

# Toward Integrated and Sustainable Development?

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## Acronyms

<b>CCA</b>	Common Country Assessment
<b>CDF</b>	Comprehensive Development Framework
<b>CDAFs</b>	Comprehensive Development Assistance Framework (UNDP)
<b>CIDA</b>	Canadian International Development Agency
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development (UK)
<b>EADI</b>	European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes
<b>EA</b>	environmental assessment
<b>ECLAC</b>	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
<b>EIA</b>	environmental impact assessment
<b>EMS</b>	Environmental Management System
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
<b>GDP</b>	gross domestic product
<b>GEF</b>	Global Environmental Facility
<b>GNP</b>	gross national product
<b>G-7</b>	Group of 7
<b>GSDF</b>	Global Sustainable Development Facility
<b>GTZ</b>	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
<b>HDI</b>	Human Development Index
<b>IBRD</b>	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
<b>ICSID</b>	International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes
<b>IDA</b>	International Development Association
<b>IDB</b>	Inter-American Development Bank
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>IFC</b>	International Finance Corporation
<b>IFI</b>	international financial institution
<b>IIED</b>	International Institute for Environment and Development
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>IPM</b>	integrated pest management
<b>ISO</b>	International Organization for Standardization
<b>IUCN</b>	World Conservation Union
<b>IUED</b>	Institut Universitaire d'Etudes du Développement
<b>MDB</b>	Multilateral Development Bank
<b>MIGA</b>	Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PCD</b>	people-centred development
<b>PPP</b>	purchasing power parity
<b>SARD</b>	Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (FAO)
<b>SD</b>	Department of Sustainable Development (FAO)
<b>SDA</b>	Rural Development (FAO)
<b>SDC</b>	Swiss Development Cooperation
<b>SDR</b>	Research Extension and Training (FAO)
<b>SDW</b>	Women and Population Division (FAO)
<b>SECO</b>	State Secretary for Economic Affairs
<b>SHD</b>	sustainable human development
<b>Sida</b>	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
<b>UN</b>	United Nations

<b>UNCED</b>	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
<b>UNCSD</b>	United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development
<b>UNCTAD</b>	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
<b>UNDESA</b>	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNDAF</b>	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNEP</b>	United Nations Environment Programme
<b>UNHCR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNIDO</b>	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
<b>UNRISD</b>	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>WB</b>	World Bank
<b>WBG</b>	World Bank Group
<b>WCED</b>	World Commission on Environment and Development
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>WMO</b>	World Meteorological Organization
<b>WTO</b>	World Trade Organization
<b>WWF</b>	World Wide Fund For Nature

## **Summary/Résumé/Resumen**

### ***Summary***

How have mainstream development agencies interpreted and applied approaches to “sustainable development”? Are they stimulating progress by governments and other social actors toward reaching the environmental and social goals enunciated, for example, in the Declarations and Plans of Action adopted by the World Conference on Environment and Development (Rio, 1992) and the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995)? Is it realistic to expect specialized international development agencies to adopt integrated, holistic approaches to complex environmental, social welfare and related socioeconomic issues? What might be done to help ensure that mainstream agencies’ sustainable development efforts become more effective?

In attempting to answer these types of questions, this paper looks first at some of the interpretations, ambiguities and contradictions associated with the term “sustainable development”, and at why it became so popular among development agencies during the 1990s. Barraclough suggests that the recent popularity may have less to do with its conceptual innovation or analytical sharpness than with the practical politics of the era. Moreover, he argues, diverging interpretations of the term have enabled a wide range of actors to endorse and pursue “sustainability” and “development”, which have almost universally positive connotations associated with dynamic and more equitable progress.

The paper goes on to discuss recent attempts by a few mainstream international agencies—the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank—to apply the concept of sustainable development in their operational programmes. The author asks: To what extent do recent agency policies in the name of sustainable development represent conceptual innovations implying a change in thinking, as contrasted with a simple change in terminology? How have sustainable development policies been translated into concrete programmes and operational decisions? Are they mere “add-ons” to the agency’s ongoing programme, or do they suggest a fundamental change in its overall approach? And how well have the agencies succeeded in integrating declared environmental and social goals? He finds that agencies’ adoption of “sustainable development” goals and programmes tended to be more a terminological than a conceptual innovation. Furthermore, the agencies have often not succeeded in integrating socioeconomic and environmental issues into a unified approach to guide their wide-ranging operations. The paper also mentions the efforts of some other development actors—UN agencies and programmes, the international financial institutions, the dozens of bilateral organizations dedicated to providing development aid, and numerous international NGOs. These agencies face similar problems in carrying out integrated programmes on the ground.

Finally, Barraclough speculates on what impacts efforts to promote sustainable development might have had in practice, and what might be done by some of the principal actors to contribute toward more integrated and effective approaches to sustainable development.

Evaluating impacts on the ground is extremely complex. Available data and analysis suggest mixed, often contradictory, results. Yet perhaps even more surprising is the author's finding that there seem to have been few systematic attempts to trace how sustainable development policies and initiatives have been interpreted and applied at various levels, from headquarters through regional and national decision-making centres, to their impacts on livelihoods and the environment on the ground. Apparently, even less is known about the extent to which such initiatives may affect broader processes that contribute to social inequalities and environmental degradation. The author suggests that this relative absence of systematic assessments with critical feedback from the field can lead to fallacious assumptions becoming embedded in the conventional wisdom that is used to formulate recommendations for future policies and programmes.

According to the author, the burden of adjusting toward more sustainable development will have to fall primarily on the rich. Sustainability will be out of reach without a redistribution of wealth and power from rich countries to poor ones, and from the rich to the poor in both. Growing pressures emanating from increasingly organized groups of the hitherto excluded, in alliances with others standing to gain from more sustainable development, could help. Identifying the social forces that could be mobilized to bring about the policy and institutional reforms required for socially and ecologically sustainable development at international, national and local levels remains the key issue for international development agencies.

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### ***Résumé***

Comment les institutions de développement en place ont-elles interprété et mis en pratique la notion de "développement durable"? Incitent-elles les gouvernements et d'autres acteurs de la société à atteindre les objectifs environnementaux et sociaux énoncés, par exemple, dans les Déclarations et Plans d'action adoptés par la Conférence des Nations Unies sur l'environnement et le développement (Rio, 1992) et le Sommet mondial pour le développement social (Copenhague, 1995)? Est-ce réaliste d'attendre d'institutions internationales spécialisées dans le développement qu'elles adoptent une approche intégrée face à des problèmes écologiques, sociaux et socio-économiques complexes? Que faire pour que les efforts de développement durable des institutions en place donnent plus de résultats?

En tentant de répondre à ce genre de questions, l'auteur de cette étude examine en premier lieu certaines des interprétations, ambiguïtés et contradictions associées à l'expression de "développement durable" et se demande pourquoi elle est devenue si populaire dans les institutions de développement pendant les années 90. Solon Barraclough laisse entendre que cette popularité récente tient sans doute moins à la nouveauté du concept ou à l'acuité de l'analyse des pratiques utilisées en politique pendant cette période. De plus, poursuit-il, les interprétations divergentes données à cette expression ont permis à un large éventail d'acteurs de souscrire à la "viabilité" et au "développement", qui ont des connotations presque

universellement positives associées à l'idée de progrès, de dynamisme et d'une plus grande équité, et d'en faire leurs objectifs.

L'auteur étudie les tentatives récentes faites par certaines institutions internationales—l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour l'alimentation et l'agriculture (FAO), le Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement (PNUD) et la Banque mondiale—pour mettre en pratique la notion de développement durable dans leurs activités de terrain. Dans quelle mesure, se demande l'auteur, les politiques récentes adoptées par ces institutions au nom du développement durable sont-elles novatrices dans leur conception, impliquent-elles une rupture dans leur réflexion, plutôt qu'un simple changement de vocabulaire? Comment les politiques de développement durable se sont-elles traduites en programmes concrets et en décisions sur le terrain? S'agit-il de simples ornements ajoutés au programme de l'institution ou indiquent-elles un changement radical d'approche? Et dans quelle mesure les institutions ont-elles réussi à intégrer des objectifs environnementaux et sociaux déclarés? Il estime qu'en adoptant des objectifs et programmes de "développement durable", les institutions agissent plus au niveau de la terminologie que sur une innovation conceptuelle. De plus, elles ont rarement su adopter à l'égard des questions socio-économiques et environnementales une démarche unifiée, applicable dans leurs opérations d'envergure. L'auteur mentionne aussi les efforts tentés par d'autres acteurs du développement—les institutions et programmes des Nations Unies, les institutions financières internationales, les douzaines d'organisations bilatérales qui dispensent une aide au développement et les nombreuses ONG internationales. Ces institutions se heurtent aux mêmes problèmes dans la mise en œuvre de programmes intégrés sur le terrain.

Enfin, Solon Barraclough se demande quelle incidence les efforts déployés en faveur d'un développement durable ont pu avoir dans la pratique et ce que pourraient faire les principaux acteurs pour que le développement durable soit abordé de manière moins fragmentaire et plus efficace. Il est extrêmement difficile d'évaluer les répercussions sur le terrain. Les données et analyses disponibles conduisent à des résultats souvent contradictoires. Mais ce que l'auteur découvre est peut-être plus surprenant encore: il semble que l'on ait rarement tenté de suivre les politiques et initiatives de développement durable du siège aux centres de décision régionaux et nationaux pour voir comment elles avaient été interprétées et appliquées à divers niveaux et quels avaient été leurs effets sur les moyens d'existence et l'environnement local. Apparemment, on en sait encore moins sur les répercussions de ces initiatives sur les tendances générales contribuant à la dégradation de l'environnement et aux inégalités sociales. L'auteur explique que cette relative absence d'évaluation systématique, évaluation qui fait apparaître les effets ressentis sur le terrain, peut être à l'origine d'hypothèses erronées que l'on admet comme des vérités incontestées et dont on se sert pour formuler des recommandations de politiques et de programmes.

Selon l'auteur, ce sera d'abord aux riches de s'orienter vers un développement plus viable. La viabilité restera hors de portée sans une redistribution des richesses et du pouvoir des pays riches vers les pays pauvres et, dans tous les pays, des riches vers les pauvres. Il serait utile que



les exclus de naguère, qui s'organisent de plus en plus, renforcent peu à peu leurs pressions et s'allient avec d'autres groupes ayant tout à gagner d'un développement plus durable. Identifier les forces sociales susceptibles de se mobiliser pour obtenir aux niveaux international, national et local les réformes politiques et institutionnelles nécessaires à un développement socialement et écologiquement durable reste l'enjeu capital des institutions internationales de développement.

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### **Resumen**

¿Cómo han interpretado y aplicado los principales organismos de desarrollo los criterios para el "desarrollo sostenible"? ¿Están alentando a los gobiernos y a otros agentes sociales a realizar progresos encaminados a alcanzar los objetivos mencionados, por ejemplo, en las Declaraciones y Planes de Acción adoptados en la Conferencia mundial sobre medio ambiente y desarrollo (Río, 1992) y la Cumbre Mundial sobre Desarrollo Social (Copenhague, 1995)? ¿Cabría esperar que los organismos de desarrollo internacional especializados adopten criterios integrados e integrales con respecto a cuestiones complejas medioambientales, relativas al bienestar social y socioeconómicas? ¿Qué podría hacerse para ayudar a garantizar que los esfuerzos desplegados por los principales organismos encaminados a un desarrollo sostenible sean más efectivos?

Al tratar de responder a este tipo de preguntas, en este documento se examinan, en primer lugar, algunas interpretaciones, ambigüedades y contradicciones asociadas al término "desarrollo sostenible" y los motivos por los que éste adquirió tanta importancia para los organismos de desarrollo en el decenio de 1990. Barraclough sugiere que su popularidad reciente puede obedecer en menor grado a su innovación conceptual o agudeza analítica que a las políticas prácticas de la época. Además, defiende que las diferentes interpretaciones del término han permitido que una gran variedad de agentes aprueben y luchen por "la sostenibilidad" y "el desarrollo", que tienen connotaciones positivas a nivel prácticamente mundial asociadas al progreso dinámico y más equitativo.

En el documento se discuten a continuación las tentativas recientes de algunos organismos internacionales fundamentales – la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Agricultura y la Alimentación (FAO), el Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (PNUD) y el Banco Mundial – para aplicar el concepto de desarrollo sostenible en sus programas operativos. El autor plantea varias preguntas: ¿En qué medida las políticas recientes de estos organismos en pro del desarrollo sostenible representan innovaciones conceptuales que conllevan un cambio en la filosofía, en contraposición con un simple cambio en la terminología? ¿Cómo se han traducido las políticas de desarrollo sostenible en programas y decisiones operativas concretos? ¿Son meros "añadidos" al programa continuo del organismo, o sugieren un cambio fundamental de su concepción general? Y, ¿hasta qué punto han conseguido los organismos integrar objetivos ambientales y sociales declarados? El autor considera que la adopción de objetivos y programas de "desarrollo sostenible" por parte de los organismos solía

ser más bien una innovación terminológica que conceptual. Además, los organismos a menudo no han logrado integrar cuestiones socioeconómicas y ambientales en una concepción unificada para orientar sus operaciones de gran alcance. En el documento también se mencionan los esfuerzos desplegados por otros agentes del desarrollo – organismos y programas de la ONU, las numerosas organizaciones bilaterales dedicadas a prestar asistencia para el desarrollo, y un gran número de ONG internacionales. Estos organismos se enfrentan a problemas similares en lo concerniente a la aplicación de programas integrados sobre el terreno.

Por último, Barraclough especula sobre las posibles repercusiones que hayan podido tener en la práctica los esfuerzos desplegados para fomentar el desarrollo sostenible, y sobre el modo en que los principales agentes podrían contribuir a unos planteamientos más integrados y eficaces del desarrollo sostenible. La evaluación de las repercusiones sobre el terreno es extremadamente compleja. Los datos y análisis disponibles a menudo barajan resultados contradictorios. Sin embargo, quizá resulte aún más sorprendente la conclusión del autor con respecto a que apenas ha habido tentativas sistemáticas de analizar la interpretación y aplicación de las políticas e iniciativas en materia de desarrollo a varios niveles, desde las sedes, pasando por los centros regionales y nacionales decisorios, hasta sus consecuencias en los medios de vida y el medio ambiente sobre el terreno. Según parece, se sabe aún menos sobre la medida en que dichas iniciativas hayan podido repercutir en procesos más amplios que contribuyen a las desigualdades sociales y a la degradación ambiental. El autor sugiere que esta ausencia relativa de evaluaciones sistemáticas con información importante del terreno puede conducir a que se arraiguen unas hipótesis erróneas en los criterios tradicionales utilizados para formular recomendaciones para futuros programas y políticas.

