

Preface

In contrast to what some sceptics may think, sustainability issues are here to stay. Resources are diminishing, the overall climate is changing more rapidly than we could ever have imagined and we, the industrial worlds, believe that we are entitled to conquer and absorb all earthly assets as quickly as possible. On a timescale of many thousands of years this can be considered as the ups and downs of a natural dynamic system. Why bother? In the end, the present-day exhaustions and sufferings will be merely wrinkles in the ocean of time. For some this may be a comforting idea, especially when sustainability issues are positioned against economic growth. 'Economic growth must go on, even if it is restricted by natural, human and organisational constraints.' Some clever jokers have even coined the term 'sustainable growth'. In our view this is a perverse line of thought, frustrating the essence of sustainability, which is always about the dynamic interaction between system and the natural and social environment. Whether we like it or not, at this moment this interaction or balance is disturbed as far as our future position is concerned.

When discussing sustainability issues in this book, we try to combine three things: innovation, knowledge and organisational structures. First, we tackle innovation from what may be an unexpected point of view. In our view innovation does not primarily deal with technology or new gadgets in audio or video equipment. Innovation is about undertaking new or renewed activities with humans in organisational structures and co-ordination mechanisms. Innovation, therefore, is not the ultimate medicine to achieve economic growth; it is a continuous process of human actions with the aim of better adjusting a system or adapting it to the natural or social environment. Second, knowledge is the motor, the fuel and the realisation of human existence. The fact that we, humans, can reason, remember and use symbols makes us a unique species on earth. In all these cognitive activities the basic element is knowledge. Organisational structures, or, better, conscious organisational structures and co-ordination mechanisms, are the tools that human beings use to deal with complexity, insufficiency, their own limitations and those of their multi-aspect environment. And, returning to our opening sentence about exhausting resources, climate change and asset exploitation, these are not natural processes only. No, these processes are taking place because inno-

vation, knowledge, knowledge creation and organisational structuring make them happen. The human, organisational and knowledge dimensions are just as crucial for the decline of our habitat as for a possible improvement of our natural and social *Umwelt*. Sustainable innovation as a continuous process of natural, social and human adaptation is the main topic of this book. If we, humans, do not adapt ourselves, we will be adapted, either for better or for worse.

This book is an indirect result of a programme (2001–2004) of the National Institute for Sustainable Development (NIDO) in the Netherlands. In 2004 NIDO was terminated by the (conservative) Dutch government. In their infinite wisdom this government declared sustainability to be of minor importance. We still do not believe they were right. On the other hand, sustainability issues are like the Hydra, a multi-headed monster. If you cut off one head, at least two heads appear anew. We look upon this book as the Hydra's 'offspring'. NIDO is now history, the business projects described lie both partly in the past and in the present, while future ideas concerning sustainability have yet to be developed. With regards to the latter we are thinking about second-generation knowledge management and the development and use of McElroy's (2005) social footprint metrics.

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