ARTICLE

Sustainability as an emerging employment-policy issue? Perspectives from Finland

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The state of the environment is deteriorating rapidly, and so is the resilience of societies and ecosystems, that is, their ability to absorb and adapt to adverse disturbances. The exchange between society and nature is mediated primarily through work, which makes it important to adjust current work cultures to meet the requirements of sustainability. An objective of this article is to highlight developments in one of the benchmark countries in the area of “sustainable working life” and to examine how the key actors in Finland view possibilities for promoting environmental sustainability, especially at the employment-policy level. The article also discusses whether the sustainability measures proposed by the key working-life actors are adequate from the perspective of resilience thinking. Despite heightened awareness of the importance of environmental issues, the promotion of environmentally sustainable work plays a rather limited role in today’s national employment-policy discussions. From a resilience perspective, the proposed sustainability measures fall short of providing the degree of adaptability needed to negotiate the consequences of environmental change and uncertainty.

KEYWORDS: ecosystem resilience, decision making, green development. socioeconomic aspects, work, national planning

Introduction

In recent years, the scientific community has approached environmental degradation and natural-resource depletion with increased urgency (e.g., Monastersky, 2009; Barnosky et al. 2012). Research suggests that human activities may have already pushed the Earth system beyond some of its biophysical thresholds and these developments could have dramatic consequences (Rockström et al. 2009). Current trends in greenhouse-gas emissions and biodiversity loss, for example, show that we are pushing ourselves against these “planetary boundaries” with accelerating speed, thereby increasing the likelihood of both incremental and rapid ecological disruption. It is thus becoming critical for modern societies to position themselves on more sustainable pathways, but also to enhance their resilience in terms of their capacities to withstand and recover from potential changes in the environment and the resulting economic and social distress (e.g., Parry et al. 2009; McKibben, 2010).

In the face of deteriorating global environmental conditions, the necessity for the “ecologization” of current work cultures has also become evident (Littig & Grießler, 2005). In recent years, various environmental strategies have been put forward with the aim of transforming work along the lines of green thinking, including, for example, green jobs programs (e.g., Jones, 2008; ILO, 2012), organizational changes (e.g., Zadek, 2001; Senge et al. 2008), and worker mobilization (e.g., UNEP, 2007; Mayer, 2008). There have also been specific discussions about “sustainable work systems,” albeit mainly focused on the perspective of human and social sustainability (e.g., Docherty et al. 2009). Despite all these positive developments, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that making work “greener” has dominated recent discussions about the future of work in advanced industrial societies. More accurately, it has been just one theme among many, one that will nevertheless hopefully gain importance in coming years.

The Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland) have traditionally paid a great deal of attention to both the promotion of sustainable development and the modernization of their working-life institutions. In many cases, the concept of “sustainability” has been linked directly to working-life development, which makes it possible to consider these countries as benchmarks in the area of “sustainable working life” (e.g., Sorensen & Wathne, 2007). We know, for example, that the Nordic countries have fared relatively well in studies concerning different employment regimes and the quality of work (e.g., Green, 2006; Gallie, 2007). From the perspective of environmental sustainability, however, the situation is more complex because, although these nations usually excel in different environmental rankings, they also top the list for the largest ecologi-
cal footprint per capita (e.g., WWF, 2012). For instance, UNEP’s Green Economy report (2011) claims that for highly developed countries such as the Nordics, the central challenge in making a transition toward a greener economy is to reduce their per capita ecological footprint without greatly impairing their quality of life.

The first major objective of this article is to provide fresh perspectives from one of these benchmark countries by examining how key actors in Finnish working life view possibilities for promoting environmental sustainability. Normally, the extent to which it is possible to move toward more sustainable working life within the framework of individual workplaces (e.g., through corporate responsibility practices) is rather limited. It is, therefore, also important to address the issues regarding sustainability in working life at the level of larger organizations and entire branches of industry, where business leaders, employee representatives, sectoral organizations, and trade unions are all key actors. The building of more sustainable work systems can also be made a key objective at the level of national employment policies, where it is carried forward by an even larger variety of social actors (including political parties, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)) (Kasvio et al. 2010).

