

Sustainable Development: Search for New Principles and Priorities

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INTRODUCTION

Different strategies for making the transition to sustainable development have been a subject of much discussion at the United Nations for over three decades. The UN Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972),¹ the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED – Rio de Janeiro, 1992),² and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD – Johannesburg, 2002),³ provide historical checkpoints at which the punctuated evolution of the sustainable development dialogue can be examined. The Stockholm conference initiated environmental legislation at the national level, and the UNCED added to that foundation by establishing multilateral environmental agreements on a number of issues of international importance. The WSSD adopted a very different approach from the other two, setting an agenda based on shared goals, rather than legislation, as the basis for both international cooperation and national action. Although these conferences helped different states and actors to arrive at a common understanding of global environmental concerns, no consensus on the principles and priorities for achieving sustainable development has yet been reached.

Although multilateral political processes can help facilitate intergovernmental consensus on global issues, there is currently no common understanding as to how the transition from principles for international cooperation to strategies for national action should be approached. Opinions continue to vary widely with regard to the nature and scale of the changes prerequisite to transition, and the question is further complicated by the necessity of translating generalized international norms into terms appropriate for individual states and localities in making the transition. Also problematic are the lack of consensus on global objectives, inadequate strategies for market transformation, and the scarcity of harmonized or equivalent approaches. These problems could be better avoided if sustainable development were framed in more specific terms than merely the relationship between environment and development.

LOCAL-GLOBAL DICHOTOMY

The conceptual and legal framework of the UNCED clearly distinguished global from local environmental concerns. Within that framework, multilateral treaties were recognized as the basis for international cooperation on global issues. Such treaties often involved trans-issue exchanges as a means

¹ Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, 5 – 16 June 1972 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.73.II.A.14 and corrigendum).

² Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3 - 14 June 1992 (United Nations publications, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigenda).

³ Report of the United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, 26 August – 4 September 2002 (A.CONF.199/20).

of leading otherwise unwilling parties to mutually beneficial compromises. For example, under this framework, developing countries that acted to protect the global commons were to be compensated through financial resources, including technology transfer, allocated by the Global Environment Facility (GEF). Many developing countries that would not or could not have otherwise cooperated were induced to do so by the exchange of benefits involved. Industrialized countries agreed to such terms because they recognized that they bore a significantly greater responsibility for the global environmental degradation that had already been inflicted. They also recognized that, despite the disproportionate responsibility currently held by the industrialized world, anticipated growth of all kinds, including population growth, increased consumption, and expanding industrial capacity, would make the developing world an increasingly significant polluter in the future, and that it would thus be wise to begin regulatory efforts as soon as possible.

Despite the benefits provided by this framework, it created a dichotomy between international cooperation and national action because it failed to recognize the local causes of global problems, as well as the local impacts of proposed options for dealing with those problems. This shortcoming provided a disincentive for developing countries to make environmental commitments that might negatively impact their economic growth. Incorporating so-called global concerns into their national strategies would deprive developing countries of their entitlement to resource transfers, which are available only for measures leading to global, and not national, benefits. This framework has also been an obstacle to substantive discussions on options for dealing with the activities that cause global environmental degradation, because of fears by both industrialized and developing countries that such discussions may lead to commitments with uncertain costs. The outcome is that, eleven years after the framework was put together, states are still discussing the global environmental agenda in the conventions and process issues in the GEF, rather than addressing the source of the concerns.

This framework also has a limited role in building capacities for addressing global environmental concerns over the medium to long-term. Because environmental, economic, and social issues are interconnected, translating international environmental commitments into national policies remains a challenge. In many countries these issues are still not viewed as a priority or as relevant to local circumstances. Therefore, the current discussion remains limited to more multidisciplinary scientific research, adapting economic instruments, technical fixes, or greater participation of civil society to meet the challenges. These are important measures and lead to better understanding of the complex issues at hand, but they are inadequate for the modification of more long-term trends, which require a reassessment of underlying economic, ecological and governance paradigms. The focus on regulation reflects an inadequacy in the policy dialogue about the conditions required for instituting long-term changes, as well as failure to recognize the need for a new approach towards international cooperation.

