In Quest of Sustainable Development

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Overarching Concerns
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Acronyms

CFC	chlorofluorocarbon
CSD	United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development
CSER	corporate social and environmental responsibility
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
GDP	gross domestic product
GNP	gross national product
ICT	information and communication technology
IFI	international financial institution
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
NGO	non-governmental organization
ODS	ozone-depleting substance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPP	purchasing power parity
SA	social accountability
SIF	social investment fund
TNC	transnational corporation
TRIPS	trade-related intellectual property rights
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development
WRI	World Resources Institute
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development
WTO	World Trade Organization

Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

World leaders met in Johannesburg in late August 2002 to review progress in implementing outputs of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro a decade earlier. They were also asked by the United Nations General Assembly "to reinvigorate global commitments to sustainable development". The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), however, faced a seemingly impossible task.

In order to be endorsed by UNCED as an overarching global goal, the term "sustainable development" had to be sufficiently ambiguous to accommodate many widely differing interpretations. Participants had conflicting interests, divergent perceptions, unique historical and environmental contexts as well as often incommensurable values. The Johannesburg Summit provided an opportunity to highlight several of the conflictive political economy issues behind recent unsustainable processes. This paper attempts to contribute to debates about possible policies to ameliorate them by a brief review of research into the social dynamics of environmental change.

Contradictory trends

Several worrisome global environmental trends have been well documented and widely publicized. Greenhouse gas emissions from human activities continue to accumulate in the atmosphere contributing to unwanted climate change. Biodiversity necessary for maintaining Earth's life support system is being eroded at unprecedented rates. The world's remaining tropical forests are rapidly shrinking. Soil erosion threatens to degrade much needed agricultural land. Marine and coastal ecosystems are being degraded and ocean fisheries are endangered. Fresh water stress threatens livelihoods in many regions. This listing of environmental woes could be endlessly extended.

Optimists can cite several apparent more positive global trends. Depletion of the atmospheric ozone level has been vastly slowed. Metropolitan air and water pollution have been slowed or reversed in several high-income countries. Environmental gains by rich countries, however, have been accompanied by increased environmental degradation in poor ones. Unsustainable patterns of production, consumption and waste disposal in rich countries are driving environmental damage and social polarization in poor ones as their impacts are transmitted through trade, finance, various forms of compulsion and a host of other mechanisms.

Recent global environmental and socioeconomic trends have been mixed, but in many respects threatening for the kind of sustainable development envisioned by the Brundtland Commission and the Earth Summit. Global post-1950 economic growth (as conventionally measured) slowed significantly after the 1970s. This fall was most pronounced for low- and middle-income countries of Africa and Latin America. This was partially offset in global averages by continued rapid growth in low-income East Asian countries with large populations such as China.

Of more concern for sustainable development than rates of GDP growth, however, is the quality of growth. Modern production-consumption patterns appear to be increasingly non-sustainable both socially and environmentally. The rate of global population growth has been slowing and world population was projected to stabilize at about 9 or 10 billion people by the end of the twenty-first century. But increasing per capita production and waste is threatening life-supporting natural ecosystems everywhere.

According to most estimates, income inequalities between rich and poor increased during the 1990s both within countries and among them. Different criteria, indicators and time periods for estimates of income can lead to contradictory conclusions. For example, by using "purchasing power parity" (PPP) estimates of income and weighting countries according to their

populations, it is possible to manipulate the data to suggest lessening global inequalities. PPP dollars, however, have to assume price relationships similar to those prevailing in the United States for poor countries with very different resource endowments and socioeconomic structures. If PPP dollars were really a good all-purpose estimate of incomes, then the foreign debt burden of low-income countries could be reduced by over three fourths, and of middle-income countries by over one half, merely by recalculating them in terms of PPP dollars.

In reality, the implications for sustainable development are minimal, whether national and international statistical indicators show marginal improvements or deterioration of income inequalities and rates of poverty. There are always some losers and some beneficiaries accompanying "development" and "globalization" processes. Many social indicators such as life expectancy and literacy rates have improved on average, but this conceals many situations in which they have worsened. Low-income losers seldom receive adequate compensation to maintain their livelihoods even where overall gains for their societies may be much greater than losses.

