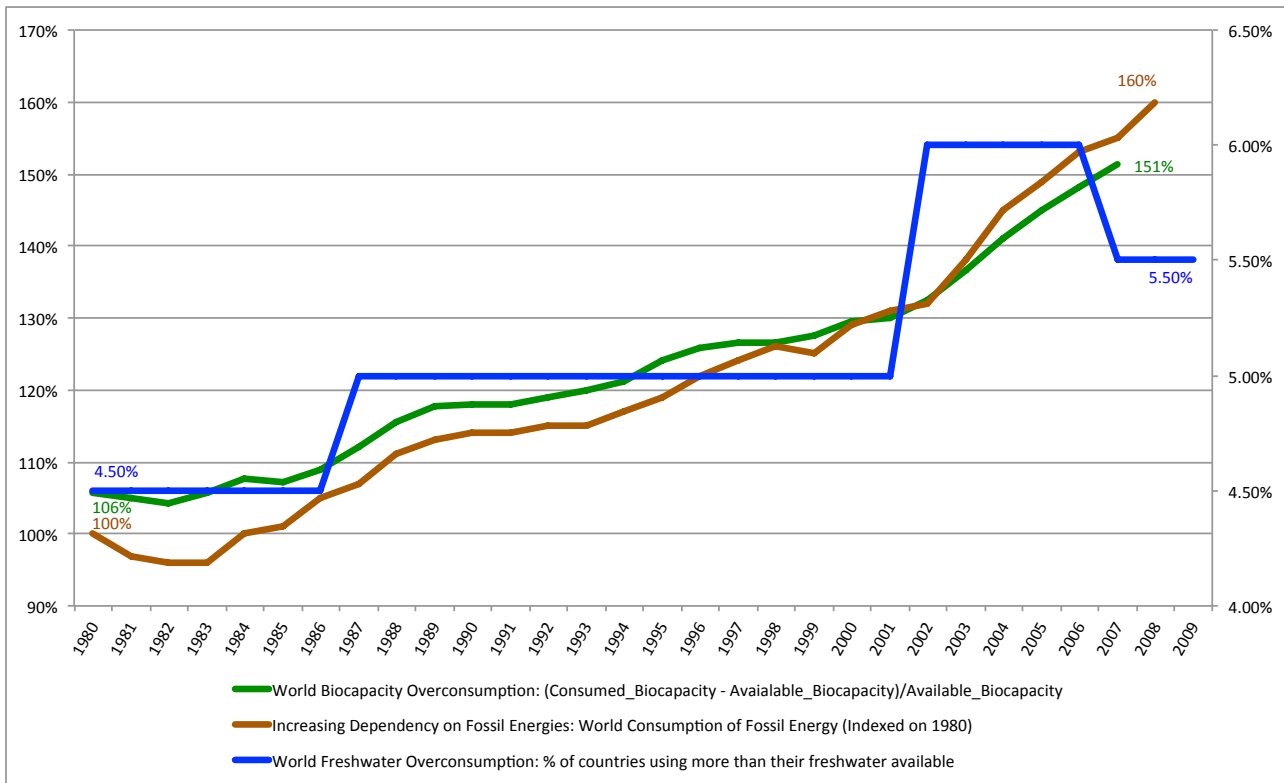


Sustainability and human kind: A boiling frog?

Trends and the understanding of where they will lead us, if not changed, are very important; even more so when we are looking at the complex challenges of sustainable development and the world's capacity to implement efficient answers.