A starting point for this article is the recognition that, even in a country where there is shared interest in developing more sustainable work practices, the proposed strategies can take many forms (Räikkönen, 2011). As we will see later, these strategies fall roughly into two broad categories. In the first, the preferred mode of action is that of reformism, which includes a strong belief in so-called “ techno-fix” options that operate within the framework of the status quo. In the second, there is a desire or a sense of necessity for more profound transformational changes in the dominant social paradigm. Despite these differences, both approaches share a common “sustainability goal,” which can be defined as “the flourishing of life on Earth, incorporating human and ecological wellbeing, maintained over an indefinite time-frame” (Clifton, 2010).

Given the gravity of the environmental challenges facing the world, and the fact that our societies remain dependent on ecosystems to support life, cultivating resilience must become a high social priority (e.g., Rees, 2010; Hecht et al. 2012). To date, the focus of the sustainability movement has largely been on risk mitigation, that is, on “avoiding the unmanageable.” However, as irrevocable global changes edge closer, we can expect a shift toward adaptation, and with it increasing focus on “managing the unavoidable,” with the help of resilience thinking (Zolli & Healy, 2012). It thus seems appropriate to end this article with a discussion on whether the proposed sustainability measures by the key working-life actors—be they reformist or transformational—are adequate from the perspective of resilience thinking (e.g., Walker & Salt, 2006). It should be noted that within this article, the cultivation of resilience refers closely to what Handmer & Dovers (1996) describe as “the ability of institutional arrangements to make judgments about the sort of society needed for human and ecological survival, and for the policy-formulation, decision-making and management arrangements to comprehend and implement this vision.”

Reformist and Transformational Approaches to Sustainability

The Nordic countries have acted for a long time as international forerunners in efforts to modernize western work institutions. Since the Second World War, this community of nations has developed into relatively homogenous wage-earner societies that have made systematic efforts to promote the quality of working life (e.g., Hvid et al. 2011). However, it remains largely open to what extent the Nordic countries will be able to adjust their national employment systems to emerging environmental uncertainties that may undermine the sustainability and continuing success of the overall welfare model.

While domestic discussions have never been about outright denial of large-scale environmental problems, Finnish researchers, politicians, trade unions, and other key working-life actors are nevertheless debating the best ways of transitioning toward environmentally sustainable work practices. Opinions differ between those who argue that marginal adjustments to the present system will suffice and those who demand more profound changes. Before addressing the Finnish case, we need to take a short detour and more closely examine these two differing positions, which this article will refer to as “reformist” and “transformational” approaches (e.g., Clifton, 2010). Other well-established distinctions, such as “weak sustainability” vs. “strong sustainability” (Pearce et al. 1989), or “shallow green” vs. “deep green” (Naess, 1995), can also be used in a broadly similar way. Even though these kinds of distinctions and classifications make practical and heuristic sense, it should be recognized that, in reality, it is always a question of a whole spectrum of thinking, rather than an “either/or” dualism (Williams & Millington, 2004).

Reformist Approach

The reformist approach is based on the notion that the trajectory of economic development and peo-
people’s political and consumer demands do not need to change qualitatively and that solutions to environmental problems can be identified and implemented within existing social and economic structures (e.g., Williams & Millington, 2004). Proponents of this approach are thus content to operate in a reformist fashion within the dominant social paradigm, which means they are more likely to concentrate on the revision of means (i.e., new technology and planning) than on the revision of goals (Sachs, 1995). The reformist approach also typically considers sustainable development as comprising three separate but connected rings of environment, society, and economy. There is an implicit assumption that each sector is, at least in part, independent of the others, thus allowing tradeoffs between environmental and social issues, for example that some pollution is acceptable to increase growth (Hopwood et al. 2005).