Conforme al autor, la carga del hacer ajustes encaminados a un desarrollo sostenible deberá recaer fundamentalmente en los ricos. La sostenibilidad será inalcanzable sin una redistribución del bienestar y del poder de los países ricos a los países pobres, y de la población más rica a la más pobre en ambas categorías de países. Podrían contribuir a este propósito las presiones crecientes de los grupos cada vez más organizados de los excluidos hasta el momento, aliados con otras fuerzas bien situadas para beneficiarse de un desarrollo más sostenible. La identificación de las fuerzas sociales que podrían movilizarse para provocar las reformas políticas e institucionales necesarias para un desarrollo social y ecológicamente sostenible a nivel internacional, nacional y local, sigue siendo la cuestión fundamental para los organismos de desarrollo internacionales.

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## Introduction

How have mainstream development agencies interpreted and applied approaches to “sustainable development”? Are they stimulating progress by governments and other social actors toward reaching the environmental and social goals enunciated in the Declarations and Plans of Action adopted by the Rio and Copenhagen summits? Is it realistic to expect specialized international development agencies to adopt integrated, holistic approaches to complex environmental, social welfare and related socioeconomic issues? What might be done to help ensure that mainstream agencies’ sustainable development efforts become more effective? These are a few of the questions that are discussed below.<sup>1</sup>

This paper first looks at some of the interpretations, ambiguities and contradictions associated with the term “sustainable development”, and at why it became so popular among development agencies during the 1990s. It then discusses briefly, and necessarily rather superficially, recent attempts by a few mainstream agencies to refine and apply the sustainable development concept in their operational programmes. Finally, it speculates about what impacts these efforts have had in practice and what might be done by some of the principal actors (“stakeholders”) to contribute toward more integrated and effective approaches to sustainable development.

## I. An Ambiguous Concept

Sustainable development is a term conveying different and often contradictory meanings for the diverse groups promoting it. Its recent popularity stems in part from its ambiguity. The underlying concerns it embraces about the limits to economic growth imposed by the earth’s non-expandable ecosystem, and by social conflicts associated with growing inequalities and inequities, are ancient ones. These concerns have become increasingly prominent during the last four centuries. “Development” was accompanied by expanding industrialization and imperialism in its multiple guises, as well as by a twelve-fold growth of population and a spectacular increase in pollution-generating uses of natural resources, principally by the one fifth of the world’s inhabitants with the highest income. The search for an integrated approach to direct “progress” toward humanistic goals has been high on the agenda of the United Nations since its founding over a half-century ago.

### ***A. Origins of the term “sustainable development”***

The term sustainable development was widely adopted by mainstream development agencies following publication in 1987 of **Our Common Future** by the World Commission on

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<sup>1</sup> This is a very big order for a short paper that was prepared in a short amount of time, as part of the work UNRISD carried out for its contribution to Geneva 2000, the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the Implementation of the World Summit for Social Development. Most of the information had to come from secondary sources accessible from Geneva in mid-1999, supplemented by personal experience and recent research into related themes carried out by UNRISD. The Institute’s studies dealing with sustainable development issues, however, mostly focused on the impacts of policies and associated processes on livelihoods and the natural environment in the particular institutional context of a few selected developing countries and localities. They did not pretend to examine critically the programmes of mainstream development agencies. In view of these limitations, the observations in this paper are necessarily partial, tentative and at best suggestive of what a few of the mainstream development agencies have attempted and of the constraints they encounter.

Environment and Development (WCED), or Brundtland Commission. WCED used the term as a unifying theme in presenting its environmental and social concerns about worrisome trends toward accelerated environmental degradation and social polarization. It stated that “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. ... Even the narrow notion of physical sustainability implies a concern for social equity between generations, a concern that must logically be extended to equity within each generation” (WCED, 1987: paragraphs 1 and 3 of chapter 2).

The Brundtland Commission, however, was by no means the first mainstream development agency to use the term. In **State of the World 1984: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society**, Lester R. Brown advocated a “sustainable development strategy” that included stabilizing population, reducing dependency on oil, developing renewable energy resources, conserving soils, protecting biological support systems and recycling materials (Brown, 1984:3). The World Conservation Union (IUCN) had promoted the term with an emphasis on environmental protection similar to Brown’s in its **World Conservation Strategy** (IUCN, 1980). The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) adopted the concept in the mid-1970s after its principal founder, Barbara Ward, used the term to highlight the linkage between environmental protection and development (Holmberg, 1992). Undoubtedly, other conservationists and developers used the term even earlier. For example, FAO documents in the 1950s and 1960s frequently mentioned sustainable agriculture. Literature discussing high-yield sustainable forest management appeared nearly two centuries ago; “Faustmann’s Rule” for estimating optimum lengths of forest rotations published in 1849 long anticipated many twentieth century “social cost-benefit” models for determining optimum rates of sustainable economic growth (Dasgupta, 1982).

The term “sustainable development” figured prominently in the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development’s (UNCED) Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and Agenda 21 (“a blueprint on how to make development socially, economically and environmentally sustainable”) (UNCED, 1992). The United Nations World Summit for Social Development also highlighted “sustainable development” to emphasize the interdependencies and complementarities between social development and environmental protection. The term is mentioned four times in the introduction to the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, sometimes further modified as “people-centred sustainable development”, and on numerous occasions throughout the Declaration and its accompanying Programme of Action. Sustainable development featured in all the other United Nations summits during the 1990s and it is hard to find any recent reports of mainstream international development agencies that do not mention sustainable development as a goal of their activities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> IIED, WCED, UNCED and the Social Summit emphasized the close interrelationships between meeting the needs of all social groups at present and of protecting the natural environment for future generations, that is, between *intragenerational* and *intergenerational* equity issues. Nonetheless, during the 1990s sustainable development in the discourse of many development agencies and of the public more generally often came to mean only the conservation of the environment and its natural resources while neglecting issues of social equity. This helps to explain much of the conceptual and terminological confusion surrounding the term. Some use it to suggest a new intellectual paradigm or way of thinking about development that emphasizes the need to deal simultaneously with social and

The term “sustainable development” suggests that what has to be sustained is “development”.<sup>3</sup> But like earlier concepts of social and economic “progress”, and for which it is often used as a synonym, “development” implies a normative judgement about historical change. In common speech, “development” has come to mean that poorer countries “advance” toward the production structures and lifestyles of richer ones. This differs from the biological concept of development, from which the term seems to have been borrowed, by which an organism progresses from inception to growth, maturity, reproduction and eventual death while relegating longer-term sustainability to evolution.

Different social actors may have widely differing perceptions about whether certain processes of historical change are developmental or degenerative. Their views tend to be importantly influenced by how such changes affect their own societies and their positions within them. The distinctions between economic, social, cultural, political and other kinds of development, as well as the constraints imposed by global and local ecosystems, seem much clearer for academics and technocrats than they do for most workers, peasants, businesspersons and other participants in the processes of historical change taking place under the development label. By the early 1970s, one of Latin America’s leading development theorists and practitioners had concluded that the development concept was useful primarily as a mobilizing myth, not as an analytical tool (Furtado, 1975). He recognized that development meant different and often contradictory things for different social actors.

Nonetheless, during the last two centuries, and even before, many economists, politicians, technocrats, investors and others have tended to equate progress (“development”) with economic growth and technological “modernization”. Economic growth is conventionally measured using complex index numbers, which are derived from national accounts of recorded or imputed estimates, at “market prices”, of value added by the production and transaction of goods and services in order to estimate total national product or income. These GNP or GDP estimates, when divided by estimates of national populations, are alleged to be roughly comparable indicators over time and among countries of levels and rates of economic growth.

These crude estimates of economic output have always involved numerous highly dubious and heroic assumptions. They have ignored the glaring incommensurabilities implied by explicitly or implicitly assigning monetary prices to “goods and services” that are crucial to and highly valued by some, but are considered virtually worthless by others. The cultures of indigenous peoples, the protection of endangered species and the preservation of historic monuments are examples. In any case, many highly valued or essential goods and services are not marketed and are essentially qualitative and hence non-quantifiable. National income estimates largely neglect the composition of economic output and its distribution among diverse classes and

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environmental issues. Others use it as a catchy new way of referring to the way they have always conceptualized development, with an emphasis on whatever aspects were already most important for them – whether these were returns on investments, natural resource conservation, social welfare or something else.

<sup>3</sup> What is meant by “sustainable” presents another quandary. For many agencies, sustainable development seems sometimes to mean sustaining a development project beyond the period for which they plan to inject resources to support it.

other social categories.<sup>4</sup> Also, national income accounts neglect most of the social and environmental damages and similar negative “externalities” associated with economic growth processes. Environmental degradation tends to be proportional to the total “throughput” of resources and ensuing wastes involved in production, processing, trade and consumption. This throughput greatly exceeds estimated “outputs” as it includes resources used throughout intermediate stages of production. Total throughput tends to increase in relation to output, to the extent that production processes become longer and more complex. Obviously, estimates of economic output give undue weight to what is marketed in relation to what is not, and implicitly accept as legitimate the disproportionate power of those who control assets and income.

In spite of these glaring weaknesses, average per capita national product became widely accepted among mainstream development agencies as a principal indicator of each country’s level and rate of development in comparison with other countries.<sup>5</sup> In view of the wide acceptance among mainstream agencies of average per capita income as a leading indicator of levels of development, it is not surprising that observers primarily concerned with issues of environmental degradation and social justice criticized the concept of sustainable development promoted by IUCN, the Worldwatch Institute and WCED as being too vague to be very helpful (e.g., Redclift, 1987; O’Riordan, 1985; and many others). The composition and financing of these bodies provided critics with further cause for alarm, as they included both corporate and political interests with little history of defending the poor or the environment. Often promoters of sustainable development were spokespersons for narrowly focused environmental conservation groups for whom the livelihoods of the poor tended to be a secondary concern. Nonetheless, all of these apparently contradictory interests had accepted the term sustainable development—if not the underlying conceptual paradigm that it supposedly implies calling for both inter- and intragenerational equity. Many observers pointed out that, to the extent development meant economic growth as conventionally measured, “sustainable development” was itself a contradiction of terms, an oxymoron, as “development” could be neither socially nor environmentally sustainable (e.g., Barraclough, 1991).

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<sup>4</sup> Conversion of national income estimates into purchasing power parity (PPP) dollars does not help overcome these inherent difficulties, and for some purposes can be highly misleading. The empirical data for meaningful conversion to PPP dollars are simply not available for most developing countries, adding another potential source of error to the already shaky hierarchy of dubious assumptions needed to estimate average per capita incomes. More seriously, PPP estimates can contribute to fallacious inferences about how resources should be allocated in poor countries in order to accelerate “development”. Essentially, PPP estimates have to assume that relative prices in low-income countries are roughly similar to those in the United States in order to estimate comparable values of economic outputs. But why should the relative returns for street cleaners, farm workers, barbers, nurses or elementary school teachers in India, Bangladesh or China, whose services cannot be traded internationally because of strict immigration restrictions, be assumed to bear a relationship to the returns from services of highly skilled scientists, computer engineers or doctors in these countries, who tend to be mobile enabling them to compete in segmented international labour markets, be similar to that in the United States? In the absence of unimpeded international migration, calculations in PPP dollars of returns to essential social investments in basic health, education, infrastructure and food production, for example, tend to be highly misleading (on this point see Streeten, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Until recently (1997) the World Bank simply ranked countries in its annual **World Development Report** from lowest to highest levels of development according to their estimated average per capita GDP. Some agencies, such as UNICEF, used other criteria, such as infant mortality, for their principal rankings of countries, but all considered per capita output to be a leading development indicator. In 1990, UNDP introduced its own complex Human Development Index (HDI) of which income was only one of three major components, in large part in answer to criticisms of the predominant use of estimated per capita income in characterizing “development”, but this still left most of the weaknesses mentioned above and many others unanswered. More will be said about the HDI later.

### ***B. Why the term flourishes***

Why then, during the 1980s and 1990s, did most mainstream development agencies adopt the term sustainable development to present their ongoing and new efforts to integrate environmental protection and socioeconomic goals? After all, the earlier terms they had used to call attention to the need for environmental protection, such as natural resource conservation, eco-development and many others, had all claimed to take both environmental and social issues into account in an integrated manner. The slogan of the conservation movement in the United States a century earlier had been “the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time”, which was meant to convey an attempt to integrate socioeconomic and environmental goals. Many early advocates of environmental conservation promoted their cause in terms very similar to those of today’s advocates for sustainable development, and were equally imprecise.

The reasons for the term’s recent popularity have less to do with its conceptual innovation or analytical sharpness than with the practical politics of the era. The world’s population had grown from about 1 billion in 1800 to some 4 billion in the 1970s, and was projected to surpass 6 billion in the 1990s. Accelerating “globalization” accompanying modern electronic communications and a resurgence of international trade, finance, production and consumption had contributed to unprecedented rates of urbanization, industrial pollution, deforestation, and soil and water degradation. At the same time, there was a concomitant increase of socioeconomic polarization both between rich and poor countries and within most of them. The sharp rise in the early 1970s of commodity prices, especially of petroleum, and the so-called “world food crisis”, were widely blamed on impending scarcities due to natural resource degradation and depletion. Only later was it recognized that the fiscal, monetary and trade policies of the United States, the Soviet Union and a few other major industrial countries, together with the policies of several transnational corporations in the early 1970s, provided a more convincing explanation for this particular set of events (Barraclough, 1991).

The publication of **Silent Spring** (Carson, 1962) had been followed by many other widely read cries of alarm about environmental degradation, such as **Limits to Growth** (Club of Rome, 1972) and **Mankind at the Turning Point** (Mesarovic and Pestel, 1974). These publications were accompanied by the rapid rise of “green” and other social protest movements in “developed” countries. The 1972 Stockholm UN Conference on the Human Environment and the subsequent creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) were international political expressions of such growing environmental concerns. All this took place in a context of slowing rates of economic growth and rising unemployment in most OECD countries and in most developing ones as well, with the exception of the “Asian Tigers” until 1997. The disintegration of the “Soviet bloc” in the 1980s exposed the growing environmental and social problems in these self-styled “socialist” countries. It also led to a lessening in the public’s mind of the imminent danger of a nuclear holocaust overshadowing all others. This contributed to opening additional space for international development agencies to emphasize global social and environmental issues. All this recent history created a receptive political climate for promotion of concepts such as “sustainable development” and “human development”.

