand. More production. Etcetera. Etcetera. Deep down in our hearts we all know that that kind of growth cannot possibly be sustainable.

Somewhere in the document the Ecological Footprint is mentioned. It is based on the idea that consumption can be converted into the surface area that is needed to produce it. That enables us to compare the environmental impact of consumer behaviour and lifestyles of different population groups or countries. There is 1.8 hectares of productive land available for each person in the world to satisfy his or hers individual need for consumption. Currently we use just over 2.2 hectares per capita worldwide, which means that we are rapidly depleting the earth's resources. I am not good in arithmetic, but even I can calculate that such a system is not sustainable.

Growth only can be sustainable when we decrease our ecological footprint to an acceptable level. That level, at this moment, is 1.8 hectares per capita but will most probably be less in the near future. Erosion and desertification are constantly reducing the amount of productive land available. Together with a growing world population it means that ever more people have to share ever less land.

People don't want to believe in inconvenient truths. The first opinion I wrote for the EESC was about sustainable development as a driving force for industrial change. Starting point was Bruntlands' definition of sustainable development (development that meets the needs of today without endangering the supply of the needs of future generations), I considered energy as a key issue. I wrote in the first draft that fossil fuels were finite. That was a big mistake.

An intensive debate followed between the representatives of industry and the rest of the study group. In the end the industrialists admitted informally that it was true but I was not allowed to write it down in those words because if that quote would be published in an regular

EU document it would be official. So we agreed that I would write that fossil fuels would become increasingly rare and expensive.

Not only captains of industry are very good in ostrich policy. Also politicians know how to put their head in the ground and pretend that what they don't see simply is not there. But deep down inside they know our current system is not sustainable. And they know what has to be done to shift to a more sustainable development in the future. But as the former Luxembourg prime-minister Junker once defined they have a problem: if they would do what is necessary they would not know how to win the next elections.

Real sustainable development, is about change. The sustainable development politicians and captains of industry are talking about is something else. Let me give you a few examples.

My country, was among first countries to establish a "fly-tax". On every departure from Amsterdam Airport came a tax of around € 25 per passenger, to compensate the CO2 emission of that flight. As a result many Dutch started their holiday from an airport abroad, in Belgium or Germany. Amsterdam Airport lost a lot of customers. So now my country is the first to abolished the "fly-tax" again.

We also have a goal to reduce the CO2 emission. But we want to realise them in other countries – not in our own. The idea behind it is that if we can help developing economies to reduce their CO2 emissions with 10 percent the over all effect will be better than if we reduce 10 % at home. Because 10 % of a high emission level is more than 10 % of e relative low emission level. The Dutch can be very creative when it comes to defend their competitiveness.

Two weeks ago I was on a conference about sustainable development around the Mediterranean. People from countries around that sea were talking about their domestic problems – mainly about the shortage of sweet water in their countries. At the same time all those countries invest enormously in the type of tourism that builds huge hotels with big swimming pools - practically on the beach. You cannot call that sustainable in countries with an increasing shortage of sweet water. These countries don't have the intention to stop that development though. From now on they will try to manage it as sustainable as possible – whatever that may mean.

It certainly does not mean sustainable development. That is no change. It is damage control. And that is something completely different. No doubt we will achieve something with damage control. We will achieve that the problems will not be on the doorstep of our children. But we will pout the problems on the doorstep of our grandchildren. And that is something that we should not want. Sustainability is not just one out of many possible choices on a list with different options. It constitutes the only possible course of action in order to secure a viable future. The concept of "sustainability" is an overarching one and is therefore not restricted to the environment, but also embraces economic and social sustainability issues. It is often stressed that there is only scope for environmental and social considerations against a background of a healthy, growing economy. That is an overly simplistic explanation - the reverse is also true. There is no scope for a healthy, growing economy against a background of a sick environment or of a society driven by social dissent.

Real sustainable development is not about damage control, it is about change – real change. There are essential issues to be dealt with, like energy and raw material efficiency. And it is possible if the political will is there. The total annual energy use is 400 EJ. Every year the Earth absorbs 3 million exajoules (EJ) of renewable energy – hydroelectric power, wind energy, biomass and solar energy. That is 7.500 times as much as the total annual use. On top of that there is geothermal energy, an inexhaustible, clean and energy saving energy source. Its potential is enormous, as the outer 6 kilometres of the earth’s crust stores energy that amounts up to 50.000 times that of all known the known oil and gas stocks in the world. Thus, in fact there is enough sustainable energy to cover our needs. We just don’t use it. Instead we choose to deplete the reserves of fossil fuels that amount to 300 000 EJ, only 10% of total annual insolation.

Not only fossil fuels are finite, also reserves of metallic, mineral and biological raw materials for industrial production. There is extensive use of raw materials in the industrialised world: 20% of the world's population consumes more than 80% of all raw materials. This consumption pattern is incompatible with the sustainable use of the natural resources available to us. Based on the assumption that these raw materials are our common heritage and that current and future access to them is a universal and inalienable right, Europe has to reduce its use of raw materials fourfold by 2050 and tenfold by 2080.

In final analysis every product involves damage to the environment, whether during production, use or disposal at the end of its life cycle. The cycle has many phases: the extraction of raw materials, design, production, assembly, marketing, distribution, sale, consumption and disposal. At each stage different players are involved: manufacturers, designers, dealers, consumers, and so on. An integrated production policy attempts to improve coordination of these phases (for example by taking optimum recycling into consideration at the design stage) in order to enhance the environmental performance of the product throughout its life cycle.

But what really has got to change is the distribution mechanism because something is going terribly wrong there. The ecological footprint shows there is 1.8 hectares available for every individual to satisfy his or her consumption needs. We use 2.2 hectares per capita right now. But enormous differences exist within this global figure. The average ecological footprint in Austria is 4.9 hectares. In the USA it is 9.6 hectares per capita, in Bangladesh it is 0.5. So Joe Sixpack from the US consumes almost 20 times more than Otto Normalverbraucher in Bangla Desh. That is far from sustainable.

I am a unionist, I come from a movement that believes in fair and equal distribution of knowledge, power and income. The biggest challenge we face is to do something about the incredible and unfair inequality between the industrialised world and the developing countries. Economical growth should be concentrated in the regions where the GDP per capita is below € 25.000 – and the lower the GDP the higher the growth. People in the industrialised world have to learn to be satisfied with less instead of demanding more every year. We have to learn to get out of the four treadmills from Mathias Binswanger. It will be very hard to change that attitude, people don't like change. An increase in income only leads to a greater and more lasting feeling of happiness in countries where the GDP per capita is below € 20.000. When the individual income rises above that limit that relation disappears, as several studies show. Sop maybe it is possible to convince people in the industrialised world that they can get their satisfaction and their happiness from other things than increasing income and consumption.

Change is a difficult, dynamic and from time to time alarming process. In general the attitude towards change is very reluctant because people are afraid of it. And fear is a bad adviser. So before we can make a successful attempt to shift from the current system of

depleting the world’s resources towards a more sustainable development we will have to get beyond this fear. To have a future and to be at ease in that future. If we don’t succeed to get beyond this fear we will end with regret. And that is the worst that can happen to us. Because fear is only temporary. Regret is forever.