From a resilience perspective, the reformist approach can be closely aligned with what has been defined as “engineering resilience” (Holling, 1996) or “reactive resilience” (Dovers & Handmer, 1992). This is the current dominant approach to resilience, in which modern industrialized societies and their institutions search for stability and continuity by making non-disruptive reforms (i.e., fine-tuning or tinkering) at the margins of political and social life, such as buying cars with better mileage (e.g., Clifton, 2010). As Handmer & Dovers (1996) describe, responses in this category are commonly shaped by what is perceived to be politically and economically palatable in the short term, rather than by the nature and scale of the threat itself.

**Transformational Approach**

The “transformationists” argue that reformist strategies will not suffice to turn the tide of unsustainability, and that a habitable future is not possible unless we rethink our attitudes toward nature as well as our view of economic progress and “development” (Williams & Millington, 2004). Proponents of this approach view today’s mounting environmental problems as located within the very economic and power structures of society, hence the need for fundamental shifts in society’s operating assumptions, notably regarding the endless pursuit of materialism (e.g., Hopwood et al. 2005). In contrast to the above-mentioned sectoral approach to sustainable development, the transformationists strive to narrow the conceptual divide between the environment and humanity by viewing humans as part of the totality of nature. Giddings et al. (2002), for example, make this point clear by describing how humans are part of a web of connections within environment and society and noting that we should thus avoid separating the impacts of our actions into distinct compartments.

From the resilience perspective, the transformational approach resonates closely with a type of resilience that has been defined as “ecological resilience” (Holling, 1996) or “proactive resilience” (Dovers & Handmer, 1992). In contrast to the engineering approach to resilience, which implicitly assumes global stability (i.e., that only one equilibrium steady state exists), the ecological approach considers thresholds or “planetary boundaries” to be of paramount importance (e.g., Holling, 1996). Responses in this category are based on the notion that rather than adapt the Earth to suit ourselves we must adapt ourselves to meet the finitude of nature (Williams & Millington, 2004).

**Research Design and Data Collection**

Hvid et al. (2011) suggest that “sustainability” will be the next big Nordic project, replacing or continuing the “welfare state,” and that work will have as prominent a role in this project as it had in the creation of the welfare state. The main objective of the current study was to find the extent to which the key actors in Finnish working-life debates are interested in sustainability as a central objective of future employment policy. With “sustainable work” being a relatively new area of study, it was deemed best to use semi-structured expert interviews to obtain the desired information, allowing both the interviewer and the interviewee the flexibility to discuss issues and probe for details in a conversational manner (e.g., Wengraf, 2001). This approach involves many open-ended questions that also make it possible to explore various thoughts and perspectives, enabling us to construct a tentative picture of the ways in which the interviewees view the problems of sustainability (cf., reformist and transformational approaches). The interview questions addressed the following issues: the economic, social, and environmental challenges facing the advanced industrial countries in general and Finland in particular; the topicality and importance of the concepts of “sustainability” and “sustainable development” against the backdrop of these global challenges; the feasibility of promoting sustainability as a key employment-policy objective in Finland; and the possible applications of sustainability measures in Finnish working life.

A total of twenty interviews were carried out with key working-life actors: two with representatives of employer organizations, three with officials from trade unions, six with individuals associated with various government agencies and public bodies, three with staff from NGOs, two with managers of benchmark companies committed to sustainability, and four with senior members of Finnish political parties (from the bloc of the biggest parties in power.
and the opposition bloc). The selection of interviewees was straightforward because the key actors in Finnish working life are all relatively well established. With regard to the selection of political party representatives, we contacted the various party headquarters for suggestions for suitable respondents.\footnote{Interviews were conducted by the author and an associate, Dr. Antti Kasvio.}

The results might have varied slightly if, for example, different benchmark companies and NGOs had been chosen. The interviews took place at the respondents’ premises or another suitable location during September 2011–December 2011. Discussions lasted between 50 and 80 minutes and were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and then analyzed using qualitative content methods to search out underlying themes in the transcripts (e.g., Bryman, 2004). The language of the interviews was Finnish and all the interview excerpts presented in this article are translations into English.