FAILURE AND PROMISE OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

The international community has failed to address three central challenges. The first is to acknowledge the inadequacy of the environment-centered paradigm, which is limited to targets, legally binding commitments, and burden-sharing between governments as a framework for international cooperation and implementation at the national level. The second is to recognize that securing the necessary political will for mainstreaming environment in national development policies requires priority to be given to the developmental concerns of the world's poor, which include access to services, markets, and opportunities for economic growth. The third is to find innovative mechanisms to forge partnerships with the private sector in order to facilitate research, development, and diffusion of new technologies for market transformation (e.g. to a carbon free economy and benefit sharing based on valuation of environmental services).⁴ Multilateral negotiations have attempted to fit long-term trends into a conceptual and legal framework to which they cannot easily conform. The most common shortcoming is a false assumption about the availability of technology essential to achieving real reform. While human development has environmental consequences, the measures that need to be taken to slow and correct those consequences have economic and social consequences in turn. What is now needed is a re-framing of the issue – a movement away from the assumptions of conventional models and policy options that, once identified and agreed upon, make the solution of environmental problems a scientific and technical matter.

The profound changes of the past decade enforce the need for more innovative and creative approaches to sustainable development. The World Trade Organization (WTO) was established in 1994, and at the WSSD in 2002, trade was recognized as a means of implementing Agenda 21.⁵ The role of the private sector in promoting environmentally sound behavior was thus given much greater recognition than it had previously received in the sustainable development dialogue. The short-term environmental priorities of developing countries generally include local air and water pollution concerns and land degradation, in addition to alleviating poverty and providing basic human needs. Responding to the concerns of developing countries, the GEF has now designated sustainable land management, in addition to climate change and conservation of biodiversity, as a focal area for funding. Development priorities were recognized as global concerns at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and partnerships with the private sector were identified as a means of meeting those challenges. The potential of the private sector to facilitate the achievement of these short-term goals becomes ever greater as some developing countries undergo economic growth and a strong private sector emerges. China and India are the most notable recent examples of such growth. Although the role of the private sector is widely recognized, its importance still needs to be further emphasized and the potential for partnerships developed. Trade, technology, and democracy are essential instruments for implementing a sustainable development agenda that responds to the fundamental concerns of underdevelopment, rather than merely imposing restrictions on natural resource use.

⁴ Ian Swingland (ed.), *Capturing Carbon and Conserving Biodiversity: the Market Approach*, Earthscan, in association with The Royal Society, 2003.

⁵ General Assembly resolution S-19/2 annex.

Recognition of the central role of sustainable development in making mutually reinforcing transformations, considering economy, technology, the private sector and civil society, however, will not be easy to achieve. Provisions requiring the consideration of these actors and elements are not included in current multilateral environmental agreements. Although clear goals and practical initiatives can facilitate the development of a new global consensus, addressing the main challenges will require a combination of carefully targeted interventions, including the development of a political coalition that is ready to supplement traditional principles of international cooperation. If this is not achieved, we will remain locked in a ‘time warp’ around 1992.

ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT AT RIO AND BEYOND: CONSENSUS OR CONFLICT?

In response to the inability of environmental systems to cope with the consequences of high levels of economic activity, the strategic focus of the UNCED was on two multilateral environmental agreements – the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Framework Convention on Climate Change. These treaties address human impacts on habitat and climate and seek to achieve more sustainable and equitable growth within the earth’s biogeochemical limits. It was assumed that the negotiation of a treaty was a necessary and sufficient condition for solving global environmental problems. However, there was no agreement about the primacy of the environmental Precautionary Principle as a guide to subsequent implementation. (Both the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development⁶ and the conventions refer to the precautionary approach). Consensus was achieved in these treaties only through the inclusion of a provision that eradication of poverty, not protection of the environment, remains the overriding priority of developing countries. The uneasy balance between environment and development that resulted from the UNCED is also reflected in the twenty-seven Rio Principles, which can be grouped into three approximately equal sections dealing with development, environment, and common issues.