A member of the WCED Panel on Food Security explained to me in 1986 why he thought that sustainable development was the best term to use in promoting an integrated approach to fighting environmental degradation and promoting social equity issues. He believed that the term's ambiguity was a virtue because it enabled actors with widely divergent interpretations of the term to endorse it. To some it conveyed an imperative to integrate socioeconomic and environmental concerns in a search for deep structural reforms, while to others it merely meant a little more attention should be paid to environmental protection. Also, the term was attractive to nearly everyone because "sustainability" and "development" had almost universally positive connotations associated with dynamic and more equitable progress. Most important, it could help to open new space in international organizations for those convinced that environmental degradation and social polarization were not only closely linked, but were also symptoms of deep systemic malfunctioning. This would enable them to promote more effectively radical people-centred institutional and policy reforms at international, national and local levels. Of course, vested interests would use this same space to try to maintain their privileges and power, but vigorous popularly based social forces could use it to improve their opportunities to counter them.

This was a shrewd analysis. The slogan of sustainable development quickly became widely adopted and very diversely interpreted. It has probably helped to bring into the open some underlying political issues. Clearly, there are no purely technocratic answers for resolving conflicts between parties whose values are not commensurable, meaning that they cannot be quantified on any mutually acceptable monetary or other single scale of measurement in order to facilitate technically determined trade-offs. Moreover, even if conflicting parties could agree on some common values for estimating equitable trade-offs (an obvious impossibility if unborn generations are involved) the problem of uncertainty would remain, meaning that speculations about many future events and circumstances cannot reasonably be expressed in terms of probabilities ("risks"). Any interpretation of "sustainable development" implies dealing both with profound non-commensurabilities and great uncertainties. Conflicts of interest resulting from such divergent perceptions can only be resolved politically, usually through some combination of compromise and compulsion.

Current disputes about control of natural resources frequently illustrate these fundamental issues. River basin development projects, for example, often imply displacement of all or many of the people whose livelihoods depended on customary access to the area's natural resources. Sometimes such conflicts of interest can be resolved by providing those displaced with acceptable compensation in kind or in money (although more often than not compensation is grossly inadequate). In some cases, however, extinguishing the customary access rights of indigenous groups implies destruction of their traditional cultures as well as their material livelihoods. Mutually acceptable "just compensation" in monetary terms may be impossible to estimate, as what is at stake for many members of indigenous groups is not for sale at any price. This leaves no alternative other than a strictly political resolution of the conflict. At the international level, non-commensurabilities are often even more intractable. The long-standing



conflict over land and water resources between Israel and neighbouring Arab states provides only one of countless examples.

The assumption made by most promoters of “sustainable development” of trade-offs between present and unborn generations is on the face of it a rather silly fiction. Unborn generations cannot negotiate a deal, by definition. No one knows what their circumstances or values will be. Trade-offs have to be made by actual social actors. Some of them may claim to represent the interests of the unborn. They may have different perceptions of what those interests may be, however, or may only use differing projections to rationalize other goals.

When projected future costs and benefits are discounted, so as to be expressed at “present value”, their nature and value have to be arbitrarily estimated. Using standard accounting practices and market interest rates, however, projected future costs and benefits have negligible weights beyond the next five or 10 years when expressed at “present value”. Many economists assume high substitutabilities<sup>6</sup> between what they have labelled as “natural or environmental capital” (including energy, biodiversity and other natural resources, together with “sinks” for dumping noxious wastes) on one hand, and of “man-made economic capital” and “human capital” (including human capabilities associated with knowledge, ingenuity, health, skills, etc.), on the other (e.g. World Bank, 1992; Anand and Sen, 1996). Many ecologists and others, however, disagree. They do not believe that improved technologies can continuously overcome limits to growth imposed on the planet’s complex life support system by the “law of entropy” (the second law of thermodynamics, stating that disorder always increases and energy diminishes in a closed system) and numerous more proximate physical, biological and social constraints. There is no way these non-commensurabilities and uncertainties can be reasonably quantified in terms of assumed market values that could constitute a technical basis for negotiation accepted by all the principal parties concerned.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, some groups that are harmed, especially in poor countries, will perceive blatant imperialism in the imposition of market prices to resolve conflicts of interests and values, no matter how they are estimated. They correctly perceive that power relationships and not impersonal market forces lie behind most alleged technical solutions for conflicts concerning access to environmental resources and the distribution of wealth and income.

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<sup>6</sup> “Substitutability” is the term economists use for replacing one factor of production by another to achieve the same output, taking into account their relative prices. Use of renewable solar energy, for example, could be substituted for use of finite supplies of fossil fuels in the degree the latter become scarcer and hence more costly, and new technologies result in the latter becoming more feasible and less expensive.

<sup>7</sup> Some economists recognize the complications implied by uncertainties, but they hope that these can be lessened by further research and they tend to brush aside the impossibilities of reducing uncertain damages and benefits for very diverse groups to a common unit of measurement (Taylor and Pieper, 1996). Technical discussions about what discount function to use in comparing projected costs and benefits for unborn generations with those associated with the present generation’s production-consumption and investment-saving decisions are fascinating (e.g. Heal, 1997). Practically, however, the exercise is a mere intellectual game. It has to assume that uncertainties can be expressed as risks and that values of the unborn will be commensurable with ours. Similar intractable problems are encountered in current discussions about climate change and biodiversity loss. Scientific advances can help illuminate the discussions, but they cannot be expected to solve the underlying issues of values and uncertainties. These issues, however, provide a powerful argument for application of the “precautionary principle” advocated by many analysts, and especially by some ecologists and ethicists. This too is necessarily ambiguous, because of multiple irreconcilable values and uncertainties associated with the quest for equity not only between generations, but also within our own. Such perceived conflicts of interest always require political solutions. Taking into account qualitative as well as quantitative arguments can sometimes help, but power relations remain fundamental.

In his book **Ecological Economics**, Martinez-Alier provides a lucid review of debates about these issues, mainly in Europe and North America, during the last two centuries. He brings out how issues of commensurabilities and uncertainties have plagued discussions of environmental degradation and its linkages with social justice throughout history. As a practical matter, both the environment and doctrines of justice can be considered to be social constructs irrespective of assumed teleological origins. He also shows the limitations of analytical approaches based on methodological individualism (explanations of a society's behaviour in terms of the preferences and "rational choices" of its individual members) in attempting to resolve such issues, as they lead to generalizations and projections that, when not tautological, are valid only for fleeting moments in specific historical contexts. He does this by focusing on the work of several innovative humanists and scientists—including a few economists—who had become concerned with the squandering of renewable and exhaustible natural resources in industrializing societies in the face of finite potential sources of energy available for human use. Current discussions of sustainable development were anticipated intellectually over a century before the international context became propitious for it to become a centre-stage political issue (Martinez-Alier, 1990).<sup>8</sup>

In view of these ambiguities inherent in the concept of sustainable development, mainstream development organizations have naturally interpreted it to rationalize their own perceptions of priorities, and also as an opportunity to expand of their ongoing programmes and add on new ones. Those most sensitive to rich countries' dominant interest groups have tended to emphasize a "common heritage of mankind" when talking about the need to conserve natural resources in poor countries, while those more sensitive to the needs of the poor in poor countries emphasized "the right to develop". Each organization's mandate, governing bodies, sources of resources and clienteles played a role, as did the perceptions of their staff. United Nations Declarations and Resolutions, together with summit Plans of Action and the injunctions and stipulations of international environmental agreements could all be cited in support of an agency's sustainable development programmes no matter how much they might contradict some of the other activities of the same agency. The political economy and politics of sustainable development are the central issues that have to be investigated in order to understand better how international development agencies have attempted to interpret and operationalize the noble objectives the term is supposed to imply.

### ***C. The search for an integrated approach***

The United Nations has sought an integrated approach to development ever since its founding over a half-century ago.

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<sup>8</sup> Martinez-Alier places the founding of modern "ecological economics" in the 1960s and 1970s with the work of Georgescu-Roegen and several others who were for the most part probably ignorant of many of these much earlier debates. In the United States, Herman Daly, a former student of Georgescu-Roegen, became a leading advocate of such an ecological approach and Jeremy Rifkin helped popularize it (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971; Daly, 1977, Rifkin, 1980).

The quest for means of bringing the human future into closer correspondence with professed values has been prone to substitute terminological innovation for conceptual innovation, to reinvent 'practical' solutions that have long been current, and to evade definitions that would reveal lack of consensus on the present nature of human societies and on the nature of the Good Society that is being sought. ... The reconciliation of technocratic rationality with popular participation, of continually expanding production with protection of the human environment and resource endowment, of continually diversifying human wants with priority to the satisfaction of basic human needs poses questions ... that are as far as ever from plausible answers (Wolfe, 1980:63 and 64).<sup>9</sup>

This is as true now as it was two decades ago when it was written.

UNRISD research suggested that "unified approach" was a terminological innovation for "balanced social and economic development" in the international repertoire of aspirations. These terms could mean very different things to different users. There was wide agreement that development should be viewed as a dynamic process integrating economic growth, improvements in social welfare, protection of natural environments and the reduction of existing disparities among and within nations. But there was little consensus about just what reforms were sought and most urgently needed in international relations, socioeconomic structures (including social relations) or about how such reforms might be encouraged and directed. Of course, terminological innovations frequently reflect perceptions that earlier policies were inadequate for dealing with obdurate problems. Changes in the names of programmes and policies, however, can have little real impact unless they are accompanied by a corresponding realignment of the social forces driving them.

The more recent term "sustainable development" is often adopted merely as another terminological innovation, and thus poses the same problems. It should imply that explicit attention be given to the integration of environmental issues and social ones. Many who use the term, however, fail to recognize that reversing environmental degradation requires a reduction in social inequities. There seems to be wide rhetorical agreement among agencies that improved equity is not possible between generations, or even between different social groups within the present one, if essential life support systems provided by the natural environment are not protected. There is no consensus, however, about what this implies for different "stakeholders" – about what reforms are needed and who is capable and willing to bring them into effect or about how costs and benefits should be shared or even about what they would be. Participation is often interpreted to mean acquiescence and voluntary contributions of labour

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<sup>9</sup> In the early 1970s an UNRISD team led by the Institute's Director Donald McGranahan, and later in collaboration with Marshall Wolfe then chief of ECLAC's Social Development Division, undertook a research project requested by the UN's Secretary-General to "prepare a report on the application by governments of a unified approach to development analysis and planning". Two of UNRISD's Board members at the time, future Nobelists Jan Tinbergen and Gunnar Myrdal, took particular interest in this research, as did Raul Prebisch of ECLAC, and UNRISD Board member Jacques Delors contributed a paper. The research included expert meetings, numerous background papers by leading world "experts" and several in-depth country case studies. Among the principal conclusions was that a unified approach is an expression of a technocratic utopia made by aggregation of objectives, whose validity by themselves hardly anyone can deny, but that in specific contexts are often highly contradictory. A unified approach to development worthy of the name, however, assumes a common philosophy and a unified social science, but these do not exist.

and resources by low-income “beneficiaries” who have no real influence on a project’s goals and design or in establishing the rules within which it must operate.

A conclusion of the UNRISD research into a unified approach to development was that effective policies to promote development should depend on a diagnosis of particular circumstances. Development in the last analysis is merely a symbolic stamp of approval for changes that the user of the term considers unavoidable or desirable. To the extent there is a consensus about the meaning of “sustainable development”, proposals of feasible policies to approach it depend crucially on a realistic appraisal of how different social agents perceive their roles and act, and the confrontation between their perceptions and the specific historical settings on which they are trying to act (Wolfe, 1980:134). How well did mainstream development agencies do this in their programmes during the 1990s?

## **II. Conceptual or Terminological Innovations? Sustainable Development Policies in Selected Agencies**

As pointed out in the introduction, an in-depth, agency-by-agency analysis of how sustainable development policies have evolved since the term was “mainstreamed” after WCED in 1986 is beyond the possibilities and scope of this paper. Instead, I try to raise a few questions and to suggest hypotheses based on very spotty information mostly taken from publications, web sites and other sources, such as personal observations and critical commentaries by others. To what extent do recent agency policies in the name of sustainable development represent conceptual innovations implying a change in thinking, as contrasted with mere terminological ones? How have “sustainable development” policies been translated into concrete programmes and operational decisions, and are these mere “add-ons” to an agency’s ongoing programme or do they suggest a fundamental change in its overall approach? How well have they succeeded in integrating declared environmental and social goals?<sup>10</sup>

I have suggested earlier that the adoption by development agencies of sustainable development goals and programmes may have been for the most part merely a new term for what they were doing or intending to do anyhow perhaps with a few new ones added on. To the extent that the new terminology implied a reformulation of goals, programmes and priorities to give more emphasis to environmental and social issues and to their integration in agency policies, however, it could represent a significant conceptual and programmatic advance. How have

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<sup>10</sup> Throughout this discussion I try to use the term “policy” in the sense of a purposeful course of action by a social actor to approach a predetermined goal, and not as a rhetorical declaration of intent, which is frequently called “policy”. Another source of great confusion is the interpretation of the adjective “social”. Social policy or social goal, for example, is sometimes used in the literature to refer to specific “social sectors” such as health, education and welfare. Alternatively, it may mean policy designed to influence social relations (which are the essence of any “society”), or it may refer to policies and goals about which there is a broad consensus within the whole society. I tend to view economic activities as a subsystem of a broader social system, but many economists, on the contrary, seem to see the economic system as the dominant one in which “social” sectors and goals are subordinate. This creates great confusion in use of the term in general and especially in discussions of how to integrate the “social” and the “economic”. The recent widespread adoption by development agencies of the term “social capital” (meaning mutually supportive networks of relationships among individuals and groups, which is considered by some authors, however, to be a definition of “society”) has compounded this confusion. I try, but seldom succeed, to be clear when using the word “social”.

mainstream agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UNDP and the World Bank interpreted and applied the term?

### **A. FAO**

FAO was founded in 1945, shortly before the United Nations. The principal objectives of “sustainable development” were all written into FAO’s constitution. These included “conservation of natural resources”, “raising levels of nutrition and standards of living”, “bettering the conditions of rural populations”, “improving the efficiency of the production and distribution of all food and agricultural products”, and “contributing to an expanding world economy”. The difficulties FAO faced in practice in reconciling these praiseworthy (and often assumed at an abstract level to be complementary) objectives during the four decades before WCED should have provided a warning to agencies embarking on “sustainable development programmes” later about some of the problems they would encounter.

FAO, of course, participated officially in the Stockholm and subsequent UN summits dealing with what came to be known as sustainable development issues. Like other UN agencies, it was also able to provide inputs for the WCED. As the major objectives of sustainable development were already supposedly components of its ongoing programme, however, FAO tended to regard the mainstream agencies’ explicit adoption of its own official “sustainable development” goals as an endorsement of its ongoing work—as well as a possible threat of competition from other organizations for scarce resources and for bureaucratic turf.