During the interviews, sustainability was approached as a holistic concept to ensure that all relevant viewpoints were taken into account, which means that the environmental, social, and economic dimensions were given equal footing. The implicit goal was to shed light on interviewees’ underlying assumptions about the nature of the interplay among the different dimensions of sustainability. In other words, the goal was to ascertain whether respondents favor a strong interdependence across these dimensions or a partial independence characterized by tradeoffs between, say, environmental protection and economic development.

Previous studies have already documented Finland’s ability, among other Nordic countries, to promote simultaneously the requirements of increased flexibility and competitiveness and objectives related to social solidarity and well-functioning basic social safety networks (e.g., Magnusson et al. 2008). In a similar vein, the Financial Times headlined its special report on Finland: “Rich, happy and good at austerity” (Milne & Stothard, 2012). The country’s progress in environmental sustainability, however, is not on par with its advancements in the economic and social arenas; for example, Finland performs relatively poorly in terms of environmental indicators in the Sustainable Society Index (van de Kerk & Manuel, 2012).\footnote{In spite of the fact that Finland has been active in advancing sustainability strategies, total material requirement and consumption of energy per capita, for example, are still high by international comparison. The key reasons behind this significant resource use are the energy- and material-intensive industry in the country, long distances, and the regionally dispersed production structure (e.g., Berg & Hukkinen, 2011; Statistics Finland, 2012).}

Against this backdrop, and to avoid repeating already known accomplishments in economic and social sustainability, the ensuing analysis focuses mainly on the environmental dimension of sustainability.

**Results**

The results of the interviews follow three thematic areas: the perceived importance of environmental sustainability against the backdrop of global challenges and domestic responsibilities; the feasibility of promoting environmental sustainability at the employment-policy level; and the nature of the proposed sustainability measures (reformist vs. transformational).

**Promotion of Environmental Sustainability on Hold and Waiting for Better Economic Times**

The interviews were conducted during the fall of 2011. The economic turmoil arising from the financial crisis that began in 2008 had been going on for well over three years and had not fully abated. In this sense, it was an opportune time to explore whether pro-sustainability views would hold ground during economic hardship. Overall, most respondents acknowledged the gravity of the environmental threat and that certain policy adjustments and structural reforms were needed to ensure the proper, “sustainable” functioning of society and the economy (Table 1, excerpts A–C). The language used by the majority of the interviewees reflects a mode of thinking that is clearly more reformist than transformational—a belief that even though the environmental situation is deteriorating and clearly needs increased attention, workable solutions can be found within present social and economic structures. It also became evident that despite heightened awareness of environmental problems, discussions of solutions were largely overshadowed and marginalized— at least at the time—by the ongoing economic crisis (Table 1, excerpts D–E).

The interviewees were also asked about the credibility of the notion of “Nordic excellence in sustainability” and, in particular, whether Finland is living up to its forerunner status in this area. Some responses highlighted the fact that the relatively well-functioning social structures in the Nordic welfare states and the close partnerships among government, industry organizations, and trade unions could help in tackling future sustainability challenges. The majority of the responses concluded, however, that the present situation is far from ideal and that much more needs to be done to prepare for the environmental challenges of tomorrow.
Feasibility of Promoting Environmental Sustainability at the Employment-Policy Level

Based on the interviewees’ responses, “sustainable work” (encompassing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability) is not acknowledged as a key policy objective in Finland yet. Especially notable is the lack of attention given to environmental sustainability in the context of working-life development. Given that Finland, along with other Nordic countries, is considered to be an international benchmark in sustainable working-life development, it would be natural to expect more advanced and in-depth involvement on the part of the key actors regarding how to make work more environmentally sustainable. The responses of key employment-policy actors, such as representatives from trade unions and governmental bodies, reveal a great deal of room for improvement in integrating environmental concerns more fully into employment-policy discussions (Table 2, excerpts A–C).