The Rio conventions were based on a legal framework that assumed that a consensus on coordinated action required legally binding commitments as the foundation of multilateral cooperation. This was reflected in the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, a key element of which is that the obligations of developing countries to protect the environment are contingent on the provision of financial and technological resources by developed countries. The international institutional response to the ‘Rio paradigm’ required bargaining between states over regulatory rules specifying mutual constraints, which had to be monitored and reviewed periodically at the international level. The rules provided a framework for international cooperation primarily to monitor environmental standards at the national level. Consequently, there has been only limited discussion as to how national responses to global environmental concerns should be shaped. Over the past ten years, the focus of decision-making in the Conferences of the Parties of these conventions has been on establishing institutional arrangements, rules,

⁶ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3 - 14 June 1992 Vol I: Resolutions adopted by the Conference, resolution 1 (United Nations publications, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigenda).

and work plans at the multilateral level, particularly methodological work to support reporting, monitoring and review of commitments. As a result, only limited attention has been given to actions at the national level that would de-couple environmental degradation and economic growth.

Agenda 21 was an important turning point, as it helped the dialogue to transition from viewing the relationship between environment and development as a series of trade-offs, to seeing it as an opportunity for “win-win” options, recognizing that positive gains could precipitate from environmentally oriented change. This shift required scientists and decision-makers to suggest new strategies for change, and demanded new international agreements about short-term measures that could drive the modification of more long-term trends. However, scientists from different disciplines, political decision-makers, and other actors interpret data differently, leading to competing ideas about the concerns at hand, as well as the different options for addressing them. Other circumstances also complicated this approach. As national circumstances vary greatly, common rules impose varying degrees of hardship on different actors. The national communications submitted under the multilateral treaties indicate that the potential for “win-win” initiatives is limited, and that a series of short-term measures will not likely lead to achievement of long-term goals.⁷ Market-based instruments appear to be appropriate only in specific circumstances. The role of government as the primary actor is being questioned, and partnerships with the private sector are being considered increasingly important to implementation. It has proved very difficult to achieve results in the framework, as the role of different actors and the degree to which they are willing to cooperate have not been clearly defined.

As attention turns toward implementation, it is becoming increasingly apparent that arrangements based on specific treaties, which consider the environment as a distinct and separate policy issue, are not a suitable means for pursuing the solution of more long-term transitions that require the mainstreaming of national development strategies. Pursuing collaboration at the project level, rather than the broader institutional sphere, reduces conflict and is easier to formulate, but it remains outside the policy arena and thus fails to generate the political will requisite for addressing problems of such scale. Legislating standards for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases, for example, requires a review of national energy policy with severe implications for those countries with huge reserves of fossil fuels. Similarly, segregating people from conservation areas by declaring such areas “reserves” to protect plants and animals deprives local populations of a source of livelihood. The real lesson of the Montreal Protocol is that technology can drive environmental improvement processes, as the availability of substitutes to ozone-depleting substances largely determined the phase-out schedule. The problems that such treaties seek to address are not purely environmental, as their causes lie in activities shaped by society and economy. Environmental change reflects deeper political, economic and social concerns, while also influencing change in institutions and attitudes.⁸ Ministers of industrialized countries dealing with

⁷ Compilation and Synthesis of Third National Communications: National Communications from Parties included in Annex I to the Convention, FCCC/SBI/2003/7, 2003.

