

## ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICIES AND LOCAL INITIATIVES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** *Sustainable development continues to gain widespread popularity in policy debates. Much of this popularity stems from an expectation that it can reconcile economic development with the need to conserve natural resources, protect the environment and meet social objectives (Gibbs, 1996). This paper explores how established local policy partnership networks are coming to terms with these contested notions in their attempts to put sustainable development into practice at the local level. We suggest that due to the highly contested nature of the concept, these networks are facing problems in trying to unravel what sustainable development actually means. Few organizations are grappling with the more fundamental implications of the concept and, as a result, policies for sustainability are being developed cheek by jowl with those of economic growth and competitiveness. The sustainable development depends upon broad participation which goes beyond established partnership networks and engages a much wider range of organizations and individuals*

**Key words:** Public Policies, Sustainable Development, Local Initiatives

The term sustainable development was widely adopted by mainstream development agencies following the publication in 1987 of *Our Common Future* by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) which 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 be logically extended to equity within each generation". The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992. The conference, also known as the Earth Summit, attempted to put sustainable development at the top of the international agenda for the twenty-first century. The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development enunciated 27 principles dealing with nations' rights and responsibilities in pursuing sustainable development.

### Trends and Issues

There can be little dispute with the assertion that economic development; social development and environmental protection are interdependent and essential components of sustainable development. Recent trends however, suggest that they are often far from mutually

reinforcing. Interrelationships among them are extremely complex and often highly contradictory. In the modern world, outcomes in particular sub national, national and international context depend on interactions among diverse socioeconomic and ecological system at all levels. Economic development, social development and environmental degradation (or enhancements) are all social constructs. They are necessarily rather vague concepts, as they imply normative values about what constitutes socioeconomic progress and environmental health. There has been little progress in reconciling these interdependent objectives of sustainable development in particular social and ecological contexts. Making them mutually reinforcing would require profound policy and institutional reforms at all levels. A quick review of international report summarizing available data and analyses on social and economic development trends together with those on environmental degradation, despite some positive achievements, overall trends with respect to sustainable development had become more unfavorable than they had been in 1992.

### **Social Indicators**

"Social development", like the term "development" more generally when applied to human societies, has come to mean "progress" in approaching certain social goals. It is shorthand for complex processes of historical change. Institutions regulating social relations in production, distribution and other activities are all restructured during social development. Different social actors have many conflicting objectives. Diverse societies may endorse similar overarching goals, such as those currently implied by sustainable development, but their elites may have very different views about priorities and the means for approaching them. For many social groups, social development simply means overcoming poverty. Social development, like economic development is commonly interpreted in developing countries to mean catching up with the already rich and developed. This implies improved living standards, including better access to food, shelter, education, health, security and a clean environment. For many, it also suggests access to the lifestyles prevalent in rich industrial countries. For social groups that are excluded from many of societies' privileges and benefits, social development implies their being respected and included in society on equal terms with the more privileged. For many others, however, it still means only lifting average living standards for the whole national society without challenging and reforming established power relations between social classes, ethnic and religious groups, men and women, or among countries.

There are several widely used indicators of progress towards social development. A good composite index in theory should be average life expectancy at birth, reflecting access to nutritious food, sanitation, health services and so forth. Access to education can be indicated by literacy rates, school enrolments and the like. Gender discrimination is reflected in different levels attained by males and females. Difference between social or occupational classes, income levels or ethnic groups can reflect various kinds of social discrimination and prejudice. In assessing trends in social welfare is that indicators of poverty, health, education, access to services and so forth are commonly expressed in terms of percentages of a larger population. World population more than tripled during the last century. In developing countries, population increased by two thirds during only the last quarter of the twentieth century. Assuming the 30 per cent of their population was undernourished in 1975 and 25 per cent undernourished in

2000, this meant a 17 per cent decrease in the rate of under nutrition in only 25 years. This seems like good progress. The number of hungry people in these developing countries, however, would have grown by over 300 million, or by well over one third. Moreover, if China and a few other large countries in Asia making rapid progress in improving nutrition of the poor are omitted, there was no gain in the proportion of people who were adequately nourished in most developing countries. Improvements in social conditions at these aggregate levels may conceal serious deteriorations for various countries and social groups. Indicators of life expectancy, poverty, literacy and infant mortality all appear to have improved dramatically, especially in developing countries. Population increased by 3.5 billion people, almost all in developing countries, during the last half-century. If the data of the high-level panel are translated into numbers of people suffering deprivation under these same headings, the overall trends look less rosy.

During the last 50 years, the world's population increased by some 240 per cent. If one looks at social welfare trends in low-income regions and countries such as those in sub-Saharan Africa and the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, they are extremely depressing. The apparent good results in reducing poverty for developing countries as a whole can largely be attributed to China and a few other Asian countries. Both the social causes and the impacts of environmental degradation are largely determined by institutionalized social relations as well as by the policies of diverse social actors. In this respect, identifying the roles of social actors, processes, structures and interactions in contributing to environmental degradation and in determining its impacts on diverse social groups and ecological systems is an essential step towards proposing remedial actions.

