



“Summary of article by Johan Holmberg and Richard Sandbrook: Sustainable Development: What is to be Done?” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 91-93

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(This is a summary of the introductory chapter of the book.)

The Concept of Sustainable Development

The World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) brought the concept of sustainable development to geopolitical significance. Today the term sustainable development is a catch phrase meaning different things to different people. To some it is a truism, to others a contradiction in terms. Sustainable development is often identified with sustainable growth. Questions about the trade-offs and links between economic development, economic welfare and the environment remain unanswered.

As the Brundtland Commission and others have defined it, the primary implication of sustainable development is that future generations should inherit an undiminished stock of "quality of life" assets. This is, however, a political concept, and this capital stock can be measured or interpreted in three ways:

- 1) as comprising man-made and environmental assets;
- 2) as comprising only environmental assets; or
- 3) as comprising man-made, environmental and "human capital" assets.

The notion of intergenerational equity lies at the core of the concept of sustainable development. While there is no solid definition to go by, development that does not meet the criteria of intergenerational equity must be bad development. Barbier¹ (1987) has attempted to reconcile different views in a working definition of sustainable development. He identified three systems that are basic to any development process: biological, economic and social. Society applies sub-goals and targets to be achieved within each of these systems. The objective of sustainable development will be to maximize goal achievement simultaneously across these three systems, through an adaptive process of trade-offs. An unsustainable process would seek to maximize goals for each of the systems separately, without regard for the trade-offs. The choices and trade-offs made in a sustainable development strategy will depend on priorities, time, and scale (local, regional, national or global).

Four Dilemmas

There are four dilemmas in defining sustainable development and its goals. First, Goodland et al.² (1991) convincingly argue that economic growth cannot be the unquestioned objective of economic policy. Growth implies more: more throughput, more inputs and more waste. Human activity has resulted in problems of global warming, rupture of the ozone shield, and the highest rate of extinction of biological species ever recorded in history. The role of conventionally defined growth, in this view, should increasingly be limited to poverty alleviation in developing countries. The rich nations of the world cannot go on increasing their output and must instead concentrate on increasing efficiency in resource use. However, such a conclusion is contrary to the prevailing economic and business ethic.

Second, sustainable development is defined differently from conventional economic development. The change in emphasis from quantitative to qualitative dimensions leads to problems in measurement. Therefore, a new set of indicators and methodologies is needed. Further complications in measuring and comparing success arise when different trade-offs are made at different locations and times.

A third dilemma relates to how trade-offs will be made. As argued earlier, a sustainable development program will call for making trade-offs between different systems. While some broad principles may be agreed upon, such trade-offs are very difficult to make, and the tools needed to make these decisions are poorly developed. Cost-benefit analysis, which attempts to ascribe values to different systems, is controversial. Another dilemma is how to make trade-offs between protecting biological diversity and meeting human needs. Those in favor of development for people are pitted against those in favor of conservation. While both groups support the notion of sustainable development, they disagree on the means and methods of bringing it about. Is it necessary to cop-out by defining sustainable development as a broad guiding principle rather than a methodology in a complex, unequal world?

The fourth dilemma involves the relationship between sustainable development and democratic government. Central to the concept of sustainable development is the notion that future generations should not be made worse off because of today's needs. However, democratic governments cater to the needs and aspirations of people today, which leads them to borrow from the future. Similarly, cross boundary issues that make for a sustainable world order rarely gain attention from politicians. Politicians alone cannot be blamed for such a situation, as they often reflect prevailing public opinion. The limited time horizon of elected governments is not conducive to a broader perspective on intergenerational or international issues. It is for these reasons that patterns of sustainable development must be built from the bottom up. When progress at the local level is constrained due to factors beyond local control, public pressure will grow to make changes at the national, and eventually at the international, level.

Primary Environmental Care

Primary environmental care (PEC) is a process for progress towards sustainability at the "grass roots." It combines raising the productivity and welfare of the poor with concern for protecting the environment. Its three sets of goals, which must be considered together, include: 1) economic (meeting basic needs); 2) environmental (protecting and optimizing utilization of the environment); and 3) social (empowering groups and communities). The success of PEC

depends on the involvement of local groups and communities in the organization and decision-making aspects of their communities. In addition, natural and financial resources, political support and open access to information are required for success. PEC concentrates on empowerment and on building the knowledge of local people and institutions.

Notes

1. Edward B. Barbier, "The Concept of Sustainable Economic Development," in *Environmental Conservation* 14(2), 101-10 (1987).
2. Robert Goodland, Herman Daly, Salah El Serafy, and Bernard von Droste, *Environmentally Sustainable Economic Development: Building on Brundtland* (UNESCO, 1991).