One of FAO’s apparent responses to the 1995 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (or Rio Summit) was to declare Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) a major goal and to create a new Department of Sustainable Development (SD) as one of FAO’s technical departments, each headed by an Assistant Director-General. In addition to creating a few new posts, FAO moved several existing divisions, branches and professionals into three Sustainable Development Divisions (SDR—Research, Extension and Training, divided into four services; SDW—Women and Population Division, divided into two services; and SDA—Rural Development, divided into two services). This provided substance to the SD Department.

Since its establishment in 1995, the SD Department has focused knowledge and advice related to cross-cutting bio-physical, institutional, social and human dimensions of sustainable development. More specifically, it aims at promoting, co-ordinating and leading the formulation of concepts, policies and strategies for:

- greater involvement of rural people, both men and women, and especially the poor, in defining development policies and programmes that affect their livelihoods;
- generation and transfer of knowledge and technology for sustainable development; and
- management of natural resources and protection of the environment” (FAO, 1999b:para. 52).

The SD in Rome, however, includes only three of FAO's some 25 technical divisions, about one eighth of its technical resources at headquarters. In addition to its other departments in Rome, FAO has regional offices and some 75 country representatives in developing countries (several with responsibilities for more than one country). These are all supposed to give a high priority to promoting sustainable development, and also to food security. Food security broadly interpreted, however, is an essential component of sustainable development and in many respects can be regarded as essentially the same thing (South Centre, 1997; Barraclough, 1991).

If one compares work programmes and budgets after 1995 with those of earlier years, however, one suspects that these changes in FAO's organization chart were more terminological than substantive<sup>11</sup> (see, for example, **FAO Programme of Work and Budget 1998-99** and 1992-93). During the 1950s and 1960s, FAO had been one of the most vocal international organizations in calling attention to issues of soil and water conservation, deforestation, dangers of ocean fisheries depletion, loss of biodiversity and the like. Some of its units and staff members had also been consistently concerned with issues of rural poverty, small farmer productivity, popular participation and agrarian reform, as well as their linkages with environmental and economic issues. FAO's major programmes absorbing the greater part of its efforts and resources, however, were directed toward promotion of "agricultural modernization" and trade in agricultural products and requisites. FAO was especially active in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s in promoting "green revolution" high-external-input technologies in developing countries with little attention given to the undesirable social and environmental impacts frequently accompanying them. In this sense, FAO's overall development strategy has always been somewhat contradictory. The bulk of its resources have been dedicated to promote agricultural "modernization" contributing to rather quick increases in production and productivity, but there were always also some efforts, usually by units located elsewhere within the organization, to promote policies and institutions conducive to greater longer-term social equity and natural resource conservation (see FAO's **Programme of Work and Budget 1998-99**, and earlier years).

FAO's own Evaluation Service noted in early 1999, "If achieving SARD (Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development) is a step by step process, then some progress has been made since UNCED, even if it has been uneven" (FAO, 1999a). This same report mentions the need to integrate environmental concerns in agricultural policies, including trade policies, but it omits mentioning the parallel need to integrate social concerns in these national and international policies. It claims that there has been some progress since the early 1990s in promoting soil, water and forest conservation, in the cycling and use of organic materials in low-external input farming systems, in "sustainable intensification" using environmentally friendly technologies (such as integrated pest management—IPM), in protecting biodiversity, in promoting popular participation, etc. The report does not provide data or analysis to support these claims, however, nor does it call attention to how several FAO programmes, especially those financed

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<sup>11</sup> This tends to be true of most reorganizations of large bureaucracies, both "public" and "private". Some critics characterized the massive restructuring of the US government in the early 1950s as a "garbage pail reform", merely dumping the garbage from one container to another.

through its investment centres, may be contributing to contrary trends in many socioeconomic and ecological contexts.

FAO's "corporate" strategy (FAO, 1999c) calls for "the eradication of food insecurity and rural poverty". It is essentially a restatement of the goals enunciated in the Declaration and Plan of Action of the 1996 World Food Summit held in Rome (FAO, 1996). Almost every page of this 29-page document plus 35 pages of annexes is peppered with sustainable development terminology such as "sustainable livelihoods", "conservation and sustainable use of natural resources", "equitable access to resources and markets", "targeting the poor and disadvantaged", "food security", "integrated resource management with recognition of future private and social costs of resource degradation", etc.

The document and its annexes, however, fail to analyse the major processes leading to "degenerative" instead of "sustainable" development, and what FAO could do to help counter them. Instead, it is primarily a breakdown of FAO's broad goals into a wish list of well-intentioned, more detailed, objectives, all supposedly contributing to sustainable development and food security. It falls far short of presenting a strategic plan of action of how to approach FAO's goals. The latter would require FAO to take leadership by outlining in very general terms which social actors would be able and willing to take courses of action leading to achievement of desired objectives in specific historical contexts. Instead of merely accepting World Bank and OECD interpretations of the alleged present international "development consensus" (often called the "Washington consensus"), it would critically examine how the proposed policies relate to FAO's mission. It would have to recognize that development is seldom a win-win proposition, but almost always implies losers as well as winners. Rapid agricultural technological modernization stimulated by relatively free trade and unimpeded movements of capital, for example, frequently leads to loss of access to land, jobs and livelihoods of large portions of rural populations long before alternative livelihood opportunities become available, depending largely on institutional and policy contexts of each country. A strategy for approaching sustainable development would have to acknowledge such problems and to suggest ways of dealing with them.

This rather bleak assessment of FAO's strategy and programmes should not be interpreted as a belittlement of the many positive contributions it has made in the past and is continuing to make in promoting more sustainable development. It has done a great deal to raise awareness in both poor and rich countries of the dangers of environmental degradation and growing socioeconomic inequities. It was among the earliest of international agencies to call attention to destructive deforestation, soil erosion, depletion of water resources, overexploitation of ocean fisheries, the perils of noxious agricultural chemicals and many other environmental issues. Several of its community forestry initiatives, for example, seem to have promoted effective popular participation in more sustainable forest management. FAO also generated, stimulated and publicized data and analyses about the obstacles to "development" posed by inadequate food and malnutrition, extensive rural poverty, inequitable land tenure systems and other deficient agrarian institutions.

Yet, **The Ecologist** (March/April 1991) was able to devote a whole well-documented special issue, much of it prepared by “insiders”, to the failure of FAO’s programmes to deal adequately with these same environmental and social problems and for frequently contributing to worsening them. Reading these articles today one finds that most of the criticisms are still valid and pertinent. It would have been possible, however, to have prepared a convincing volume emphasizing mostly positive contributions. What stands out for this observer is not FAO’s purported hypocrisies or incompetence, but rather the impossibility for any international development agency to escape reflecting in its programmes the uncertainties and the conflicting perceptions, values and interests of its support groups and intended clientele. These contradictions are inevitable, but many of us believe that the relative weight given to integrating social and environmental concerns into FAO’s operational programmes could have been greatly increased by imaginative leadership fully committed to the high priority of sustainable development goals.

Sustainable development for FAO in the 1990s was apparently more a terminological than a conceptual innovation. And the organization’s overall strategy continues to reflect the same contradictions and concerns that were written into its constitution, but they have been given a new name. These problems continue to beset its operational programmes. It has not succeeded in integrating socioeconomic and environmental issues into a unified approach guiding its multifarious operations. This was largely unavoidable, but critics believe that it could have done better than it did. Some hypotheses about the political and bureaucratic dynamics contributing to this outcome are advanced later, following a brief review of sustainable development efforts by other international agencies.

## **B. UNDP**

UNDP as a separate UN programme took shape in the mid-1960s, with the fusion of the UN Technical Assistance Administration, the representatives in developing countries of the UN Technical Assistance Board and a few UN-administered economic and social development funds. It was assigned a leading role in providing technical assistance, mobilizing resources and co-ordinating UN development activities in developing countries.<sup>12</sup> UNDP depends on voluntary contributions and about four fifths of its ordinary core budget in the early 1990s came from about 10 industrial countries (UNDP, 1994; Commission on Global Governance, 1995).

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<sup>12</sup> In the early 1990s UNDP’s total annual budget for national and multinational programmes in developing countries amounted to about \$1.4 billion (UNDP, 1993). (This includes funds from all sources, including co-financing of UNDP projects and also special purpose trust funds, but its core budget from donor contributions was less than half this amount; similar patterns hold for most of the other agencies.) In 1997 UNDP’s total expenditures were \$2.4 billion, but its core funds were only about \$800 million (UNDP, 1998). These can be compared with total budgets of \$1.2 billion for the World Food Programme (WFP), \$919 million for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), \$974 million for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), \$633 million for FAO, \$965 million for the World Health Organization (WHO) and \$430 million for the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The total budgets in 1997 for 15 leading UN Funds, Programmes and Specialized Agencies working on international development, including those just mentioned, amounted to about \$8.9 billion (DFID, 1999). UNDP’s budget in the late 1990s shrank, however, with cuts in contributions by some big donors such as the United States.



From the beginning, UNDP was concerned with linkages between socioeconomic and environmental issues in developing countries. Most of its early development funding was through projects, often drawn up in consultation with UNDP but usually requested by governments and prepared and operated by agencies such as FAO, ILO, WHO and many others.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the “sustainable development” content of UNDP projects depended largely on the orientation of “executing agencies” and, of course, in the case of national and regional development projects, on priorities of the governments requesting the projects. Since the work of the WCED in the mid-1980s, UNDP has given a high profile to its work programmes and publications to the socioeconomic and environmental issues implied by the term sustainable development.

UNDP’s programme is necessarily diffuse and heterogeneous. This is partly explained by its origins as a fusion of diverse UN programmes and funds, as well as by very divergent views among major funders about what its objectives and priorities ought to be. Much of its funding is not from core contributions for its ordinary budget, but earmarked funds for special purposes. These include developing country contributions to help finance national UNDP offices and operations and the co-financing of UNDP projects, as well as donor contributions to several trust funds and for other pre-designated ends. Also, UNDP administers many funds for which it has little real control over objectives and approaches. About three fourths of the resources it spends from its development budgets for developing countries and regions are assigned for low-income countries in Africa. This means its activities are relatively more prominent there, especially in small countries, than in Asia or Latin America. To “mainstream” sustainable development in all these diverse activities is probably an impossible challenge. UNDP’s influence on policies and programmes in each developing country depends crucially on the leadership qualities and dedication of individual Resident Representatives and their staff, which, of course, vary widely. Its effectiveness is also dependent on government policies and the balance of social forces supporting them.

Here it is possible only to look at a very few of UNDP’s diverse activities. Those briefly discussed below are minor ones within the context of its total programme, but perhaps they illustrate some of the problems this agency faces in promoting sustainable development. In any case, major research would have to be undertaken to make more than a few preliminary and superficial observations. One should keep in mind that many of UNDP’s activities are far removed from dealing directly with long-term development issues. UNDP teams attempting to broker peace agreements in Central America while wars were still raging, or to provide and coordinate disaster relief in East Africa, inevitably have other priorities that are more pressing. Such emergency activities absorb a significant portion of UNDP’s budget.

A small but important UNDP programme promoting sustainable development has been the annual publication of the **Human Development Report**. These reports, “published for the

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<sup>13</sup> Much of UNRISD’s “green revolution” and part of its “food systems” research was funded by UNDP, as was some of its work in preparation for the Copenhagen Summit and part of its current research on gender issues. During the 1960s and 1970s, I participated for FAO, in collaboration with national government agencies, in the preparation and subsequent execution of a few joint FAO-UNDP “integrated rural development” projects. UNDP policies were only one of many factors influencing the “sustainable development” content of these projects.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)", state that they represent "the collaborative efforts of teams of eminent consultants and advisors ... and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Development Programme, its Executive Board or its Member States". Nonetheless, UNDP has become increasingly identified with its **Human Development Reports**. The reports are attractively produced and widely distributed. They are obviously intended to provide an alternative to the World Bank's annual **World Development Report** as an authoritative source of arguments, analysis and data about development issues.

The UNDP reports define "human development" (many have asked: Who other than humans would development be for?) as "a process of expanding human choices by enabling people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives". They identify as key issues "human rights—economic, social, cultural, civil and political", "collective well-being", "equity" and "sustainability". The 1998 report states: "Human development is not a concept separate from sustainable development—but it can help rescue 'sustainable development' from the misconception that it involves only the environmental dimension of development" (UNDP, 1998).

The **Human Development Reports** attempt to integrate social, economic and environmental issues in their texts and tables. The 1998 report, for example, focused on the theme of consumption patterns and their implications for society. It highlighted the growing gap between rich and poor countries, and increasing polarization within them, together with the dangers posed for present and future generations locally and globally by environmental degradation of all kinds. The other 11 published reports have focused on different themes, but all have made an effort to emphasize linkages and interactions among social, economic and environmental policy issues.

These UNDP publications have apparently contributed to changing at least some of the rhetoric in discussions of development to include more attention to social and environmental issues in both developing and rich industrial countries. The reports have many conceptual, analytical and statistical weaknesses that have been widely noted by specialists.<sup>14</sup> Some critics believe they fail to offer an alternative "development paradigm" but merely restate the World Bank's neoliberal "Washington consensus" with a "human face" by proposing to add a "massive international welfare bureaucracy" (Nicholls, 1996 citing Korten, 1994).

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<sup>14</sup> The **Human Development Reports** are divided into about 100 pages of text, graphs, summary tables, boxes, etc., a few technical appendices and a final section of development indicators. In 1998 these appendices included 48 tables, six presenting indicators for all 174 countries included that year, 20 only for "developing countries", 20 for "industrial countries", one providing regional aggregates and one providing data by country on human rights instruments. All in all, these tables imply over 50,000 separate entries. Many critics have pointed out that reasonably comparable and reliable data simply do not exist for most of these entries, especially for poor countries. Moreover, the Human Development Index (HDI) and related ones purporting to measure gender differences and poverty by country all ignore non-commensurabilities, making it logically impossible to reduce the data to a common measure. Many of the concepts are essentially qualitative and hence non-quantifiable by definition. The Reports freely acknowledge these difficulties, but discount their importance.

In the late 1970s, UNRISD was repeatedly asked to provide a "social development index", ranking countries included in UNRISD's development data bank. A previous Director, Donald McGranahan, who had established this data bank, and I as Director at the time, rejected this notion for the reasons just noted. (These technical reasons are discussed in McGranahan, Pizarro and Richard, 1985.) I still think we were correct in doing so on "scientific" grounds, but we probably underestimated the political demand for such an index no matter how faulty it might be technically.