⁸ Clark, William C. and Nancy M. Dickson, Sustainability Science: The Emerging Research Program, *National Academy of Sciences*, PNAS, Vol. 100, No. 14, July, USA, 2003.

development assistance have now recognized that the multilateral environmental agreements negotiated at Rio are not about the environment, but about sustainable development.⁹

JOHANNESBURG: POTENTIAL AND PROMISE

In the past ten years, the debate has broadened to combine the concerns about natural resources with considerations of those who depend upon those resources. The realization by the global community that the key issue is not identifying the components of sustainable development, as was the objective of Agenda 21 at Rio in 1992, but rather identifying the relationships between them, as was done in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation in 2002, represents a major advance in the discussion. The traditional (environmental) 5-to-10-year targets are now being supplemented with 30-to-50-year (sustainable development) goals.

Most forecasting exercises, done through mathematical modeling techniques, are based on the assumption that past trends can be projected into the future, and that the structure of the system remains the same or at least responds in predictable forms. When projected over a long time horizon, such descriptive diagnosis of environmental change and sources of degradation invariably leads to disasters, because it ignores the possibility that in the medium to long-term horizon of 30–50 years, endogenous change may well make those projections unlikely. Another approach will be to outline a desirable goal in the future. These can be goals composed of various qualitative targets, like the Millennium Development Goals with their emphasis on access to services essential for human well-being.¹⁰ They can be strategic policies integrating reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases as a key element of energy policies, as announced by the United Kingdom,¹¹ or they can be strategies linking climate change, technology and energy policies, as proposed by the European Commission,¹² to name a few examples. Instead of describing what could happen, these approaches help to reach agreement on what should be done. Strategic goals address policy issues, which then alter policy objectives and activity patterns and facilitate understanding about how best to bring about the desired changes.

NEW PRINCIPLES, PRIORITIES, AND ACTIONS

The World Summit on Sustainable Development framed the issue of international cooperation differently than did the UNCED, by analyzing the underlying activities that cause environmental degradation. The strategic focus was on three areas – the eradication of poverty, modification of consumption and production patterns, and the protection of the national resource base for economic growth. The

⁹ Integrating the Rio Conventions into Development Cooperation, Development Advisory Committee, OECD, Paris, 2002.

¹⁰ United Nations Millennium Declaration, UN General Assembly resolution 55/2.

¹¹ *Energy White Paper*, United Kingdom, 2003.

¹² *World Energy, Technology and Climate Policy Outlook - 2030*, Directorate General for Research - Energy, European Commission, 2003

consideration of consumption and production patterns is an essential element of the “sustainability transition.”¹³ Moreover, these priorities recognize not only the relationships between states but also the relationship between states and international regimes, sectors and actors. The interactions are based on the principle of “mutual supportiveness,” and a desire to determine what should be done rather than who should be blamed. They turn the focus of international cooperation from a reliance on regulations that impose constraints to a shared set of goals for collaborative action to support mutually reinforcing transformations. They also blur the distinction between global and local concerns. This framework does not discuss the incremental costs of projects or the percentage of GDP that has to be spent on aid, but rather acknowledges trade as a means of national implementation and recognizes the importance of exchanging experiences, lessons learned, and good practices to facilitate national action. The new framework also seeks to resolve the global dimensions of common concerns and to find local solutions to global problems.

The conceptual basis of the new paradigm is that there is a large degree of overlap between global environmental concerns and national sustainable development objectives. This perspective also recognizes that there can be alternate pathways by which the mainstreaming of these concerns into national strategies can be achieved. The focus of international cooperation, therefore, should be on “inputs,” like the development of new technologies, and not on “outputs,” like the reduction of emissions or expansion of protected areas. The framework also implies a new emphasis on institutional arrangements at the national level, with international cooperation seen as supporting such efforts. Multilateral environmental agreements are based on commitments negotiated between governments, but they can succeed only if governments accept new roles and responsibilities. As the objective of sustainable development is the creation of mutually reinforcing transformations, it does not require multilateral treaties to negotiate the terms of burden-sharing, monitoring, and enforcing compliance. What it does require is an internationally agreed upon long-term strategic focus, a set of principles to guide implementation at the national level, and new forms of collaboration.