Proposed Sustainability Measures—Reformist or Transformational?

It has until recently been difficult to generate sufficient political support for wide-ranging measures to conserve natural resources or to protect the environment, as these have been seen as putting people’s employment at risk. However, key working-life actors may start to think differently about environmental issues if they realize that work cannot be sustainable as long as we refuse to see the huge resource and environmental problems that are arising (Kasvio et al. 2010). Although the responses of the interviewees showed a nascent willingness to move beyond making mere superficial ecological improvements (i.e., from remedying ecological decline to actually making industry more environmentally sustainable), only a few were willing to go as far as questioning society’s current operating assumptions or the prevailing view of economic development. Overall, both reformist and transformational types of responses were clearly identifiable from the interviews, ranging from questioning the severity of climate change to calls for a “degrowth” economy (e.g., Latouche, 2010). As could be expected, the NGO representatives were the main proponents of the more far-reaching, or transformational, demands (Table 3, excerpts A–B), whereas the “traditional” working-life actors were, for the most part, content to follow a more reformist course (Table 3, excerpts C–E).

The interviews also provide insights on how the key working-life actors conceive the interplay between sustainability’s different dimensions. Only a few respondents embraced perspectives that clearly follow the lines of the transformational approach, which, as described above, rejects tradeoffs that allow economic development and growth objectives to supersede environmental protection (Table 4, excerpts A–B). The reformist approach, with its emphasis on finding a workable balance between the differ-

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Table 1 Interview excerpts depicting how interviewees perceived the importance of environmental sustainability against the backdrop of global challenges and domestic responsibilities.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| A | “If we carry on pursuing economic growth by whatever means possible, we won’t be able to find a sustainable solution to the current economic crisis. What we need is more long-term thinking about how we can stay within the ecological boundaries in a socially acceptable and fair way. The question of how to promote these mighty goals within the context of Finnish working-life development has no easy answer, that’s for sure.” (Representative of the center-right opposition party) |
| B | “Within our party, we want to approach these things realistically and acknowledge that something must be done, that we can’t continue to overexploit our planet as we are right now. What’s debatable, though, is the timetable for this, and what effects our interventions will have on economic and social life.” (Representative of the right-wing populist opposition party) |
| C | “If we think about the state of the global environment, it’s clear that to keep our planet inhabitable, we will soon have to make big changes to our way of life.” (Representative of the center-left party in power) |
| D | “Before the financial and economic crash of 2008, the media hype around climate change was at its peak, and our unions also became interested in these issues. The general discussions we had on the topic were quite lively, but after the economic collapse of 2008, these discussions have more or less fallen into silence, for the time being at least.” (Trade-union representative) |
| E | “It seems that the ecological dimension of sustainability is being sidelined once again. Compared to a few years ago, climate change doesn’t rank that high on the political agenda anymore; stimulating growth and consolidating public finances have become much more pressing, acute matters.” (Government-agency representative) |
Discussion

The beginning of this article noted that human activity is driving the Earth toward irreversible biospheric changes, a planetary-scale “tipping point” that may result in widespread social unrest, economic instability, and loss of human life. We thus have to learn to manage more effectively our interaction with natural systems and to stop undermining the resilience of our life-support systems. Work plays a central role in this transition, since it is almost always involved in the satisfaction of needs—and thus the

Table 2 Interview excerpts depicting how interviewees perceived the feasibility of promoting environmental sustainability at employment policy level.