Macro-level environmental and socioeconomic indicators, trends and comparisons can be useful for some purposes, such as calling public attention to problems that seem to have been neglected but rather successfully dealt with in other contexts. For example, levels of health, nutrition and education of the poor are much higher in some poor countries such as Sri Lanka and Cuba than they are in other countries with much higher average per capita incomes. For other purposes such as proposing effective policy reforms to address such problems, they tend to be poor guides. Policy analysis requires a holistic integrated approach that skilfully relates historical processes with interacting contexts at all levels. A major portion of this paper, therefore, is devoted to reviewing local case studies where contexts are most varied and subject to change.

Policies for sustainable development

Policies are purposeful courses of action toward perceived goals. They are inevitably conflictive. Moreover, their impacts tend to be ambiguous in dynamic systems. Their outcomes are influenced by many unforeseeable internal and external factors as well as the divergent intentions and interests of some of their supporters. Public policies ostensibly aimed at advancing sustainable development have had many positive impacts as well as frequent negative ones. Positive policy responses to projected environmental and socioeconomic degradation help explain why prophets of imminent gloom and doom have often been mistaken.

Local-level democratic decentralization has been incorporated as a goal of sustainable development. At the same time, global concentration of technological, military, financial and political power has been rapidly increasing by most criteria. This contradiction is supposedly overcome by implementation of subsidiarity principles whereby decisions and resources are ascribed to the lowest (most decentralized) level possible. What these levels are in practice, however, leaves room for infinite debate and conflict. Moreover, decentralization, in the absence of reforms in national and international policies and institutions accompanied by a redistribution of resources, can be counterproductive.

There is a widely held perception that nation-states have lost their capacity to influence their societies and that they are all subordinate to impersonal transnational forces such as world financial markets. This is a distorted view. Subordinate states, dependencies and colonies never had the possibility of determining their own development strategies. Now all the world's strong nation-states are enmeshed in a world system, which could not survive without their active military, technological and political support. They are not going to tolerate possibly system-threatening deviations by subordinate countries or among themselves any more easily than they have done in the past.

Recent efforts to build partnerships for sustainable development between United Nations organizations, large transnational corporations (TNCs), governments and some NGOs should not be expected to make much of an impact. A few big TNCs now control many of the world's

financial resources and its capacity to produce new modern technologies essential for states' political-military power. They largely influence policy and ideological agendas everywhere through their control of mass media but they are helpless without the military and political protection of a few powerful nation-states.

Powerful corporations now claim to be able to bring about sustainable development through their exercise of "corporate responsibility" and observance of a "triple bottom line", integrating the goals of monetary profits with those of promoting social well-being and environmental protection. This is nonsense in the present world order. It would have to imply public laws, institutions, regulations, accounting practices, tax structures, subsidies, etc., that would all support sustainable development goals. Popularly based democratic social forces would have to be dominant or crucially influential everywhere. Such a vision is considered utopian by most observers. It certainly would not resemble "capitalism" as we know it.

So, what could be done at Johannesburg to advance sustainable development? Probably not much, given the current international context. Advocates of a better world, however, could try to advance a modest agenda that, if taken seriously, could have radical implications.

In the first place, WSSD could reaffirm the importance of agreeing on common goals but with differential responsibilities. There is a danger that social components of sustainable development will be eroded at the expense of what are commonly regarded to be ecological ones. Universal human rights, social justice with greater equality, poverty elimination, democratic popular participation for all, the quest for relatively autonomous national markets and development, the rights of countries to design and implement their own development strategies, etc., are as much integral parts of sustainable development as are greenhouse gas abatement, access to cleaner air and water, preservation of biodiversity and the like. In any event, all these goals imply value judgements and political negotiations. Means of approaching them will have to differ widely in divergent contexts. There are no global recipes for action.