Nonetheless, the Reports seem to have met a widely perceived need for a major UN agency to offer “authoritative” data, arguments, graphs, correlations, boxes (usually telling “success” stories), complex algebraic formulae and indices that highlight social and ecological components of development as well as economic ones. By 1998 over 100 “developing” and “transitional” countries had produced national and regional human development reports with UNDP assistance. UNDP believes these have contributed to advance sustainable development through advocacy, highlighting critical concerns, focusing on equity and articulating people’s perceptions and priorities (UNDP, 1998). The **Human Development Reports** may not have broken much new ground conceptually or empirically (compared to what had already been well cultivated by other agencies, NGOs and specialists), but they have had a positive political impact in promoting the sustainable development concept. Some of the Reports’ principal architects admit in private that this was their main objective.

The **Human Development Reports** probably go as far as possible for an international agency in integrating socioeconomic, cultural and environmental goals implied by sustainable development at a global level.<sup>15</sup> The conflicts, constraints and contradictions as well as possibilities for negotiating some limited progress to approach these goals only become apparent in specific historical contexts. UNDP’s major mission is to promote development in poor countries, but as already noted, it has many other, sometimes competing, assignments. The difficulties it has encountered in attempting to translate its sustainable development goals into operational programmes to be carried out at national and subnational levels are instructive in this respect.

In 1993 UNDP’s new administrator enunciated sustainable human development (SHD), or people centred development (PCD), to be the core goal of the organization’s activities. The **Human Development Report** concept of human development was apparently further modified by adding “sustainable” to emphasize UNDP’s social and environmental concerns. In practice this was supposed to translate into UNDP’s operational programmes and projects being designed and evaluated in terms of their contribution to promoting employment, environmental regeneration, equity and empowerment (of the poor and also of women). This was often equated in UNDP documents and directives with giving the highest possible priority in UNDP country programmes to eliminating poverty, but in a manner consistent with

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<sup>15</sup> The UNDP encounters political constraints that inhibit its going much further. When it attempted to highlight needs for a global taxation system, it aroused the ire of the United States Congress. Its attempt to rank countries on their human rights record provoked numerous member countries to protest. Its analysis of poverty-generating policies and institutions pretends, unsuccessfully in my opinion, to transcend issues of “neoliberalism” versus “socialism”, which is certainly understandable given its diverse sources of funding and political support. The **Human Development Reports**, like the World Bank’s **World Development Reports**, treat the social dimensions of development such as improved health, education, welfare, people’s participation and environmental protection both as goals of “sustainable development” and as instruments for achieving more rapid rates of “growth”. The weighting is different, but the temptation to evaluate costs and benefits of alternative policies in monetary terms based on actual or “shadow” (assumed) market prices is too great for most planners and politicians to resist. In real world historical processes, goals and means are always inextricably linked, but economic analyses and planning presupposes their separability. By emphasizing the instrumental contributions of social and environmental “improvements” to economic growth in monetary terms, development agencies unavoidably assign GDP (as conventionally measured) a central role in “sustainable development” that some of them say they wish to avoid. This lends support to the criticism cited earlier of the **Human Development Reports** as being “the Washington consensus with a human face”.

environmental and economic growth objectives. The roles of UNDP Resident Representatives in co-ordinating UN development activities was to be greatly strengthened through the preparation of country strategy notes by UN agencies in each country under the representative's leadership.<sup>16</sup>

The 1997 UN reforms introduced programmes of Common Country Assessment (CCA) and a United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) intended to help it "to identify clearly where the UN can make a significant, strategic difference for the countries and peoples that the organization serves, especially the poorest and most vulnerable . . ." and also to promote "more focused linkages between the development mandate of the United Nations and its other core missions, including human rights ..." (Speth, 1999a). The CCA should analyse the national development situation using a common framework and indicators in order to identify key issues for "advocacy, policy dialogues, and preparation of a common United Nations response (UNDAF)". The UNDAF is intended to be "a strategic planning and collaborative programming framework to identify priorities for United Nations action ..." "Full government participation is mandatory ..." CCA and UNDAF exercises would be undertaken under the leadership of the UNDP's Resident Representatives. Of course, they would focus on sustainable development and other goals derived from UN conferences, instruments and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Pilot programmes were begun in 18 countries in 1997 with the participation of 29 UN organizations. All countries, where applicable, should have CCAs and UNDAFs by 2004.

Whether this initiative will be more successful than earlier ones in achieving a common UN development programme in each developing country remains to be seen. Several UN agencies have resisted surrendering any of their separate institutional identities or prerogatives in developing countries, implied by their becoming full members of a team under the leadership of the UNDP Resident Representative. Also, much depends on personalities. Resident Representatives have neither the bureaucratic authority nor wield enough economic clout to impose their priorities on other agencies, so that being able to exercise intellectual leadership becomes crucial to their effectiveness. Most important, however, is that whether such a UN team effort will largely succeed or fail must depend on national governments. If a government's development strategy is relatively coherent and supportive of UN goals, this facilitates co-operation among UN agencies. To the degree that government policies conflict among themselves as well as with UN resolutions and declarations, however, a common framework becomes increasingly difficult. Some ministries, factions within them and different groups of so-called "civil society" will always attempt to play the interests of UN and other "aid" agencies

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<sup>16</sup> For an excellent summary and critical analysis of these UNDP sustainable development initiatives in the mid-1990s, see Nicholls, 1996 and 1999. Those of us who had worked in the field with UNDP in the 1960s and 1970s were far from convinced of how innovative the new UNDP programmes were. We had heard much the same thing from headquarters with slightly different terminology many times before. The conceptualizations from New York of poverty issues in poor countries had always seemed rather bizarre, as they implied the availability of data and contextual information that simply did not exist. Also, theorists and programmers at headquarters were constantly adding new dimensions to their definitions of poverty, failing to take into account both the non-availability of comparable data and the simple truism that each new dimension to be considered would unavoidably increase the number of poor if rigorously observed. For the most part, such guidelines were simply put aside by field officers pressed to get on with urgent work.

and officials against each other to their own advantage. International development agencies are torn between pragmatic pressures to consider as successful any programmes or projects so judged by host governments and other clients, on one hand, and pressures to give priority to declared sustainable development goals, on the other, especially as the latter tend to be contradictory among themselves in specific country and local contexts.<sup>17</sup>

After 1996, UNDP seems to have largely abandoned the term “sustainable human development” in favour of “sustainable livelihoods” (UNDP, 1997). Several bilateral and non-governmental development agencies did the same (DFID, 1999; Farrington et al., 1999; Sida, 1996). I have not been able to find an authoritative explanation for this change in terminology, but I suspect it had to do with the confusion caused in some donor circles by adding the apparently redundant term “sustainable” to the **Human Development Report** concept of human development in which it had already been included. If properly interpreted, “sustainable livelihoods” has a potential for adding greater analytical power to the concept of sustainable development, although it could easily become just another terminological innovation.<sup>18</sup>

UNDP has apparently made some significant contributions to the promotion of sustainable development goals at international and national levels through its **Human Development Reports** and its operational programmes. The **Human Development Reports** have many serious technical weaknesses, but they have been very useful for advocacy groups pursuing sustainable development goals. UNDP has encountered huge obstacles in integrating the concept of sustainable development into its operational programmes. Many of the reasons for this have already been mentioned. These difficulties apply to all the international development agencies and several of them are discussed further in later sections of this paper.

International agencies such as UNDP attempting to promote sustainable development face fundamental dilemmas. According to UNDP’s own analysis in the **Human Development Reports** and other documents, high-income modern production and consumption patterns are a principal factor driving most anthropogenic processes of environmental degradation, such as pollution, deforestation, desertification, climate change and loss of biodiversity. The 1998 **Human Development Report**, for example, highlights the role of consumption patterns in

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<sup>17</sup> I participated in the field for FAO and UNDP in earlier attempts to develop a common UN approach to development assistance under UNDP leadership after 1966. FAO co-operated initially, but after 1976 it practically withdrew its support for its own bureaucratic political reasons. Moreover, the guidelines from UNDP headquarters designed to foster co-operation toward common goals were seldom helpful. They were necessarily very general and failed to foresee adequately the problems that arise in the specific historical and ecological contexts of individual countries. Frequent changes in terminology describing UNDP priorities in directives sent from UNDP headquarters were particularly disconcerting.

<sup>18</sup> UNRISD adopted the concept of livelihood in the late 1960s for evaluating social impacts of the “green revolution”, and made it a principal evaluative criterion to use in other research programmes in 1977 (Pearse, 1980; UNRISD, 1979). Its application is tricky, however. It is primarily a qualitative concept, which makes its quantitative measurement at best only very partial and often misleading. While research can help identify the direct impacts of policies and other processes on livelihoods for particular groups in specific contexts, it is dauntingly difficult to capture indirect spin-offs. To be useful for policy analysis it has to establish linkages between local-level impacts and contextual institutional and policy constraints at national and international levels. This implies sophisticated historical, political economy and cultural analyses. Some of the UNDP documents on sustainable livelihoods discuss these topics. How to make them operative in the field, however, is a difficult issue that seems to be treated rather superficially. In many countries application of sustainable development principles is extremely delicate politically, especially for intergovernmental organizations and their national counterparts.

driving environmental degradation. In practice, consumption patterns are inseparable from those of production, investment and how societies are organized and governed, but the Report's authors focused principally on consumption. This and other UNDP analyses suggest that present-day environmental degradation and mass poverty in developing countries are in part generated by these same high-income production and consumption processes, which are mostly concentrated in rich industrial countries but are spreading rapidly to developing ones. Their impacts are transmitted through trade, coercion and emulation within highly inequitable social and political structures at all levels.

As a UN intergovernmental programme, UNDP is accountable to its member states. The governments of these states, however, depend on principal support groups that seldom include effective representation of poor minorities and, in many cases, even of poor majorities. Over four fifths of UNDP's financial resources come from voluntary contributions by only about 10 of the world's richest industrial states. These donor governments can hardly be expected consistently to embrace policies that would radically modify the self-perceived interests of their own powerful support groups as well as the lifestyles of a majority of their citizens. Moreover, UNDP's staff members, like those of other international development agencies for the most part, are professionals recruited from rich countries and from well-educated middle-class and elite groups in poor ones. Typical staff members' incomes, and hence their consumption (as conventionally estimated in terms of market prices), are on average more than one hundred times greater than those of the abjectly poor who constitute well over one fifth of developing countries' people. Given these constraints, how realistic is it to expect international development agencies, whether intergovernmental, governmental or non-governmental, to provide coherent, sustained, operationally effective support for the profound structural and policy reforms at international, national and sub-national levels that their own analyses imply would be required to advance "people-centred sustainable development"?<sup>19</sup>

Such constraints are frequently exacerbated by the need of international agencies to depend in part on funds from non-governmental sources. Since its founding, UNDP has sought to promote "partnerships" with other UN agencies, the international financial institutions (IFIs), governments, NGOs and the private sector. Indeed, the search for broad co-operation under UN leadership was a premise of UNDP's creation as a separate programme. Its founders, however, recognized that the legitimacy of the UN system rests on the fiction that United Nations policies are made by, and accountable to, sovereign and equal member states. In 1998, UNDP initiated discussions with several transnational corporations to create a "Global

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<sup>19</sup> The UNDP has made many valiant attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable. To the extent this brings into the open fundamental contradictions, as its recent emphasis on sustainable livelihoods may help to do, this could be positive for promoting more sustainable development policies. Often, however, the contradictions are glossed over by implying that sustainable development policies transcend the contradictions. Treatment in the **Human Development Reports** of issues dealing with property rights and international trade policies are good examples. The last UNDP administrator initiated policies that tended to generate helpful public debates about some of these fundamental contradictions, such as rich-country consumption patterns. The new administrator's initial statement avoided most substantive issues of development policy, concentrating instead on financial and managerial matters. He mentioned sustainable development and sustainable livelihoods in passing, and emphasized the need for closer partnerships with governments, "civil society" (left undefined), the "private sector", and other UN organizations (Malloch Brown, 1999).

Sustainable Development Facility" (GSDF). This Facility would be largely financed by big business with the aim of "2B2M/2020" – bringing two billion additional people into the market economy by the year 2020. Already by early 1999, some sources reported that 18 corporate sponsors had pledged over \$50,000 each toward the GSDF. In return, these private corporations would enjoy "unprecedented access to (UNDP) country offices, high-level government contacts and its reputation" (Karliner et al., 1999). Some find this development worrisome primarily because many of these corporations are well known for their negative records in dealing with social development, human rights and environmental issues. Others are concerned about the implications for the United Nations of sharing decision-making responsibilities with the private sector, whether business corporations or NGOs. The UN Secretary-General's invitation at the 1999 World Economic Forum that business leaders join the UN in "a global compact of shared values and principles, which will give a human face to the global market" added fuel to such fears (South Centre, 1999).

UNDP has played a leading role in promoting the sustainable development concept during the 1990s. It faces serious obstacles, however, in attempting to integrate social and environmental concerns into its operational programmes.

### **C. World Bank**

The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were both founded a little before the UN itself. According to its **Annual Reports**, the World Bank (WB) includes only the IBRD and the International Development Association (IDA), while its affiliates, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA) and the International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) are all part of the World Bank Group (WBG) (World Bank, 1998). The WB stated in 1994 that its "purpose is to assist its developing member countries to further their economic and social progress so that their people may live better and fuller lives", and in 1998 that it "has one overarching goal: helping its borrowers to reduce poverty". It states that it has "three related functions: to lend funds, to provide economic advice and technical assistance, and to serve as a catalyst to investment by others. ... The IBRD finances its lending operations in world capital markets. IDA extends assistance to the poorest countries on easier terms, largely from resources provided by its wealthier members" (World Bank, 1994a).

The World Bank first became officially concerned with environmental issues in 1970 when President MacNamara appointed an environmental advisor. It participated actively in the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, and in the late 1970s it created an Office of Environmental and Health Affairs (Goodland, 1999).

The Bank's environmental staff expanded from one advisor in 1970, to five professionals in 1985, to some 300 staff and consultants in 1995 out of a total Bank staff of about 8,000. Its lending ostensibly directed toward improved environmental management reached nearly \$1 billion in 1995 (Wade, 1997). Environmental concerns have not had a corresponding increase in influence, however, over the Bank's policies in practice.

In 1974 the Bank employed a professional sociologist, Michael Cernea, primarily in answer to mounting protests arising from its involuntary resettlement policies accompanying large infrastructure projects. He was located in the Agricultural Department, however, not in the Environmental Office. Later the Bank gradually increased its staff of social scientists and environmentalists, but they did not carry much weight in guiding its major lending operations. In the late 1970s, the Bank employed an ecologist who was promptly sent to Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay on two 10-day missions to assess the environmental and social impacts of two huge WB projects, obviously an impossible task. Under the Clausen presidency (1981–86) “development” in the Bank seemed by many critics to mean “a race to prevent default of indebted developing countries, and to protect private US banks” (Wade, 1997). Non-project loans, such as for structural adjustment, grew from zero to over one third of Bank lending. (By the late 1990s, such non-project loans amounted to over half of Bank lending.)