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|---|---|
| A | “I remember that we used to have our own environmental policy program back in the 1990's, but it got lost somewhere along the way. Nowadays we dabble a bit with initiatives like the paperless office, but we don't have any specific programs for tackling the bigger environmental issues.” (Trade-union representative) |
| B | “I think we have quite realistic views on issues such as green growth and green investments, but we lack the capacity to promote more transformational or radical ideas in our union programs. Sorry to say, but we still mainly repeat the same old doctrines.” (Trade-union representative) |
| C | “From an employment-policy perspective, our discussions on environmental change have been surprisingly superficial. It's been difficult to find common ground among ourselves about environmental problems and their likely societal consequences, so one can say that, for us, the whole thing is very much a work in progress.” (Government-agency representative) |

Table 3 Interview excerpts depicting the nature of the sustainability measures proposed by the interviewees.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| A | “The only solution is to cut down on energy consumption, which directly slows down environmental destruction and increases resilience. The reason we haven't done this already is that in the present system, cutting down on energy consumption hampers economic growth. We continue to play about with trivial issues when we should be addressing more fundamental problems.” (NGO representative) |
| B | “People don't seem to understand that we don't have the luxury of promoting incremental change anymore. For the last few decades, we've wasted precious time relying on piecemeal change, and now we've shut certain doors and others are also closing. Now it's time for more fundamental changes.” (NGO representative) |
| C | “We all agree that the requirements of all environmental regulation and legislation have to be met and that the harmful environmental impacts of pursuing economic growth should be kept to a minimum. We have to admit, though, that in relation to our strategic objectives of maintaining economic growth and achieving full employment, environmental concerns usually take a back seat.” (Trade-union representative) |
| D | “We recently visited one of our universities of technology, and many of the students' projects, for example in the field of biotechnology, made me feel very positive about the future success of Finland. It's just a matter of finding a reasonable middle ground between what's good for the environment and what's good for the economy.” (Representative of the right-wing populist opposition party) |
| E | “My particular field of expertise doesn't include knowing where environmental thresholds lie—that's something for other experts to think about and tell us about if necessary. My job is mostly to ensure that workers don't drown under their workload.” (Government-agency representative) |
exchange between society and nature (Littig & Grießler, 2005). In a similar vein, Hvid & Lund (2002) view work as the single most important link between humankind and nature: it is through our work that we create the basis for our own existence and also change our material surroundings and the institutions in which we live. Building more sustainable work cultures and institutions is therefore an essential part of the move toward sustainable and resilient societies. As was mentioned earlier, this transition boils down to the ability of institutional arrangements to comprehend what this difficult situation demands and act accordingly (Handmer & Dovers, 1996). The rest of this article discusses some problems associated with the reformist approach for tackling the environmental crisis, the possible advantages of using more transformational strategies, and what this means from an employment-policy perspective.

Analysis of the interview data shows that the majority of the key working-life actors approach sustainability issues with a reformist rather than a transformational orientation. In terms of resilience thinking, this means that, when faced with the choice of engineering or ecological resilience responses, Finnish policy makers gravitate toward the former. Engineering resilience strives for constancy or stability, and its proponents often describe it as practical, realistic, balanced, and pragmatic (Handmer & Dovers, 1996). However, insights from the emerging field of socioecological resilience suggest that the more traditional and dominant “engineering” approach to sustainability, and its focus on trying to anticipate and resist disruptions, may be vulnerable to unforeseen factors (Fiksel, 2006). In contrast to engineering resilience, the ecologically more sensitive version of resilience thinking thus suggests that the crux of sustainable development is not maximizing constancy, but, more critically, designing interrelations between people and resources that are sustainable in the face of the unexpected (Holling, 1996). This understanding suggests designing systems with more inherent resilience by taking advantage of fundamental properties such as diversity, adaptability, and innovation (e.g., Walker & Salt, 2006).