Ecological degradation, like sustainable development, is a social construct. There are no absolute benchmarks of what constitutes a "natural environment" against which degradation can be measured. The impacts of human activities are an integral component of "natural ecosystems." Perceptions of environmental health and of sustainable development more broadly, require value judgments. The social issues such as reducing inequalities and poverty among and within nations, as well as promoting production and consumption patterns that are compatible with socially and ecologically sustainable economic growth, should be given the highest possible priority.

### **The Role of Public Policies and Local Initiatives**

Some two centuries ago, Malthus argued that rapidly expanding populations would soon be checked by slower-growing food supplies accompanied by famines, plagues and violent conflicts. Since then, the world population has increased nearly tenfold. Food supplies, however, have grown even more rapidly. There are more people today suffering from hunger, insecurity and extreme poverty than any time earlier, but the proportion of humanity who are desperately poor and doomed to experience short and brutal lives has apparently decreased. Public policies respond in large part to political pressures from the state's support groups and from others viewed as potential state supporters or dangerous opponents. So-called decision makers, even in authoritarian states, are constrained by their needs for eventual broad political legitimacy. Policy reforms by governments usually require impetus from powerful social forces

(that is, organized interest groups and their broader constituencies identified with the perceived interests of social class, status, ethnicity, religious affiliations, region and so forth). Private organizations have purposes and policies ranging from expansion and profits of business enterprises to the altruism of a few NGOs.

A *mantra* of many environmentalists is "think globally, act locally." This emphasis on local action, local solutions and local government is salutary if it is interpreted to mean that sustainable development policies ultimately have to be implemented by agencies in specific localities at particular times. Moreover, in principle, the reforms have to enjoy some measure of local support and cooperation. In the same vein, one of the most thoughtful mid-twentieth century United States politicians, Tip O'Neill, famously stated that "all politics is local". He certainly did not mean that national and international policies are of secondary importance. After all, he was one of the most powerful national-level politicians in the United States for over two decades. But he knew that United States politicians have to count on local constituencies in order to be effective.

Almost always and everywhere there is something that local residents, their organizations and local governments could do better to protect the livelihoods of the poor and their natural environment. But the limits on what local groups can do are often very narrow. Sometimes there are almost no possibilities at all for constructive local initiatives that could be undertaken without provoking more violent repression, leaving people worse off. This is frequently forgotten by progressive outsiders often romantically extolling the benefits of decentralization and democratic local governance. The benefits of democratic decentralization are great and are a key goal of sustainable development. Advocates of decentralization, however, often neglect the prevalence of inequitable repressive local power structures and the acute scarcity of resources in many localities, even if those available locally were equitably distributed. Such issues require national and international actions as well as local ones.

There are always exceptions. When there are local government initiatives toward sustainable development in a large commercial estate context, however, they are unlikely to be really local. Elites generally have local, national and, in some cases, cosmopolitan identities. Their responses to environmental and poverty issue reflect more than local perceptions and concerns. Initiatives taken by subordinate workers, tenants and others in socially polarized rural areas tend to be highly conflictive. Popular movements are often brutally suppressed where local authorities believe their use of violence will be backed or tolerated by the national state and other powerful outside organizations. Where the state may be more sympathetic to collective initiatives by the poor, however, positive changes towards sustainable development can sometimes emerge following prolonged struggle. Opponents to reform rely heavily on fomenting divisions among popular movements that always include groups with divergent as well as convergent interests in reform.

Local initiatives and programmes to improve livelihoods and control environmental degradation at the level of metropolitan governments tend to reflect the concerns of each city's political and economic elites and vocal middle classes. Their policies are sometimes modified

by strong pressures from organized groups of the poor, depending partly on national and international contexts. Nonetheless, urban sustainable development policies usually benefit the urban non-poor disproportionately in spite of their declared objectives. This is now widely repeated conventional wisdom. The poor and their civil society organizations need to be active participants. This view is supported both by practical experience and in theory.

### Conclusion

The emergence of sustainable development within policy frameworks has opened up new possibilities to tackle a range of established problems, such as environmental degradation, under-employment and lack of democratic participation. Moreover, round tables on sustainability, Local Agenda 21 initiatives, citizens' forums and the prospect of elected assemblies and mayors have created the potential for renewed dialogue and the exchange of ideas. Established policy networks are particularly entrenched and retain responsibility for putting into place policy on sustainable development. Moreover, such networks continue to be restricted by the guidelines of the central government and as a result have limited scope for developing innovative and locally sensitive policies. Developing mechanisms and institutions within localities and regions to actively engage a wider cross-section of the population in sustainable development, which is an important step in overcoming such limitations.

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