



“Summary of article by David Barkin: New Strategies for Rural Sustainable Development: Popular Participation, Food Self-sufficiency, and Environmental Regeneration” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 6: A Survey of Sustainable Development. Island Press: Washington DC, 2001. pp. 318-321

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Today’s global economy, based on the international expansion of capital, is integrating resources and people into a dual economy in which great wealth is generated alongside great poverty and despoliation. Such polarization imposes a burden on society, wasting human and natural resources. To defend their cultures and livelihoods, and to save the environments on which they depend, the rural poor need to consciously de-link from the global economy in critical areas, creating autonomous productive systems they can control and defend.

New Strategies for Sustainability

“While the trickle-down approaches to economic progress enrich a few and stimulate growth in ‘modern’ economies and ‘modern’ sectors within traditional societies, they do not address most people’s needs; moreover, they have contributed to depleting the world’s store of natural wealth and to a deterioration in the quality of our natural environment.... In the ultimate analysis, we rediscover that in present conditions *the very accumulation of wealth creates poverty.*” (51)

“The search for sustainability involves a dual strategy: on the one hand, it requires releasing the bonds that restrain people from strengthening their own organizations, or creating new ones, in order to use their relatively meager resources to search for an alternative and autonomous resolutions to their problems. On the other hand, a sustainable development strategy must contribute to the forging of a new social pact, cemented in the recognition that the eradication of poverty and the democratic incorporation of the disenfranchised into a more diverse productive structure are essential.” (51)

Several conclusions emerge from a review of the literature on sustainable development. First “sustainability is a process rather than a set of well-specified goals. It involves modifying economic and social processes so that nature can better adjust to more modest demands from humanity.”(52) Second, sustainability must focus on local participation and control over the way in which people live and work. As such, sustainability goes beyond issues of environment, economic justice, and development. It is about diversity in all its dimensions, not just flora and fauna but human communities and cultures. Achieving sustainable development “requires challenging not only the self-interest of the wealthy minority, but also the consumption package which is defining our quality of life.” (52)

Food self-sufficiency is the first issue to deal with in developing a strategy for rural development. It is a controversial objective, raising questions of autonomy in contrast to the assumed process of increased integration into the global market, with specialization based on monocropping. From an economic point of view, it is generally argued that it is inefficient for a society to favor local production of basic goods when such goods can be produced more efficiently elsewhere. But this is true if and only if both the land and labor involved in such production could find productive use elsewhere. Where land or labor is rendered unproductive through the substitution of tradable goods, a strategy of self-sufficiency can be more efficient.

On the other hand, “in the context of today’s societies, in which inequality is the rule and forces discriminating against the rural poor legion, a greater degree of autonomy in the provision of the material basis for an adequate standard of living is likely to be an important part of any program of regional sustainability.” (54-55) At the least, local food production contributes to higher nutritional health standards. Food self-sufficiency must be one part of a larger strategy of productive diversification based on principles of greater self-reliance. Rural communities have always been characterized by a diversity of productive activities. This diversity, much of which has been lost to the mistaken importation of large-scale commercial agriculture, must be reintroduced.

Sustainability is also about direct participation by the rural poor in the real power structures that control development. While official development practitioners recognize that such empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainability, few programs actually empower local communities. State agencies and development agencies, following the logic of the neoliberal economic paradigm, generally end up promoting participation that fails to give meaningful power to local communities.

Sustainability must also deal with poverty. “Economic progress itself will depend on involving the grassroots groups to help the affluent find ways to control their consumption and in the organization of development programs that offer material progress for the poor and better stewardship of the planet’s resources.” (58)

Because international economic integration does not affect all peoples equally, different strategies for sustainable development will apply in different regions. In the regions that have been largely left behind, people have “the unique opportunity to take advantage of their marginal status.” (61) Many are of indigenous origin and retain knowledge of ethnobotany, ethnobiology, as well as other cultural knowledge that can contribute to increases in productivity delinked from the global economy. Further research into technological advances compatible with traditional knowledge, combined with increased transfers of knowledge among cultures, can improve productivity and reduce labor-time in production.

In such regions, redeveloping the peasant economy is essential. “It is not a question of ‘reinventing’ the peasant economy, but rather of joining with their own organizations to carve out political spaces that will allow them to exercise their autonomy, to define ways in which they will guide production for themselves and for commerce with the rest of the society.” (61) These

regions have many opportunities to diversify their productive base, develop new uses of renewable energy, and seek new ways of adding value to traditional productive processes.

Local control is especially important in areas now valued internationally for their biodiversity. These are battlegrounds, as local residents struggle not to lose control of their land and knowledge to scientific and environmental elites seeking to identify and protect such biodiversity. While “biosphere reserves” are one way to protect the earth’s dwindling genetic diversity, they have led “to conflicts between local populations which have traditionally coexisted with these species, exploiting them in sustainable ways, until the powerful forces of the market led to increased kill rates that threatened their very survival.” (62) Alternative approaches include the “peasant reserve of the biosphere” or “neighborhood restoration clubs” in which local residents are given responsibility for managing resources sustainably, while the international community agrees to guarantee an acceptable quality of life for residents.

Autonomous Development

Given the stark juxtaposition of winners and losers in the dual economy, we need a new strategy that recognizes that the vast majority of rural producers cannot compete with commercial agriculture. Farmers in richer nations simply have too much technological and financial advantage, and overproduction in their home countries creates the political imperative to export to the Third World, often at prices below local production costs. Yet marginal rural producers can support themselves and contribute to society. “The approach suggested by the search for sustainability and popular participation is to create mechanisms whereby peasants and indigenous communities find support to continue cultivating in their own regions. Even by the strictest criteria of neoclassical economics, this approach should not be dismissed as inefficient protectionism, since most of the resources involved in this process would have little or no opportunity cost for society as a whole.” (64-65)

This would formalize an autonomous productive system, recognizing the permanence of a stratified society. This can benefit marginalized rural peoples and those developing links with the global economy, making productive diversification possible. “More importantly, such a strategy will offer an opportunity for the society to actively confront the challenges of environmental management and conservation in a meaningful way, with a group of people uniquely qualified for such activities.” (65)