Within today’s context of increasing uncertainties and growing vulnerabilities, the reformist/engineering approach has some major weaknesses. It fails to recognize the idea of thresholds, that is, that biological systems on many scales can shift rapidly from an existing state to a radically different one (e.g., Barnosky et al. 2012). To put it more concretely, if the sustainability measures proposed by the key working-life actors are built around a (false) notion that presumes a system near equilibrium and a constancy of results, then it makes sense to try to isolate and control the variables of interest, i.e., to allow tradeoffs between environmental and social issues (cf., Gunderson, 2000). The transformational/ecological approach to sustainability, by contrast, remains wary about the possibility of replacing “the uncertainty of nature with the certainty of control” (Gunderson, 2000) and therefore considers the process of balancing values as ultimately resilience eroding, as it leaves environmental goods too vulnerable to continued exploitation (e.g., Whiteside, 2002).

Another weakness of the reformist/engineering approach is its lack of political will to push policy beyond incrementalism. For Handmer & Dovers (1996), this kind of incremental response to environmental change is the most dangerous path, a relief valve that gives the appearance of change and alleviates the symptoms for a time without addressing the underlying causes. As it turns out, promoting real, substantive change is especially difficult in countries such as Finland with “corporatist” styles of govern-

### Table 4 Interview excerpts depicting how interviewees conceived the interplay between the different dimensions of sustainability.

| A | “What bothers me in the discussions about sustainable development is that we still tend to look at the three pillars of sustainability as equal priorities that can be balanced against each other to optimize performance. But in reality, the environmental pillar can’t be controlled with any certainty, so it would be better for us to recognize and acknowledge that planetary boundaries do exist and work our way out from there.” (NGO representative) |
| B | “Parliamentary discussions, for example, have hardly addressed climate-change issues at all this fall. And if we think about the relationship between the economy and ecology, it’s our economic activities that need to conform to biophysical constraints and not the other way around.” (Representative of the center-right opposition party) |
| C | “We acknowledge the environmental rationale behind some of the EU directives and regulations, and then there’s our own national political decisions, but we should do our best to ensure the future viability of our industrial sector. We have no intention of destroying the natural environment, but somehow we need to balance this all out.” (Representative of the right-wing populist opposition party) |
| D | “I absolutely accept the fact that Finland must meet the global environmental requirements and that we could perhaps even go a bit further than that, but I’d also like to argue on behalf of our basic industry, that it makes no sense to always be the first one to adopt the most stringent ecological standards available.” (Representative of the right-wing party in power) |
ance where the vested interests of commerce, sections of the bureaucracy, and trade unions jointly express a preference for the status quo (e.g., Pelkonen, 2008; Ruostetsaari, 2010). It was thus no surprise that the language used in the majority of the interviews with key working-life actors contained rhetorical devices of “diversionary framing” (Freudenburg, 2005) often used by opponents of fundamental change to divert attention by raising issues of economic impact, technological innovation, jobs, and global competition (Princen, 2010). The limited capacity of Finnish political culture (including employment-policy decision making) toward imaginative and expansive approaches is problematic compared with the conclusions of resilience researchers that see diversity (of views, interests, preferences, values, and solutions) as a strength in any system dealing with difficult environmental and social problems (Beratan, 2007).

From the perspective of resilience thinking, then, the reformist/engineering approach to sustainability—subscribed to by the majority of key working-life actors—is in many ways poorly suited and unprepared to adapt to the consequences of environmental change and uncertainty. A transition toward a more transformational and ecologically sensitive approach to sustainability, with preparedness to adopt new basic operating assumptions and institutional structures, is becoming increasingly important. Critical to this transition is the observation or, more correctly, the acceptance that the era of “protecting the environment”—that is, saving the odd species, greening an automobile fleet, and so forth—is over, and that the era of ensuring life support has begun (Princen, 2010). At the employment-policy level, the onset of this awareness entails realization that the existing systems of work are far from sustainable; simply not enough natural resources are available to allow their continuous expansion.

