



The Green New Deal: Is it sustainable?

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The Green New Deal legislation introduced by Rep. [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) (D-N.Y.) and Sen. [Ed Markey](#) (D-Mass.) has already won endorsements from multiple Democrats seeking the presidential nomination.

The young leaders at the Sunrise Movement, along with the new faces in Congress who support their goals, are very much on the right track in insisting that youth and other stakeholder voices must be heard — not just the same old, same old.

By prioritizing social justice and seeking a national economic mobilization, the movement behind the Green New Deal appears to be attuned to the shortcomings of how environmentalists have been treating climate change as just another box to be checked like Air-Water-Waste was addressed in the 1970s.

However, the Green New Deal would be built on a stronger and more comprehensive policy framework if it fully embraced sustainability to achieve the desired integration of environmental protection, economic development and social justice. After all, climate change is more than an environmental issue — it is the quintessential sustainability issue of our time.

One thing we cannot afford: a dangerous disconnect between a Green New Deal and the transition to sustainability. Within environmental and sustainability circles — and importantly, these are not the same — there is an uncomfortable realization that sustainability has been trapped in the old box of repetitious voices. These include environmental groups and “inside the beltway” policy wonks stuck in the traditional Air-Water-Waste model who continually dumb down sustainability to “going green.” Yes, sustainability does include an environmental dimension, but it also has economic and social dimensions.

After the last 20 years of delay, misinformation, economic turmoil and political gridlock, we may only have one next best shot at getting it right. As we move closer to the end of the 12-year window [recently identified](#) by the world’s leading scientists to address the reality of climate change, the timeline will not permit the luxury of a planned transition if we do not act now. If we remain on the current course of business (and politics) as usual, we will see increasing economic pain and social dislocation, not just a disrupted climate.

The work of the President’s Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD) ended prematurely in 1999, but proponents of the Green New Deal may be pleased — and surprised — to discover how much progress has been made on sustainability in the U.S. in the absence of a national-level sustainability policy council.

Business and industry are now our leading champions for sustainability with an explosion of interest in sustainable supply chain management, sustainability reporting, and impactful initiatives that go well beyond legal compliance. Other business activities labelled as “corporate social responsibility” or “circular economy” are entirely consistent with a sustainability policy framework.

Even more impressive is the progress of the U.S. financial sector. Sustainability thinking has permeated financial decision making, with a strong assist from institutional investors such as pension plans, key Wall Street players, and a cottage industry of analytics groups.

Beyond the business sector, there has always been a strong interest in the U.S. at the community and regional level in sustainability approaches — note the viability of and grassroots support for sustainable community initiatives, “transition towns,” and local climate action plans.

Other countries are paying attention to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the consensus roadmap to sustainability for 2015-2030. We need to wake up and engage with the community of nations who have agreed to the 2030 Agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris climate agreement and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Management.

The weak link in the U.S. sustainability field is federal policy. I am hardly suggesting that the federal government lead on sustainability, but going forward, it must be in the mix. Also noticeably absent: an umbrella organization that champions U.S. sustainability policy and works with multiple stakeholders, including mainstream Big Green groups.

Critically, we will need a president and an administration that has the political will to manage change. Not many people enjoy change when the status quo is so much easier to maintain as a lifestyle. But change we must, and our next leaders will not only to prioritize sustainability and climate change, but also be experts in change management.

The Green New Deal movement is powerful and here to stay. The Green New Deal itself is a catchy title, which is why it has been used over the years for a potpourri of ideas. The staying power of the Green New Deal, and its impact on our future, will be determined by what happens next as it is given substance and form. Sustainability leaders have a lot to offer and are ready to help. A sustainability framework can reconcile competing economic, environmental and social needs.

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