There is an emerging consensus that there are limits to potential behavioral changes, and that long-term strategies for entire economic sectors are needed. Accelerating action requires comprehensive identification of outdated technology areas and for greater investment security, rather than a project-by-project approach in which transfer of existing technologies is pushed by the incentive of incremental costs negotiated between governments on a case-by-case basis. As a result of collaborative long-term international research efforts, far-reaching technological breakthroughs, like the green revolution in agriculture, have been achieved, and it seems likely that more will follow over the next decade. Diffusion of these technologies would be facilitated by economic growth in developing countries. A key challenge will be to reconcile cooperative technology development and benefit-sharing with enduring questions of redistribution. Shifts in technology pathways are important at both the global and local levels, as they serve multiple sustainability objectives and serve to bridge different policies.

¹³ Kales, Robert W. and Thomas M. Parris, Science and Technology for Sustainable Development, Special Feature: Long-term Trends and a Sustainability Transition, *National Academy of Sciences*, PNAS, Vol. 100, No. 14 July USA 2003.

Just as the UNCED led to the development of innovative financing mechanisms, like the GEF, to finance global environmental concerns, the WSSD is leading to new collaborative mechanisms for technology development to provide solutions for sustainable development concerns. Environmental problems have traditionally been regarded as tangible and local. Technological responses thus tended to focus on abatement, dispersal, and segregation, and the objective of policy was to develop uniform technology-based standards. The implementation of such technology required case-by-case negotiation to take into account the economic circumstances of the industrial unit, which eventually led to consensus that market-based instruments provide the most efficient means of inducing technical change. On the other hand, when local problems attain global dimensions, they require strategic and sectoral rather than unit or project-level technological change. Consequently, they also require more fundamental changes, such as development of biotechnology and the hydrogen economy,¹⁴ for example. The strategic nature of such change requires entirely new perspectives and policy instruments oriented toward the development, rather than the transfer, of technology. This process will necessarily involve international partnerships between public and private research institutions, and the development of new technologies to promote public good.

These shifts are reflected in recent decisions made within existing multilateral environmental agreements. The Delhi Ministerial Declaration on Climate Change and Sustainable Development, adopted at the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Climate Change in 2002, links climate with energy and sustainable development, sees climate change as largely an economic challenge, and recognizes the development priority of access to energy services. It also stresses international cooperation for the development of new technologies through private sector involvement, investments, and supportive public policies.¹⁵ A review of the first ten years conducted by the sixth session of Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2002 found that the nature and scope of the measures for implementation require making complex and integrated policy choices that call for coordination and strong political will at the national level. It also found that the convention will succeed only if its importance is recognized in the wider context of economic development and global change, and that mechanisms for engaging the private sector in implementation need to be identified.¹⁶ International accords can thus be seen as *reflecting* underlying changes in the thinking of key groups or actors, rather than *driving* that change.

Mutual supportiveness, based on increasing global interconnectedness, is the key element of the new framework for implementing solutions to multilaterally acknowledged common concerns. The priorities that emerge in the coming years from the intergovernmental consensus will be critical to the development of international cooperation for achieving sustainable development.

¹⁴ International Partnership for the Hydrogen Economy, whose goal is to organize, evaluate and coordinate multinational research, development and deployment programs that advance the transition to a global hydrogen economy.

¹⁵ Delhi Ministerial Declaration on Climate Change and Sustainable Development, Report of the Conference of the Parties on its Eighth Session, held at New Delhi, Decision 1/CP.8, FCCC/CP/2002/7/Add.1, 2003.

Two issues that were stressed in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation – setting the agenda and considering the regional level – provide examples of such collaboration. The inter-relationship between sectors will lead to agenda-setting questions, an example of which is how global concerns should be discussed in the WTO in the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. In this case, priority setting is important because both institutions seek to achieve sustainable development, but they do so through different means. There is a growing recognition that forms of cooperation beyond legal arrangements will be necessary if our common problems are to be solved.