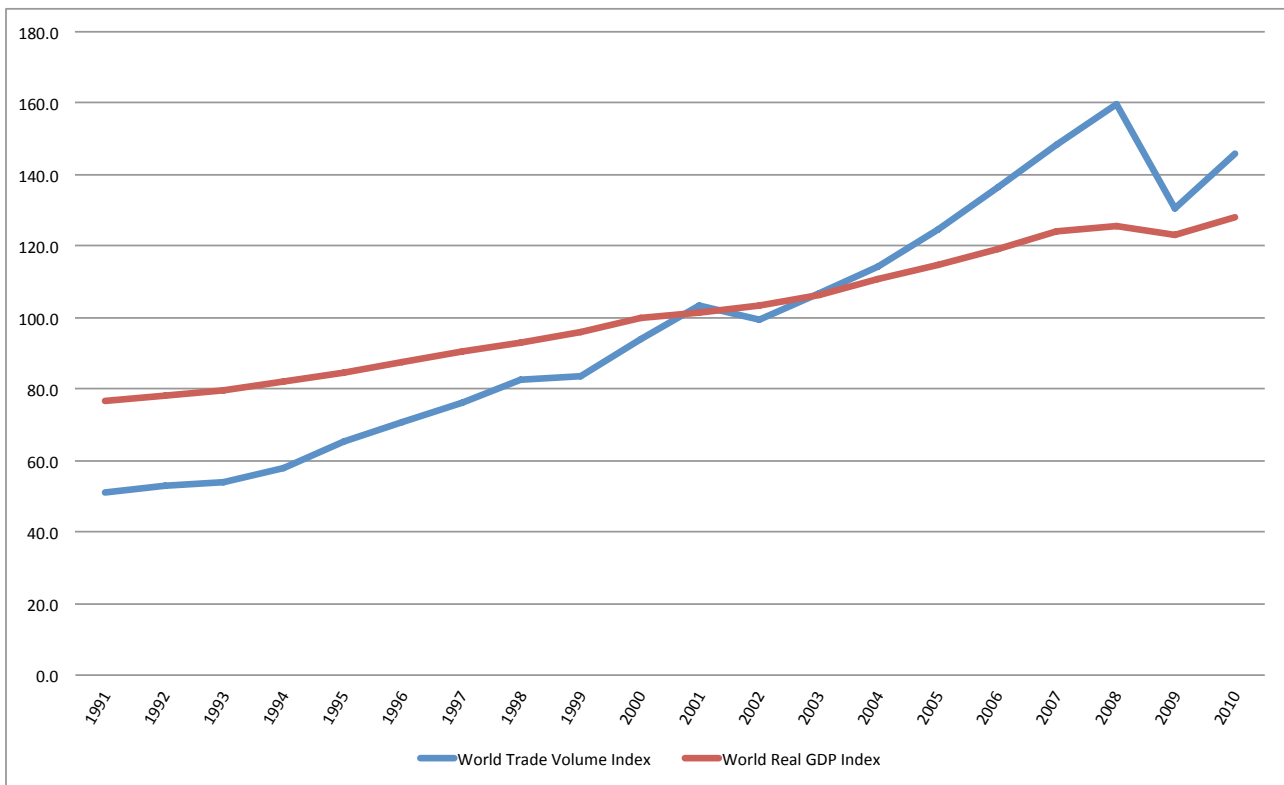
When we are looking at some big trends of our use of resources, like freshwater, biocapacity (referring to the capacity of a given biologically productive area to generate an on-going supply of renewable resources and to absorb its spillover wastes) and fossil fuels, we can see how much we continue increasing our relentless overuse of such resources.



Data Sources: World Bank, FAO, Global Footprint Network

These trends, as depicted in the above graph, clearly show that despite a certain understanding of challenges of resource overuse, we simply have continued increased overusing our resources; and accepting that this might eventually destroy the basis of our world, and we do also not recognize how close to a point of no return, we already are

To further deepen our argument, let us look at some other trend. When we think about the development over the last century, we can see that this is the period of ever increasing globalization. One important feature of globalization is the continuously increasing trade exchanges between all parts of the world. When we look at the trends of GDP and trade volume (see graph below), we are realizing that the trade volume is growing quicker than GDP since 2003. This will continue to put stress on the global transport systems and the resources available, this will also become very soon a major impediment to further growth, as increased trade volume will translate into increased transport of goods, which has to happen in a limited system of global mobility.

