

ABSTRACT

FROM MALTHUS TO BRUNDTLAND AND BEYOND

GROWTH, PROGRESS AND SUSTAINABILITY
IN THE LONG RUN

Can growth continue? 200 years ago, Malthus answer was a resounding no. With limited land to sustain the population growth brought about by higher living standards, Malthus predicted that growth would stall as higher populations would result in lower living standards. Since then population growth has not only continued, but also surpassed by the economic growth.

The club of Rome revived the question in 1972, now with energy and resources as the limiting factor. The ensuing critique of pollution and environmental degradation posed a new question: If continued growth is possible, is it even desirable – in regard to ecosystems and climate, but also out of concern for human well-being?

In 1987 the Brundtland Commission conceived of the concept of sustainability as a compromise between growth and non-growth. Growth was seen as desirable as a means of continuous development of society, but only when it was based on premises that didn't limit future generation's possibilities.

The biggest difference between the sustainability debate at Malthus' time and now is that today it has a substantial influence on the political and economical agenda. While there is certainly a reason to worry about the consequences that growth imposes on environment and resources, the last decades have brought significant results in sustainability as a consequence of a broad and persistent debate. And that is remarkable in broad historical perspective.

