"Summary of article by Sharachchandra M. Lélé: Sustainable Development: A Critical Review"

The rhetoric of Sustainable Development (SD) has become increasingly commonplace in the statements of those making or influencing development policy worldwide. This rhetoric and the SD literature that drives it are, however, afflicted by vagueness, inconsistencies and oversimplifications. These weaknesses impede the formulation of fresh, consistent, and effective policies, instead permitting the proliferation of programs that only pay lip service to the concept. SD is in danger of becoming just a politically expedient cliché, unless rigor and intellectual clarity replace the current imprecision in the literature.

Mainstream Definition

SD is broadly understood as a form of societal change that unites traditional development objectives with the objective of ecological sustainability. Translating this general definition into specific policies requires the use of a model of the environment-society relationship. The mainstream model in SD thinking may be characterized as follows:

1) Environmental degradation is severely reducing human well-being in developing countries, and will have global implications in the long run. The principal cause of this degradation is poverty, because the poor have no option but to exploit resources for short-term survival. Moreover, the poor are also often the first to experience the consequences of environmental deterioration and neglect.

2) Traditional development objectives (meeting basic needs, improving factor productivity, etc.) need not conflict with the objective of ecological sustainability; the latter is necessary for the permanence of the former, while economic development will create the resources and capacities for implementing environmentally sound policies. Moreover, environmentally sound methods are "profitable" in the long run, and often in the short run as well.

3) For any development program to succeed, even in the short run, it must be based on a participatory process.

Strengths

The SD movement has succeeded in promoting the idea that environmental conservation need not constrain development and that development does not necessarily mean environmental

pollution. The literature has highlighted many possibilities for combining the objective of ecological sustainability (less resource use and less pollution) with those of poverty alleviation and community participation, and even with motivations of long-term self interest. This approach has the potential to unite a broad spectrum of actors and interests.

Weaknesses

There are significant weaknesses in the literature, however, that compromise SD's effectiveness as a paradigm of development. One clear problem is the poor and incomplete characterization of the problems of poverty and degradation. The mainstream conceptualization has emphasized a circular process in which impoverishment and environmental degradation cause and reinforce one another. It has failed to acknowledge that poverty and environmental deterioration may both be the results of overconsumption, particularly in the North, and that all of these phenomena have deeper and complex structural and cultural causes. Consequently, much of the policy discussion focuses on techno-economic solutions: the adoption of "green" technologies, reforming pricing and subsidy policies, etc. Socio-political issues such as land reform or reducing individual materialist tendencies are either ignored or acknowledged only in passing.

Another difficulty has been the inadequate conceptualization of the objectives of development, sustainability and participation. The primary goal of development is to ease the crushing burden of poverty in the South. The SD paradigm presents economic growth as the means to reduce poverty and achieve sustainability. Yet the links between growth and either poverty alleviation or achieving environmental sustainability are not at all clear. Indeed, the irony is that SD, a supposed synthesis of previous development thinking, ignores its major lesson, i.e., the need to shift the focus from economic growth to the meeting of "basic needs," the reduction of inequity, and the building of indigenous capacity at the community level. Economic growth may be a product of SD, but the promotion of such growth should not be viewed as an integral part of SD policies.

The concept of sustainability has expanded beyond the management of renewable resource systems to embrace broader themes about the maintenance of essential ecological processes, genetic diversity, and the optimal utilization of nonrenewable resources. The concept does, however, remain disturbingly muddled as it fails to clearly answer the crucial questions: what is to be sustained, how, and for whom? It is vital to understand the conditions under which differing answers to these questions can or cannot be accommodated, i.e., when the well-being of future generations can be safeguarded simultaneously with meeting the needs and aspirations of presently deprived communities and with the protection of non-human species, and when trade-offs will be required. In trying to provide operational principles for achieving ecological sustainability, the literature not only oversimplifies ecosystem dynamics, but also loses sight of the complex social conditions that substantially determine ecological outcomes.

Initial attempts to resolve the environment-development dilemma emphasized equity and social justice as fundamental objectives. This emphasis has been quietly dropped in favor of the politically less provocative concept of "local participation." In practice, this is further reduced to "the involvement of non-governmental organizations." Such "NGO-ization" is, however, hardly tantamount to true local participation. Even significant decentralization of the decision-making

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process cannot by itself guarantee just and equitable outcomes, as it leaves the distribution of power unchanged. Finally, the relationship between equity, community participation, and environmental sustainability bears greater examination.

Examples

With all this confusion in the terms and concepts in mainstream SD thinking, it is not surprising that many SD policies do not conform to the basic idea of ecologically sound and socially equitable development. Three policy areas exemplify this point.

1) **International Economic Relations:** An unreconstructed system of monetary and trade relations continues to reproduce patterns of unequal exchange and lopsided flows of resources to the North, undermining the viability of SD in the South. Yet the IMF and the SD-friendly World Bank continue to foist draconian structural adjustment programs on developing nations and to promote simplistic free trade policies, measures more likely to exacerbate resource exploitation, inequity, and environmental pollution in the South.

2) **Sustainable Agriculture:** As one of the key elements of SD, it is ironic that there is such confusion surrounding this concept. The terms sustainable agriculture, low-input agriculture and organic farming are often used interchangeably, when in fact they are not the same thing. Moreover, the focus on "agroecology" ignores the social conditions necessary to ensure fair returns to rural factors while meeting urban food demand. The lack of a clear definition and agenda has resulted in the continued domination of Green Revolution thinking and policies.

3) **Tropical Forests:** Here a broad spectrum of institutions (FAO, UNDP, IBRD, World Resources Institute) have identified overpopulation, poverty and ignorance as the primary culprits in forest degradation. This analysis not only fails to address the ultimate causes of poverty and population growth, but also obscures the more significant causes of tropical deforestation, i.e., state-sponsored "development" schemes and logging policies.

Agenda

In trying to balance the need for rigor and steadfastness to fundamental values and the need for wider political acceptance and support, SD proponents have tilted towards the latter, and have adopted vague terminology, simplistic world-views, and inconsistent policy mixes. Such an approach, however, is itself unlikely to be "sustainable." Advocates and analysts of SD must:

1) reject the idea of economic growth as the primary vehicle to achieve SD;

2) move away from neoclassical economic analysis towards exploring more relevant empirical questions and approaches;

3) address the complex causes and consequences of poverty and environmental degradation;

4) understand the multiple dimensions of sustainability; and

5) explore what patterns and levels of resource demand and use would be compatible with different forms of ecological and social sustainability.