Environmental issues in the early 1980s received low priority. Nonetheless, pressures from several member governments and NGOs, together with adverse media publicity about the disastrous social and environmental impacts of some of its large-scale projects in developing countries, such as large dam and Amazon development projects in Brazil mentioned above, contributed to an unsympathetic administration expressing the Bank’s environmental and social concerns. In 1984 it issued an environmental policy paper that called for “mandatory” environmental impact assessments (EIAs) of environmentally risky projects. It was full of “escape clauses”, however, and critical insiders believe it amounted to little more than a series of worthy injunctions. There was only a very small environmental and social staff in the Bank to help implement these guidelines. The Bank’s senior operational staff for the most part ignored them, seeing them as unwarranted interferences with their more pressing work of making loans for “development” and in any case aimed at problems that these staff members believed they already knew how to deal with better from common sense and much experience (Goodland, 1999).

The Bank has not succeeded very well in integrating environmental and social concerns with its traditional ones of promoting economic growth. In preparation for UNCED, it devoted the 1992 **World Development Report** to environmental issues. It repeated the WCED definition of sustainable development concerning intergenerational equity, but omitted the injunction by WCED of the parallel need for greater equity within the present generation (World Bank, 1992). After 1992, the term “sustainable development” seldom appeared in official Bank documents until it was revived in 1999.<sup>20</sup> In the Bank, environmental assessments (EAs) were originally intended to look at both environmental and social impacts of Bank activities, but they were later interpreted to include only their biophysical impacts on the environment.

Pressured by the US Congress as well as several other member states, and by the Narmada Dam controversy in India, a new, watered-down EA policy directive was issued in 1989. This was strengthened in 1991. In return, however, the 1991 policy exempted structural and sectoral adjustment lending (about half the total) from mandatory environmental assessment. Also, new

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<sup>20</sup> The Bank’s 1999 **World Development Report** was the first since 1992 to discuss “sustainable development” (World Bank, 1999), although intervening ones treated some of the social and environmental issues implied by the term.



escape clauses were added, allowing project managers greater discretion in deciding whether their projects were to be subject to EAs. Mostly in response to external criticism, the Bank was drafting (in 1999) EA requirements for non-project lending. At the time of writing, it had not established a policy of making social impact assessments mandatory for either its project or non-project lending, although it had established a separate "Social Development Division" in 1987, which was upgraded to Department status in 1996 (Goodland, 1999).<sup>21</sup>

The World Bank is a huge institution with an annual operating budget of about \$1.5 billion in the mid-1990s, well over half of which went for staff costs. Its outstanding loans amounted to over \$100 billion and annual disbursements in 1994 were about \$16 billion, of which one third were through IDA (World Bank, 1994a). Net transfers from the Bank to developing countries were much less, and to several even negative, however, as countries were also servicing their past debts to the Bank as well as receiving new flows of funds. With this scale of operations and its large, highly trained professional staff, the Bank together with the IMF and other big lenders wield tremendous leverage over the policies of developing countries.

The Bank's leverage in poor indebted countries is significant, especially in their ministries of finance and central banks. It has not been used primarily to promote integrated environmentally and socially sustainable development. This was unavoidable for an international financial institution that has to raise most of its fresh funds in world capital markets at competitive rates. Moreover, the Bank's loans and policies must ultimately be sanctioned by its directors, who are named by member states and whose voting weights are roughly proportional to each member state's economic weight in the world economy. Directors from the wealthy OECD states constitute the vast majority. The rich country governments these directors represent depend on crucial support from private banks and other big creditors holding developing country debts, while directors from poor countries often have close links with these same financial institutions. Exhortations that the Bank give highest priority to social and ecological issues are likely to prove rather futile in such circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

In the face of such formidable constraints, the Bank played a surprisingly significant role in promoting at least some aspects of sustainable development during the 1990s. Its 1992 **World Development Report** constituted an influential input into UNCED and Agenda 21. This Report's treatment of sustainable development issues largely evaded discussion of the crucial importance of specific historical contexts and the limits imposed by the international economic and political order. Its analyses were predominantly economic with a naïve faith in the capacity of market forces to solve intractable ecological and social problems. It attributed negative impacts to "market failures". (Several critics have noted that far from being "failures" markets were performing much as those who controlled wealth and assets intended them to

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<sup>21</sup> Some observers give a slightly more upbeat interpretation of the evolution of the Bank's environmental and social policies (e.g., Miller-Adams, 1999; Fox and Brown, 1998; Wade, 1997), while others tend to be even more critical (e.g., Rich, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> The Bank's sister Bretton Woods Institution, the IMF, faced with similar constraints only hired its first professional social analyst in 1999 with responsibilities for looking at some of the social and environmental impacts of IMF activities (Goodland, 1999). This much later reaction to environmental and social concerns can in part be explained by its policies having social and ecological impacts that tend to be more indirect than those of many World Bank projects.

(e.g., Barraclough and Ghimire, 1995). Nonetheless, it brought together a wealth of useful data as well as good partial analyses of several specific issues. Some later papers by Bank staff and consultants made significant contributions to subsequent debates on trade and development issues in relation to social and environmental goals (e.g., Daly and Goodland, 1993; Goodland and Daly, 1993; Cernea, 1994; World Bank, 1994b; and many others; the 1999 **World Development Report** also treats some of these issues).

The Bank's prestige and economic clout contributed to several member countries adopting declared policies similar to the Bank's concerning involuntary resettlement, as well as the need for better environmental and social impact assessments. Many developing countries adopting such policies, however, lacked the institutional and political capacity required to make them effective.

Ironically, perhaps one way the Bank has helped to promote more sustainable development was to serve as a convenient target for environmental and human rights activists critical of the dominant national and international "degenerative" development strategies implied by the so-called "Washington consensus" (and, more recently, a "post-Washington consensus"). The blatant contradictions between the Bank's pro-environmental, pro-social rhetoric, on one hand, and the alienation of many indigenous and other poor peasant groups from their customary lands and livelihoods, together with the wasteful degradation of natural resources accompanying many Bank-financed development projects and structural adjustment programmes, on the other, have provided excellent opportunities for mobilizing opposition and criticisms.<sup>23</sup> It is usually much easier, and often much safer, for national social movements and NGOs in developing countries to attack the Bank rather than their own national governments and private sector interests, as the latter groups can often provoke devastating reprisals. Many critics in developing countries became skilful in enlisting support and limited protection from international NGOs and urging them to take the lead in criticisms of Bank-financed programmes. In rich countries, NGOs and other critics of the Bank could sometimes find unlikely allies among right-wing politicians and others who would normally brand their criticisms of neoliberal policies as being dangerously "leftist". If the Bank had not been around, many of its projects and policies would probably have been carried on in one way or another by other actors.<sup>24</sup> Without the Bank, mobilizing opposition would be messier and riskier in many contexts, although in others Bank participation has merely helped to legitimize environmentally and socially harmful projects and policies.

The Bank has increasingly adopted the pro-environment, pro-poor, pro-human rights rhetoric of radical social movements and NGOs. In return, however, many of these movements and NGOs have increasingly adopted much of the Bank's more substantive "neoliberal" agenda. Some have been seduced by actual or potential contracts and the prestige of being consulted in international fora. Others have been convinced by the widely trumpeted messages received

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<sup>23</sup> The "Fifty Years Is Enough" Campaign by NGOs criticizing the Bank's harmful social and environmental impacts is an example.

<sup>24</sup> The Bank often advances this counterfactual argument to justify its participation in "non-sustainable" activities, although its prestige helped get them started. The Narmada Dam project in India was merely taken over by national agencies following fierce criticisms of the Bank on social and environmental grounds for its participation and the likelihood that Bank support might be withdrawn.

from all sides that there is no other realistic alternative (e.g., Barraclough and Moss, 1999). According to some critics, the Bank's environmental programmes are primarily "greenwash" (Rich, 1994). Others find them serious and substantive, but overwhelmed by bureaucratic and political constraints as well as by the limited resources they command or can decisively influence in relation to those directed primarily toward macroeconomic and specific economic sector goals (Fox and Brown, 1998; Reed, 1996).<sup>25</sup>

In the context of an international development bank, however, this should not be surprising. Typical Bank loans that are not specifically made for financing social or environmental objectives usually include only miniscule components for environmental protection and monitoring, training, health, popular participation and research (Fox and Brown, 1998).<sup>26</sup> Otherwise, they would show unacceptable rates of return as conventionally measured, because of increased costs with no offsetting income, as customary accounting practices do not assign market values to "externalities" and "social benefits".<sup>27</sup>

Following the very critical Moss Commission report on the Bank's participation in the Narmada Dams project, the Bank's Board of Directors voted in 1992 to establish an "independent" inspection panel to review complaints by or on behalf of persons and groups harmed by Bank-financed projects. The panel was instructed to determine to what extent such complaints were a result of violations of Bank policy guidelines in executing its projects. The panel was created in 1994, but its operations have been surrounded by controversy concerning the release of information it obtains and its relation to the Bank's management. One of its initial reports contributed to the Bank's withdrawing from a large hydroelectric project (Arun 111) in Nepal in 1996 over bitter opposition from some high-level Bank staff. Several NGOs, and panel members

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<sup>25</sup> Since 1995 the Bank has issued a rather glossy annual publication, **Environment Matters**, previewing its efforts to promote environmental improvements (World Bank, 1996-1999). According to these documents, an important portion of the Bank's lending in the 1990s has been directed in support of environmental and social goals. The classifications it makes of its loans' primary objectives, to say nothing of their actual impacts, however, are highly debatable. A recent academic analyst approvingly cites an earlier observation by Cheryl Payer who had reached similar conclusions: "A great deal of what the Bank publishes is self-serving propaganda, much of the best is research that has little or nothing to do with the actual projects that absorb several billion dollars yearly" (Gray, 1998:275).

The Global Environmental Facility (GEF), created after the Rio Summit, is co-managed by the Bank, UNEP and UNDP. Many observers see it as being primarily a Bank-financed and administered programme. It is supposed to provide financial support for projects aimed at alleviating global environmental problems, such as climate change, ozone layer depletion, loss of biodiversity, international waters, etc. Its annual budget in the mid-1990s of much less than \$1 billion has been contrasted, by critical NGOs, with the Bank's total annual approval of new loans of over \$20 billion (Fox, 1998). Also, NGOs and some governments criticize the GEF's top-down, rigidly bureaucratic style (Appiah, 1998). Another weakness is the GEF's focus on financing "incremental costs" of developing countries' projects aimed at global environmental issues. By focusing on discrete projects, however, the Facility misses an opportunity to deal more effectively with global "root causes" of environmental degradation, such as rich country consumption-production patterns and the non-sustainable "externalities" associated with them. Also, it means that a critical scrutiny of the harmful environmental and social impacts of structural adjustment policies fomented by the Bank and the IMF lie outside of the GEF's operational mandate (Reed, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> **The Struggle for Accountability: The World Bank, NGOs and Grassroots Movements**, edited and partially written by Fox and Brown, with twelve authoritative contributors, presents a detailed analysis of the Bank's environmental and social "policies" and their impacts, together with efforts of several NGOs and other activists to make the Bank more accountable through the Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) campaign. The book includes excellent case studies illustrating the gaps between the Bank's policy guidelines and what happens in practice on the ground. A similar analysis by a former Bank "insider" emphasizes organizational constraints within the Bank and conceptual ambiguities concerning environmental degradation, as well as bureaucratic competition for resources and power, as major obstacles to the Bank assuming a more positive role in promoting "sustainable development" (Wade, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> My own participation in the preparation of numerous IDB and World Bank development projects in the 1960s and 1970s confirms this observation.

themselves, believe its independence and functions require further clarification for longer-term viability. Ironically, creation of the panel has contributed to a weakening of some of the Bank's earlier environmental and social policy directives. Many mandatory operational procedures under these directives are being downgraded to optional "best practices" in order to avoid contradictions between policy and practice that might be criticized by the inspection panel (Udall, 1998).

This discussion has looked at the Bank's sustainable development efforts primarily from the environmental side. The Bank, however, launched a major initiative in 1990 to reduce poverty in developing countries. Its strategy was to promote labour-intensive growth, basic social services and social "safety nets". The Bank's Operations and Evaluation Department (OED) recently completed a preliminary evaluation of this programme. In mid-1999 a few of its findings were "leaked". Depending on one's reference point, its poverty programme might be called a partial failure in dealing with environmental and social issues (**Financial Times**, 1999) or a limited success (SDC/SECO, 1999). The OED report suggests that the Bank should better integrate poverty reduction policies into all of its lending, including that for structural adjustment. There also needs to be a closer integration of social and environmental policies. Poverty reduction requires institutional reforms leading to greater equity, as relying on "trickle down" within highly inequitable social structures would imply that even with high rates of economic growth it would take many decades to reduce mass poverty significantly. While such findings seem rather obvious, many observers find it encouraging that the Bank is recognizing them in an official internal evaluation. How the Bank and other international agencies could promote the needed redistribution of wealth required to eliminate or even to reduce by half mass poverty, however, is not intuitively obvious to me. Meanwhile, by the Bank's own estimates, the number of poor (less than \$1 PPP per day per capita) increased from 1.2 billion in 1987 to 1.5 billion in 1999 (World Bank, 1999).

In early 1999 the Bank's president proposed the adoption of a Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) for each country in which it has programmes, with the aim of making Bank lending more effective in promoting sustainable growth and poverty alleviation goals (Wolfensohn, 1999). CDFs would be formulated for each country in "partnership" with governments, multilateral and bilateral agencies, civil society in all its forms, and the private sector, domestic and foreign, making them joint "owners" of the CDF. In many ways it resembles the UNDP's UNDAFs mentioned earlier, but in typical Bank tradition the CDF is also presented in the form of a tabular matrix of actors and activities. Whether the CDF proposal will be adopted by the Bank and, if it is, whether it could become an effective tool for promoting more sustainable development, remains to be seen. Sceptics, aware of the political issues implied in specific historical contexts of such a "holistic" but managerial approach, have good reasons for their doubts.

#### ***D. Other development agencies***

There are some 40 UN development agencies and programmes with "autonomous" programmes and budgets and that profess "sustainable development" activities. (How many there are depends on definitions.) In addition, the World Bank and IMF and the regional

development banks as well as several other international financial institutions (IFIs) have mandates interpreted to include promotion of sustainable development.<sup>28</sup> There are also dozens of bilateral organizations dedicated to providing “development aid”, such as DFID, Sida, CIDA, GTZ, USAID, etc.), all claiming “sustainable development” activities. By some counts, there are about 3,000 international NGOs working in at least three countries on the types of developmental and human rights issues that are implied by the term “sustainable development”.