Mutual supportiveness will also be a guiding principle in determining the balance between international cooperation and national action in a three tier decision-making process involving global, regional and national actors. First, agreement on global concerns and judgment on the related objectives will be central to the political processes determined in multilateral forums. Four major areas are emerging as important because of the scope, magnitude and frequency of their secondary effects: the nature of energy generation and use, the availability of water, the services provided by common resources and ecosystems, and the development of good governance. These are the common threads that weave through most of the concerns of sustainable development. Second, at the regional level, a range of analytical tasks for identification of trends will need to be undertaken, in which social and technological scientists, rather than natural scientists, will play an increasingly important role, as partnerships between governments, scientists, private sector and non-governmental organizations are developed. More advanced developing countries with the capacity to use diffuse technology need to be induced to play differentiated roles for the region as a whole. Third, national implementation will need to be based on a consensus about mechanisms for institutional change in order to develop new technologies for market transformation, with the distributional and efficiency impacts viewed as complementary, rather than conflicting with each other as was previously supposed.

CONCLUSION: PROMOTING CHANGE

The definition of sustainable development will change over time as new insights modify, or even redefine, the multilateral consensus. It is therefore appropriate to focus on collaborative strategic approaches that will unite diverse political constituencies. Sustainable development is no longer the exclusive concern of governments. Rather, government-business-community collaboration is the new tool for implementing sustainable development. Such a reversal of the conceptual framework requires a focus on institutional innovation through incentives for development and diffusion of technologies, know-how, and practices, changes in governance in order to provide access to services, and mechanisms for managing change through partnerships with new actors.

¹⁶ Report of the Open-ended Intersessional Meeting on the Strategic Plan, National Reports and Implementation, UNEP/CBD/COP/6/5, 2002.

Moreover, many developing countries aspire to become industrialized countries by 2020, with the ability, then, to share their experiences and gains with other developing countries. They will also be able to help bridge the political divide between the least and most developed countries that presently characterizes the multilateral process. Implementation of sustainable development should thus be viewed as a political, institutional and technological, rather than a legal, process.

The economic and social changes of the past decade have created the necessary conditions to develop a strategic approach to achieving sustainable development. Three primary strategic goals embrace multiple sectors and policies, capture the interrelationships between different actors, levels of governance, and the range of concerns. The first is the development and diffusion of new technologies and practices, particularly those related to energy and water, in partnership with the private sector and local communities. The second is the development of a better understanding of the institutional requirements for and capacities of governance to develop models of land-use practices and manage forests sustainably through new economic policies. The third is the development of initiatives for dealing with unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. The strategies for cooperation should include exchange of experiences at the regional level in order to support improved policy and governance frameworks and targeted investment strategies. These distinct, yet interrelated actions at the global and regional levels will reinforce each other to develop a broad-based coalition for the strategic transformation at the national level that is currently missing.

Sustainable development needs to be a global goal because of the unavoidably interdependent relationships between states, sectors, and activities. It is an inherently complicated goal, as the required changes affect different groups, areas and activities differently. Given the magnitude and scope of the problem, global consensus will be a prerequisite of its resolution. The focus of the discussion in multilateral forums has shifted from international commitments as a *precondition* for national action, to international cooperation as a tenet that *supports* national action. This shift is taking place within the context of a multilateral arena in which there is no clear understanding as to what needs to be done to support the mutually reinforcing transformations taking place, and to define a role for the private sector, civil society, and local government. The past 10 years have been spent analyzing the global environmental problems created by various human activities, but discussion is now turning toward evaluation of the activities that cause the environmental problems and analysis of solutions that do not compromise development and economic growth. Consolidation of this strategic thinking requires a multilateral forum, for example the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development with a higher institutional status, in order to reach consensus about long-term goals and to establish a set of principles and priorities for implementation.