Democratic decentralized governance is essential, but it is no panacea. Great care must be taken when promoting decentralization in different contexts. How to advance toward this goal in a world of ever growing inequalities presents a major dilemma. Privatization of property rights as now practised usually leads to more concentration, not less. The distinction between "private" and "public" property and between "local", "national" and "cosmopolitan" identities is always extremely blurred and controversial. Emphasis on global problems but local solutions when promoting sustainable development can be counterproductive unless local governments are able to exercise the political power and mobilize the necessary resources that are required to redirect the unsustainable processes negatively affecting them. This implies profound reforms nationally and internationally.

"Neoliberal" strategies with free trade are anathema for sustainable development in many contexts, although less so in others. In general, trade regulated not by popularly based governments but by institutions depending primarily for support on TNCs and other business interests will primarily benefit the rich at the expense of the poor and of the natural environment. Markets can make good servants but they are poor masters.

Reform of property rights to support sustainable development is a core issue. Property rights and obligations are about social relations in access to desired goals and services by different social classes or groups. They largely determine the distribution of wealth, income and power. Land reforms granting real power to those who depend directly on land, water and associated natural resources for their livelihoods are essential in many contexts. So too are reforms of tax structures, social and environmental regulations, subsidies, etc., all of which constitute part of the bundles of rights and obligations associated with property ownership or tenure. WSSD cannot do much about this except to call attention to the crucial need for the international community to be supportive of reforms in property rights that would contribute to sustainable development. Such reforms should lead to a more equitable distribution of land and other

natural resources. They would also imply strict democratic regulation of TNCs in order to direct them toward these goals.

The biggest challenge facing WSSD is how to find and mobilize the social forces capable of bringing about needed policy and institutional reforms. This should be a major theme. Answers would have to vary widely from place to place and time to time. If they are to be effective they will have to include the poor and powerless, and especially the propertyless working classes.

Solon L. Barraclough was Director of UNRISD from May 1977 to January 1984, and was subsequently Senior Consultant at the Institute until his death in December 2002. This paper was prepared for the UNRISD conference, The Political Economy of Sustainable Development: Environmental Conflict, Participation and Movements, which took place in 2002 in parallel with the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, South Africa).

Résumé

Les dirigeants du monde entier se sont réunis à Johannesburg fin août 2002 pour évaluer dans quelle mesure les conclusions de la Conférence des Nations Unies sur l'environnement et le développement, tenue à Rio de Janeiro dix ans plus tôt, avaient été mises en œuvre. Ils étaient aussi invités par l'Assemblée générale des Nations Unies à "redynamiser l'engagement pris au niveau mondial en faveur du développement durable". Le Sommet mondial de 2002 sur le développement durable, cependant, se trouvait devant une tâche apparemment impossible à remplir.

Pour être adoptée par la CNUED comme objectif général, l'expression de "développement durable" devait être assez ambiguë pour laisser place à de nombreuses interprétations différentes. Les participants avaient des intérêts contraires, des perceptions divergentes, des valeurs souvent sans commune mesure et venaient de contextes qui, par l'histoire et l'environnement, ne pouvaient en rien se comparer. Le Sommet de Johannesburg a été l'occasion de dégager d'évolutions récentes, très peu marquées par le souci de durabilité, plusieurs enjeux conflictuels de l'économie politique. Ce document tente d'apporter sa contribution aux débats sur les politiques susceptibles de renverser le cours des choses par un bref tour d'horizon des recherches effectuées sur la dynamique sociale du changement environnemental.

Des tendances contradictoires

Plusieurs évolutions inquiétantes touchant l'environnement mondial sont maintenant avérées et les résultats des études auxquelles elles ont donné lieu ont été largement diffusés. Les gaz à effet de serre émis par l'activité humaine continuent de s'accumuler dans l'atmosphère et contribuent à des changements climatiques que personne ne souhaite. La biodiversité nécessaire à la conservation des systèmes de maintien de la vie sur la Terre est réduite comme elle ne l'a