What, then, does a more far-reaching sustainability transition entail? Robertson (1983), for example, sees two principal tasks in a situation where an “old order” is breaking down and a new one clearly needs to break through. The first is managing the breakdown of existing unsustainable institutions and activities in such a way as to “avoid catastrophic collapse and untold hardship for the vast majority of people who depend upon them for almost every aspect of their lives.” The second is the task of “fostering new growth points which will eventually provide the foundations on which a new society can be built.” This is basically how resilient systems operate; they fail gracefully, for example by employing strategies for avoiding dangerous circumstances and minimizing and isolating component damage, but at the same time they retain the capacity to create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social conditions make the existing system untenable (Walker et al. 2004; Zolli & Healy, 2012).

From an employment-policy perspective, managing the breakdown of unsustainable systems of work could be made easier by endorsing, for example, the idea of a “just transition,” recognizing that support for environmental policies depends on a fair distribution of their costs and benefits across the economy (e.g., TUC, 2008). Cook et al. (2012), further emphasize that a fair and sustainable transition is contingent upon the ability of different actors—particularly social movements and those most disadvantaged—to contest ideas and policies, to participate in governance, and to influence the direction of change. However, the results presented in this article indicate that, at least at the national employment-policy level, this kind of opening up of processes will be difficult to achieve in Finland as long as most key working-life actors remain committed to preserving the status quo and their own managerial, professional, and governing positions. It seems unlikely that a top-down (policy-based) approach will, on its own, foster the kind of change needed to steer away from unsustainable trajectories. It has to be coupled with a bottom-up (grassroots-based) approach, in which an increasing number of people, despite (or even because of) the ongoing political and policy stasis, begin to seek alternative and sustainable ways of working and living outside the established order (Robertson, 1983). As Hayden (1999) points out, the more developed these alternatives, the less dependent people will be on market employment to meet their needs. In a similar vein, Schor (2010) advises people to pursue “extra-market diversification” (e.g., by developing practical skills and competencies, building social capital and community connections, and perfecting the art of self-provisioning) as a strategy for becoming more resilient, thriving, and adaptive in the face of what could be a very turbulent and disruptive transition period.

**Conclusion**

This article has provided an overview of how the key actors in Finnish working life currently view the possibilities for promoting environmental sustainability, especially at the employment-policy level. Most of the interviewed working-life actors acknowledged that the present situation was far from ideal and that certain policy adjustments and structural reforms would surely be needed—but not necessarily before economic recovery is well under way. The interviews also confirm the current lack of integration between environmental concerns and employment-policy discussions, which is mostly due to rather
visible tensions between the efforts to solve employment problems and those oriented toward environmental protection. At the moment, the promotion of environmentally sustainable work plays a rather limited role in the formulation of national employment policy. However, because our present system seems to be teetering on the verge of environmental collapse, it is not entirely unrealistic to expect that these themes will gain more exposure and recognition in tomorrow’s employment-policy discussions. Certain signs already discernible from the interviews indicate a willingness to move in this direction, but the orientation still varies greatly among different working-life actors.4

The current Finnish government has the ambitious vision that by 2017 the country will have the highest quality of working life in all Europe as measured by productivity, innovation, and attractiveness (TEM, 2012). However, current environmental trends suggest that an additional criterion—resilience—needs to be added. In other words, as we begin to witness irreversible changes to our planet, the only viable working-life development strategy may be to ensure transformation instead of destruction (e.g., Dahle, 2007; Docherty et al. 2009). The core ideas of resilience thinking may provide the necessary tools to make this transition as painless and successful as possible.

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4 This finding resonates well with the results of Berg & Hukkanen (2011), who find that it is common even among Finnish business and ministry representatives to criticize the current growth-bound economic system. However, their narrative analysis of the Finnish sustainable consumption and production debate also demonstrates the difficulties involved in constructing a more balanced policy debate that would allow the other sustainability narratives to challenge the growth story.

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