UNEP was created in 1972 to be the lead United Nations agency dealing with environmental issues. It has played an important role in spite of severe resource and other constraints. Its **Global Environment Outlook 2000** is possibly the most comprehensive up-to-date assessment of global environmental issues now available (UNEP, 2000). UNEP has been a key actor in promoting international agreements about ozone layer depletion, desertification, hazardous waste disposal, climate change and numerous other matters. Its mandate instructs it to give a high priority to equity and related social matters as well as to the environment, but it has never been provided the resources necessary to build strong in-house capacity for social analysis. Its weight in the United Nations system seems to mirror in a rough way that of environmental ministries and agencies in UN member nation states. UNEP’s core budget in 1998 was only about \$50 million, for example, compared to core budgets for UNDP of some \$800 million and for FAO of some \$400 million. UNEP has been assigned tremendous responsibilities but never provided with either the resources or authority required to fulfil them (Sandbrook, 1999).

Specialized agencies such as WMO, WHO, UNHCR, UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNICEF, ILO, WFP, IFAD, the Regional Economic Commissions, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), etc., all have “sustainable development” concerns, and several have important programmes being carried on under that title.<sup>29</sup> IFAD’s and WFP’s mandates are similar to FAO’s in explicitly setting forth goals of environmentally and socially sustainable development. ECLAC has frequently taken a leading role within the UN system in pioneering inclusion of environmental and social issues in some of its development models.

For reasons mentioned earlier, UN agencies and programmes have seldom been able to be particularly innovative in conceptualizing and operationalizing “sustainable development”. Even so, they seem to have had more scope and motivation for promoting integrated people-oriented programmes than have IFIs, such as the World Bank, the IMF and the regional development banks. The structure of governing bodies within the UN systems, in which each member state formally has an equal role, probably helps. Yet perhaps more important is that UN organizations are not themselves major actors in international financial markets, nor are

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<sup>28</sup> The WTO seems to fall somewhere between UN organizations and the Bretton Woods institutions in its formal accountability to governments of developing country governments as well as to those of wealthy countries.

<sup>29</sup> A recent publication, **Business and the UN: Partners in Sustainable Development**, is an example. Co-sponsored by UNDESA, UNDP, UNEP, UNIDO and CIDA (a Canadian government agency) the report illustrates possibilities for promoting some aspects of natural resource conservation and waste reduction, while at the same time showing the difficulties of a truly integrated approach. The report documents case studies of the transfer of “environmentally friendly” technologies, but has almost nothing to say about their social implications for those whose livelihoods are jeopardized in the processes of adopting them or of the loss of national autonomy implied by dependence on technologies of which the intellectual property rights are owned by rich country-based transnational corporations (United Nations, 1999).

their declared policies concerning trade and financial issues considered to be very important in influencing what member states and transnational business enterprises actually do in practice. This allows them more freedom to propose unorthodox policies than the IFIs can have.

Bilateral aid agencies' sustainable development policies reflect to a large extent the dominant domestic social forces and government policies in their home countries. They tend to give particular emphasis, however, to the donor state's self-perceived trade and other foreign policy objectives. Much of their aid is tied to the purchase of goods and services from their home countries or intended to promote other "national interests". A few have adopted quite innovative sustainable development programmes, often in close co-operation with local as well as home-country NGOs. Like UN organizations, however, these development aid agencies' policies are frequently very contradictory among themselves in developing countries. USAID and other OECD aid agencies in Central America, Bolivia, or elsewhere, for example, may promote, on one hand, democratic popular participation and relatively autonomous sustainable livelihoods through their support of a multitude of small, decentralized development projects. On the other hand, they may simultaneously be promoting neoliberal macroeconomic policies, including massive and highly subsidized food imports from their home countries and the expansion of capital-intensive, large-scale plantation or contract farming schemes that produce export commodities. In the institutional context of these developing countries, such policies may contribute to depriving many times more people of their traditional livelihoods than those who benefit.

International development NGOs face similar problems to UN organizations and bilateral agencies. Many are whole-heartedly devoted to sustainable development objectives, but some are mere fronts for other goals, such as public relations contributing to corporate profit maximization, employment creation for members of their own staff, or donors' foreign policy objectives. Those that are sincerely dedicated to sustainable development goals are often oriented toward particular issues, such as protecting forests and wildlife, or promoting certain civil rights, making a cross-cutting holistic approach extremely difficult and unlikely. Like UN agencies, they have to be particularly responsive to the interests of their staff members as well as to their funding sources and governing bodies. Few have built-in mechanisms for accountability to intended beneficiaries. Indeed, this may be quite impossible if the intended beneficiaries are the unborn, small children, the mentally disabled, political prisoners, or otherwise voiceless people. International NGOs that have professional staff and get most of their funds from individual and foundation charitable contributions, or from progressive home governments, are perhaps in the best position to promote innovative approaches to sustainable development goals. Even these, however, face problems similar to those of UN agencies in carrying out integrated programmes on the ground. Action Aid, for example, a big United Kingdom developmental charity, like UNDP, adopted a people-centred sustainable human development strategy in the mid-1990s. Its experiences in formulating the programme at headquarters and applying it in Uganda were remarkably parallel to those of UNDP, and for similar reasons (Nicholls, 1996 and 1999).

Very diverse non-governmental groups seem to have led the way in conceptualizing and trying to make operational innovative sustainable development paradigms. One thinks of the works prepared by independent scholars that were commissioned by the Club of Rome, the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation and the Barriloche Foundation in the 1970s. More recently one notes initiatives by IIED, Third World Network, Focus on the Global South, Third World Forum and many other NGOs and their networks.

Each initiative has to be examined carefully in order to say anything about the extent to which it may actually contribute to a more holistic integrated approach. WWF (International), the world's largest conservation organization, for example, has described its new policy of a "people-oriented approach to biodiversity conservation" as a "paradigm change". A critical analysis of its programmes and the dynamics driving them, however, led a serious observer to question this assertion. She concluded that while adroit at co-opting the rhetoric of new approaches, it will be difficult for WWF to change its old top-down technocratic ways without a significant realignment of the political, scientific and bureaucratic powers upon which it still depends for funds and influence (Jeanrenaud, 1998).

### **III. Promoting Sustainable Development in Practice**

The preceding section looked briefly and rather superficially at a few international agencies' programmes designed to promote more environmentally and socially sustainable development. The crucial questions remain. How effective have these efforts been in practice? What might be done to improve them? These questions are discussed briefly and speculatively in this concluding section.

#### ***A. Assessing the impacts of international sustainable development initiatives on the environment and livelihoods***

The world is becoming increasingly polarized between the rich and the poor—both between and within countries. Poverty amid abundance is a growing problem that poses grave dangers. ... In the past 15 years, per capita income has declined in more than 100 countries. ... The risk of a huge global underclass undermining global stability is quite real. ... Among the 4.4 billion people living in developing countries around the world, three fifths live in communities lacking basic sanitation, one third go without safe drinking water, one quarter lack adequate housing, one fifth are undernourished; and 1.4 billion live on less than \$1 per day... (Speth, 1999b).

This dismal assessment of the 1990s was not made by a radical alarmist but by the Administrator of UNDP just after the end of his term in mid-1999. One may question the details of some of his data, but the general picture of growing social disintegration and exclusion he sketches is all too real. Over a decade of efforts by international development agencies to promote "sustainable development" have apparently had negligible positive impacts on the ground. Of course, one can argue, as the Bretton Woods institutions do in defending their structural adjustment programmes, that without international "sustainable development" initiatives things would have been much worse than they are. This is a counterfactual

proposition that is impossible to confirm or deny conclusively. The fact remains that in spite of impressive international rhetoric promoting sustainable development that integrates both social and environmental concerns, the situation in many respects is becoming worse (UNEP, 1999; UNDP, 1999; World Bank, 1999).<sup>30</sup>

Most international agencies promoting sustainable development have internal evaluation procedures aimed at assessing the effectiveness of their efforts in approaching announced targets. Even by the narrow criteria for assessing discrete projects, evaluation teams frequently find that one third to well over one half of an agency's projects fall short of their objectives in performance (e.g., for World Bank projects, see Fox and Brown, 1998.). Such project assessments, however, are far too narrow to provide many insights about the broader picture associated with the processes these agencies are helping to promote.

In the first place, project evaluations commonly only consider direct environmental and social impacts within a project area, and not the wider indirect ones accompanying it. Often indirect impacts, such as migrations of people whose customary access to resources, markets and jobs have been disrupted, are not taken into account or, if they are, only very partially. Also, indirect environmental consequences of air and water pollution, deforestation and land degradation accompanying projects are frequently belittled or ignored. Second, what looks like a "success" or "failure" after four or five years may appear to be the opposite after 10 or 20 years. Most important, however, is that the internationally supported "programme" or "project" being evaluated is usually only a small component of broader processes that may overwhelm any positive impacts attributable to international agencies' sustainable development efforts.<sup>31</sup>

I have come across only a few attempts to assess systematically how international agencies' "sustainable development programmes" have been transmitted from their centres to the field for application in poor countries. There are even fewer analyses that examine the bureaucratic, socioeconomic and political forces that contribute to deforming and diluting their good

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<sup>30</sup> If one accepts the criteria commonly used (but which are always debatable) to measure environmental degradation, such as tropical deforestation, land degradation, water and air pollution, etc., the data all point to worsening global conditions although with accelerating or decelerating rates in different recent periods and places. The global data for social indicators are far from reassuring, to say the least. Life expectancies seem to have been lengthening on average, with some notable exceptions. Living levels are extremely difficult to quantify especially in most "developing" and "transition" countries. In the "transition" countries initial sharp declines after 1990 seem to have been reversed in several, but not all. Living levels fell for low-income majorities during the 1990s in much of Africa and Latin America, and after 1997 in parts of Asia and Southeast Asia. If compared with announced goals or even with the situation prevailing a decade earlier, sustainable development has proved to be an elusive goal, receding more rapidly than most of those pursuing it could run. The World Bank, for example, estimates that the worldwide total number of people living on less than \$1 per day is now 1.5 billion and is projected to increase in 2015 to 1.9 billion, compared with 1.2 billion in 1987 (World Bank, 1999:25).

<sup>31</sup> For example, as was seen earlier, the World Bank and other official "aid agencies" have made very halting and spotty progress in adopting policies that stipulate minimal standards and require, at least in theory, environmental and social impact assessments to promote compliance. Publicly backed Export Credit Agencies (ECAs), however, give financial guarantees to companies operating abroad. These ECAs are now "the single largest source of tax payer support . . . for private sector companies seeking to off-load on to the public the financial risks of their business projects in South and Eastern Europe. Projects backed by such export credit agencies—from dams to arms and polluting power stations—are frequently environmentally destructive, socially oppressive and financially unviable. Ultimately, it is the poorest in these countries who end up paying the bill. With rare exceptions, the major ECAs lack mandatory environmental and development standards, and are secretive and unaccountable" (The Corner House, 1999).



intentions at all levels from agency headquarters to developing country capitals and to local communities. Nicholls' study of UNDP's and Action Aid's policies and their application and apparent impacts in Uganda was a notable exception (Nicholls, 1996 and 1999).

The issue of the impacts on the ground of international development agencies' sustainable development policies and programmes is extremely complex. Generalizations about a programme's effects on livelihoods and the environment necessarily require counterfactual hypotheses. The data and analyses available suggest very mixed and contradictory results.<sup>32</sup> Explanations involve a vast number of interacting reasons, many peculiar to each situation.

This superficial assessment of some of the information available about the actual social and environmental impacts of mainstream development agencies' sustainable development interventions during the 1990s leads to the rather shocking suspicion that very little is known about them. There seem to have been few systematic studies attempting to trace how sustainable development policies and initiatives have been interpreted and applied at various levels, from their origins at headquarters through regional and national decision-making centres to their impacts on livelihoods and the environment on the ground. Even less is known about the extent to which these initiatives have affected broader processes that contribute to increasing social inequalities and environmental degradation. This relative absence of systematic assessments with critical feedback from the field can easily lead to fallacious assumptions becoming embedded in the conventional wisdom that is used to formulate recommendations for future policies and programmes.

On balance, it seems that progress toward sustainable development in the 1990s was discouraging to say the least. The international development industry should be able to continue to thrive, if it does not succumb to "donor fatigue", as the problems it was supposedly created to address continue to grow. There is no danger of it working itself out of a job any time soon.

### ***B. What might be done to promote sustainable development more effectively?***

#### **(i) Diverse approaches are inevitable**

Assuming human societies as we imagine them survive the twenty-first century (a chancy proposition), the efforts of international development agencies in promoting "sustainable development" a century earlier will be judged in broad historical perspective. How they affected particular policies, projects, social groups and environmental degradation processes will be relegated to footnotes of interest only to those looking for historical details. Like attempts in the now so-called developed countries during the last two centuries for securing minimal civil and socioeconomic rights for their workers and peasants, as well as for abolishing the slave trade and institutionalized slavery, one is dealing with ongoing social struggles. Outcomes depend on historical processes, of which organized efforts to achieve greater social

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<sup>32</sup> Several UNRISD projects looking at sustainable development issues in developing countries support this conclusion (e.g., Ghai and Vivian, 1992; Friedmann and Rangan, 1993; Utting, 1993; Barraclough and Ghimire, 1995; Barraclough and Finger-Stich, 1996; Valenzuela, 1996; Barraclough, Ghimire and Meliczek, 1997; Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997; Utting and Jaubert, 1998; Barraclough and Ghimire, 2000; Utting, forthcoming).

equity and to protect the environment are important but by no means the only principal components. Speculations about what might be done now to help ensure that mainstream agencies' sustainable development efforts become more effective should be viewed in this very uncertain longer-term perspective.

It is easy for me to imagine *what* agencies such as FAO, UNDP, Oxfam, etc. should do to promote the integration of social and environmental goals that they profess. Having been a participant-observer in these agencies, as well as in national government agencies, academia and the private sector, I find it much more difficult to imagine *how* they could do it. What social actors would be able and willing to overcome the constraints that these mainstream agencies confront at all levels, from local to national and international? What alliances would this imply, and what would be the consequences for sustainable development programmes of the inevitable compromises that would have to be made with allies having different and often incommensurable agendas? I criticize FAO's leadership for not being more daring and imaginative. But if I were Director-General facing the same constraints, would I do differently? If I did, would I remain in the post, or perhaps ruin the organization? Such reality checks are not conducive to self-confident recommendations for action by others.