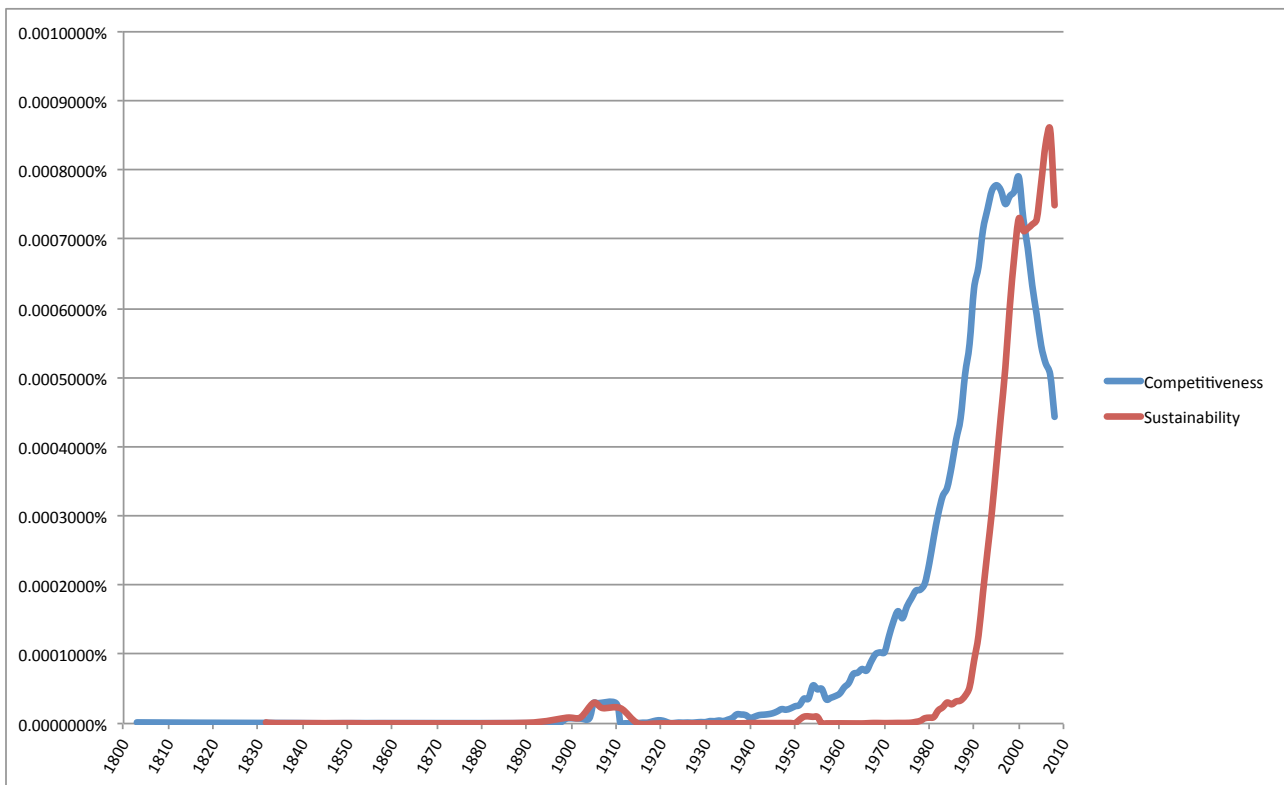


Data Sources: World Bank, The Netherlands Central Planning Bureau Trade Monitor

How bad is our current situation, when looking at these trends? Especially, when we have to admit that the negative impact of this overuse of our resources and capacities is still quite limited. To illustrate the real danger here, let us share with you a very speaking experiment: A frog is put into water of 20°. We will start now to heat this water very slowly and gradually. What we will realize is, that when this process is slow enough, the frog will not try to escape and will die in the water when it reaches a high enough temperature. What does this story tell us? If our environment changes very gradually, and hence the negative impacts are very small and easy to oversee, we will fail to take corrective actions when still possible. When we finally realize the gravity of the situation it might be too late, because either we are too weak to react or the negative impact is no more reversible.

The only possible conclusion of the above trends is that despite all efforts to tackle these issues (and this despite the Club of Rome publication “Limits to Growth” in 1972 and the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992) has shown little effect on our continued increase of overuse of resources and capacities. We are still debating over words and global agreements, when the evolution continues. We might very well be very close to a state so weakened that we will no more be able to save ourselves.

But is it right to assume that we are not ready to revisit our current behaviours in the light of sustainability? The driving force over the last two decades of the 20th century has been to drive for competitiveness, as a fundament for economic growth, which in turn will be the fuel for social development. But we all know that competitiveness is building in most cases on a cheap and fundamentally unlimited access to resources. To analyse our readiness to discuss the need to revisit our behaviours, and hence to better understand the importance of sustainability as new merging driving concept in publications, let us compare the use of these concepts, expressed by the appearance of the two words in publications since 1800 (we are doing this by using the data developed in the Google nGram project):



Data Sources: Google

This graph clearly shows how the importance in publication of the concept competitiveness has peaked during the last decade of the 20th century to be overtaken by the concept sustainability. But does this mean that the battle between competitiveness and sustainability has been decided for the sustainability and that from now on, and we will abandon competitiveness?

This analysis really raises two questions: (i) Are we starting to lay the ground for a fundamental shift in paradigm when looking at the future development of the world? (ii) If yes, what is this new paradigm?

The above nGram analysis of the use of the concepts of sustainability and competitiveness clearly shows the shift of interest, expressed by using the word in publications, from a world that is just solely concentrating on competitiveness into a world that is realizing the importance of sustainability to assure future conditions for well being. But does this increased interest generate action? Clearly, based on the first analysis of resource overuse, the answer is no.

So what is standing in the way of action?

I believe that unfortunately the past two decades have too much been a battle. Between the world of resource preservation, which is addressing resource issues and challenges the growth, and the world of economic development, which is seeing in growth based on competitiveness the sole way to address the challenges of human development. However, the solution cannot be an opposition between safeguarding of resources, implying to reduce growth, against human development, implying to maintain growth. We need to bridge the two. We need sustainability with all its aspects, that is human, social and ecological, permeating all aspects of our development. Examples for this are the need to understand and

implement sustainable competitiveness and sustainable mobility. An attempt to do so is the Competitiveness 2.0 approach developed in collaboration with Mathis Wackernagel of the Global Footprint Network (see also Global Minds: “Competitiveness in a Resource Constraint World”; <http://theglobaljournal.net/article/view/257/>).