As was seen earlier, a unified approach to promoting sustainable development in diverse contexts is a utopian illusion. At the global level it implies a level of abstraction from real-world conflicts of interests, incommensurabilities and uncertainties so great that the programmatic implications are to a large extent tautological restatements of an aggregation of worthy goals. In national and subnational specific contexts, conflicting interests become brazenly evident. A unified approach can only emerge as an outcome of political processes and negotiations. These can lead to all sorts of deformations and dilutions of a development agency's declared sustainable development policies, and its approaches will necessarily vary widely on a case-by-case basis.

#### (ii) Recognizing the contradictions

International development agencies could try to be more self-critical and honest in recognizing the contradictions their programmes imply. Who benefits and who loses, by how much and why? What are the uncertainties? What are the interactions among different actors pursuing diverse political, economic, social and environmental goals? What are the likely consequences for those who are simply trying to survive? These are hard questions that the international agencies promoting their visions of sustainable development prefer to avoid, as such introspection could easily lead to paralysis. Nonetheless, more explicit recognition of the problems and also of the extremely limited capacity of most international agencies to influence the actual policies of government and private sector actors could contribute to enhancing their credibility. This in turn could stimulate constructive debate at all levels conducive to a reformulation of issues, and possibly point to politically feasible positive courses of action.

As was noted above, international development agencies could usefully sponsor or otherwise encourage more systematic and critical analyses of the impacts of their sustainable development policies and programmes. This requires continuous feedback and ground checks. Intended

beneficiaries, together with those who may suffer harmful consequences either directly or indirectly, need to be consulted, as do more powerful actors. Such critical analyses should be extended to include the dominant public and private policies and other processes generating growing inequalities, social injustices and environmental degradation in different historical contexts. Such studies have to be carried out at all levels, from global to local. They should try to bring out linkages and interrelationships between local, national and international constraints and impacts. When they actually occur, the positive impacts of sustainable development initiatives by international agencies seem to be overwhelmed by harmful ones emanating from other processes, some of which are being stimulated by these same and other international development agencies. Outcomes vary greatly depending on the institutional contexts of each country and locality. These dynamic complexities need to be better understood in order to propose constructive courses of action, including institutional and policy reforms by relevant social actors able and willing to undertake them.

### (iii) The key roles of nation states

International development agencies have to depend principally on national governments to enable their sustainable development programmes to become operational in practice. UN agencies have to work primarily through member states. IFIs must make their loans to governments, although some of their affiliates can make or guarantee loans to the private sector. The same is true to widely varying extents of bilateral aid agencies. NGOs have more leeway in selecting clients, but they are always somewhat dependent on national government acquiescence. In any event, there is no way that NGOs or other international agencies could replace national governments in their social and environmental functions, except for limited groups and areas over short periods in exceptional circumstances.

The nation state remains the key institution through which international agencies must promote effective integration of the socioeconomic and environmental goals promised by “sustainable development”. So-called globalization has weakened the capacity of many states to adopt the macroeconomic policies that would be most appropriate in their particular circumstances for directing resources toward sustainable development objectives. At the same time, the political and economic power of a few rich states (and alliances among them) to influence other states has been increasing. Powerful states profess that their own capacities to direct resources toward pro-social and environmental goals at home have also been eroded by globalization. This is in large measure a self-serving fiction designed to disguise the growing influence of powerful support groups with other priorities. These crucial supporters control transnational financial, production-distribution and media networks, as well as most advanced military and other modern technological resources and capacities. The principal goals of most of these powerful transnational actors remain power, expansion and profits.

National government support groups with transnational operations or ambitions require the protection of strong neo-imperialist nation states. For the United Nations or other international bodies to substitute for the nation state in these functions would imply a world government. This does not exist, nor does it appear likely in the foreseeable future. In any event, a world government that merely reflected present international and intranational power relationships

could be disastrous for any hope of approaching sustainable development goals. Such a world body would reflect the military power of NATO and the economic and financial power of the “Group of 7”. The goal of a strong and truly democratic United Nations envisioned by many of its founders (South Centre, 1996) would be relegated to the dustbin of history.<sup>33</sup>

The struggle to approach more sustainable development, the struggle for universal human rights and the struggle by poorer strata of national societies to gain more influence over state policies remain inseparable. International development agencies can do little to advance their declared social and ecological goals unless they are supported wherever they may operate by popularly based national development strategies—popularly based in the sense that the state perceives its legitimacy to depend ultimately on widespread and durable popular support. This in turn largely depends on the state’s accountability to its citizens, including poor and “excluded” minorities, and its sensitive responses to their legitimate needs and aspirations to the extent that these do not infringe on the basic human rights of others.<sup>34</sup>

#### (iv) Examples of a few implications

This analysis has implications for what might be done to make international agencies’ efforts to promote sustainable development more effective. I note here only a few illustrative examples.

As already mentioned, in pursuing their social and environmental goals international agencies should avoid oversimplifying the issues and glossing over the contradictions. Single-issue campaigns, such as debt forgiveness for poor countries, are pushed as being “solutions” to the burden of unpayable foreign debts that were often used for corrupt or frivolous ends. Debt forgiveness is no solution, however, as long as the internal and international structural obstacles to genuinely sustainable development remain in place. If the debt is forgiven, without concomitant reforms in international financial and trading systems as well as national ones, for example, other mechanisms will be used to continue to drain the coffers of poor countries to the self-perceived benefit of foreign lenders, investors and consumers as well as of domestic elites. The problem is systemic and its “solution” requires profound institutional and policy reforms at all levels. International agencies can gain short-term support by oversimplifying issues. But

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<sup>33</sup> This danger is illustrated by the cavalier manner the United Nations is now treated by the United States and other great powers. It is used, blamed or brushed aside whenever deemed convenient. It is often assigned impossible tasks without the means to execute them, and then blamed for disastrous outcomes. The parallel with the defunct League of Nations is all too clear.

<sup>34</sup> This paragraph sounds hopelessly utopian. One recalls the many popularly based fundamentalist, nationalist, neo-fascist and apparently aimlessly violent social movements vividly documented from all over the world in daily news reports. These can be explained in sociological terms as forms of protest by marginalized and excluded groups in search of identities and better livelihoods, but this is not particularly helpful unless the explanation can be supplemented by politically feasible reforms that would remove the alleged causes. This has always been a fundamental dilemma for democratic participation in governments of stratified societies. The search for greater equity in all spheres within and among societies remains an overarching, ongoing challenge for sustainable development. Democratic participation and accountability together with respect for basic human rights are crucial ingredients of sustainable development by definition, as well as being practical political mechanisms for helping to approach it in many diverse contexts. History is far too complex, however, to allow glib generalizations valid for all times and places about how these principles can be best applied in practice for approaching sustainable development goals.

they lose long-term credibility miss opportunities for placing needed systemic reforms on the political agenda.<sup>35</sup>

Partial reforms of international trade policies are another example. International trade in forest and agricultural products is a proximate “cause” of agricultural expansion into tropical forests, which, together with wasteful logging for the export of timber, accelerates tropical deforestation in developing countries. Some agencies promote simplistic reforms in the international trade régime as a solution. But this is only a component of an extremely complex issue. Like blaming undesirable anthropogenic deforestation on population growth, blaming it on trade is a self-defeating reductionist approach that in many ways is simply tautological. It is usually unhelpful in suggesting practical steps in specific contexts toward more sustainable natural resource management (Barraclough and Ghimire, 2000).<sup>36</sup>

Whether WTO should attempt to enforce minimum environmental and social standards through its trade regulations has led to many acrimonious debates between Northern and Southern NGOs. Many of the former see it as common sense in a “globalizing” world economy, while the latter may perceive a threat to poor countries taking advantage of their “cheap” labour and natural resources to penetrate rich country markets in order to pursue a more autonomous national economy and acquire badly needed foreign exchange. This debate, however, is seen by some to be largely irrelevant. Rich countries could easily resort to any number of other mechanisms to restrict competitive imports from poor countries if this became a political imperative.

In any case, this debate masks an even bigger danger for developing countries, and especially for the poor: the trend now being vigorously promoted by transnational corporations to displace regulatory authority from governmental responsibility to the private corporate sector itself. These corporate interests understand that international regulation of their activities is becoming increasingly necessary in a global economy in order for transnational trade and investment to flourish. They prefer to establish their own regulatory standards for obvious reasons. Not the least of these is that it would facilitate protection of their monopoly positions in the face of growing threats from small and medium-sized competitors in developing countries who could not easily comply with technologically sophisticated processes and product standards “owned” by the same transnationals. This trend and its dangers are

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<sup>35</sup> Readers can reasonably ask what these needed “systemic reforms” should be. I certainly cannot provide any pat answers and I doubt that anyone else can either. This and the following few paragraphs only suggest a few of the issues currently being debated. General recipes no matter who proposes them would have to be profoundly ideological in nature. The point I want to emphasize here is that recommendations for reforms made on the basis of gross oversimplification of the issues commonly lead to widespread disillusionments and an eventual loss of credibility by the agencies proposing them. In practice, they miss opportunities to promote deeper reforms that are clearly required to approach sustainable development, such as reforms of international trade and finance, property rights, rich country production-consumption patterns, the reduction of glaring inequalities of all kinds in access to natural resources, wealth and knowledge as well as respect for universal human rights.

<sup>36</sup> Profound agrarian reform is a prerequisite for checking undesirable tropical deforestation and several other processes inimical to sustainable development in countries such as Brazil, Guatemala, Indonesia, the Philippines and South Africa, for example. Singling out trade and population growth as the principal causes of deforestation marginalizes the principal issues on which agrarian and related reforms could have significant positive impacts in a relatively short time. Of course, such agrarian reforms would require the support of powerful social forces both nationally and internationally.

illustrated by the emerging close co-operation in promoting Environmental Management Systems (EMS) among the transnationals, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO—an organization that the transnationals largely finance and control) and the WTO (Finger and Tamiotti, 1999). Regulations and standards set by nation states (and those set by their intergovernmental organizations) are at least theoretically accountable to their citizens and consumers, although there is frequently an abysmal gap between this ideal and reality. Transnational corporations, however, are principally accountable to their stockholders, their managements and, more indirectly, to their customers. This would exclude most of the world's poor from any meaningful participation in their regulatory frameworks.

As already noted, the most important thing international organizations can do to promote sustainable development is insistently to call attention to the longer-term dangers for diverse social groups of present trends toward social polarization and environmental degradation. In doing so, however, they need to avoid misleading simplifications of the profound systemic reforms—such as those just mentioned—that sustainable development implies. Who are the potential actors in specific contexts able and willing to try to bring about needed reforms? What alliances would this entail and what contradictions would it engender? These are a few key questions, among many others.

The 1997 **Human Development Report** on poverty issues indulged in a great many oversimplifications. One of these was its principal focus on poverty, instead of on the quest for greater equity among and within nations. Others included glossing over the many profound conflicts of interests among the so-called poor and also among dominant social actors, the relative neglect of power relations among different social actors, and the difficulties encountered in practice in changing these. This **Human Development Report**, however, has been recently castigated for concluding that “achievements in eradicating poverty depend first and foremost on people’s ability to articulate their demands and mobilize for collective action” (Moore, 1999). In my opinion, this criticism is misguided.

Like all generalizations abstracted from time and place, the **Human Development Report’s** conclusion, too, is necessarily an oversimplification. Nonetheless, in a broad historical context it seems to me to be a justifiable one. Important social reforms have, of course, come about in numerous situations without social mobilization by the victims of harmful, inequitable processes. Nonetheless the fear of such social mobilizations occurring nearly always played an important role in moving other actors. Moreover, the protests of the oppressed often took subtle forms, such as foot dragging, negligence and sabotage, but they were still collective social movements, albeit disguised as individual spite or whim, where other forms of protest were not feasible. The long history of slavery and its eventual abolition provides numerous examples of the importance of collective protests by the victims to stimulate reform, as well as the role of other groups pursuing reform for diverse reasons. Would not elites be even less inclined than they already are to support minimal social reforms to improve conditions for residents of urban ghettos if they did not see them as a source of organized crime, disease and occasional irruptions of destructive violence?

Reform is always a complex context-specific process, but I would defend the 1997 **Human Development Report's** generalization as being broadly valid. While not a sufficient condition for needed reforms, people's ability to articulate their demands and mobilize for collective action (or the fear that this may happen) are usually indispensable for bringing about reforms. Popular mobilization leading to collective action may often provoke violent repression and other anti-reform measures, but in the long run it is usually essential. Look at South Africa, for example. If there had been no collective and articulated protests by the victims, would official apartheid have ended in the twentieth century? One doubts it.

International agencies can seldom intervene directly in support of social mobilization for reform by diverse groups suffering negative social and environmental impacts from "modernization" processes. After all, many of the governments on which these agencies largely depend were put in place with the crucial help of support groups whose aim was in part to prevent such reform from occurring. But international development agencies can often lend vital indirect support to the disadvantaged in articulating their protests. United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, for example, to which many governments subscribed with tongue in cheek, often provides a crucial rallying point for reformist activists. International NGOs, labour federations and church groups often have more latitude than most intergovernmental agencies in this respect, but all these organizations have opportunities to contribute. They should use these vigorously whenever they can.

### ***C. Concluding remarks***

To the extent that present patterns of economic growth follow past trends, social polarization and environmental degradation will generate increasing political tensions and conflicts.<sup>37</sup> Human society would probably extinguish itself in the flames of conflict long before it faced any imminent danger of exhausting its means of subsistence or smothering in its own wastes. Developing countries' governments, and especially their peoples, will justifiably insist on their right to develop. The only way out of this dilemma is for the meaning and content of development to change in practice. The burden of adjusting toward more sustainable development will have to fall primarily on the rich. Sustainability will be out of reach without a redistribution of wealth and power from rich countries to poor ones, and from the rich to the poor in both.

These kinds of structural adjustment are far more urgent for humanity's future than current structural adjustment programmes pushed or endorsed by most international development agencies. The rich industrial countries will necessarily have to play a major role in bringing sustainable development into practice. The rich, however, can probably only be persuaded to adjust after their own internal contradictions become intolerable. This process can possibly be

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<sup>37</sup> Many of the social conflicts raging throughout the world, and especially those in poor countries, are rooted in struggles about access to and control over environmental resources, as well as the harmful impacts on the environment of various kinds of pollution, emanating principally from rich country production-consumption patterns and markets. The Global Movement for Environmental Justice is attempting to become a strong force working for sustainability. A recent paper reviews some of these conflicts and the Movement's attempts to influence policies (Martinez-Alier, 1999).

accelerated by appealing to their own longer-term self-interests in survival. Growing pressures emanating from increasingly organized groups of the hitherto excluded in alliances with others standing to gain from more sustainable development could help. What social forces could be mobilized to bring about the policy and institutional reforms required to approach socially and ecologically sustainable development at international, national and sub-national levels remains the key issue for international development agencies.



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