IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN A CHANGING WORLD

Klaus Toepfer
Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme, Kenya

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Summary

The idea of "sustainable development" has greatly influenced thinking on environment and economic growth ever since its use by the Brundtland Commission in its report *Our Common Future*. The Brundtland Commission had been charged with preparing "a global agenda for change." Such a change was needed because of what the commission's report would describe as the worsening "interlocking crises" of failing economic development and a deteriorating environment from the local to the global level. The way out of the economic and ecological cul-de-sac, the commission determined, was to replace the current approaches to economic growth with a new model called sustainable development. The commission went on to define sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

1. Introduction

There is a view which says that the idea of sustainable development has gained popularity because each reader brings to mind a picture suited to his or her preconceptions. And, much of the variation in the meaning of sustainability has arisen through different preconceptions about trends in our ways of production and consumption and the power of science to accommodate them within the natural environment. Though the definition given by the commission seems very simple, it contains some radical implications in economic terms. The very idea of meeting "needs" introduces the concept of equity—equity in meeting the needs of the poor of the earth today and equity in meeting the needs of humans as yet unborn. Clearly, sustainability implies intergenerational fairness which is possible if we approach earth not only as an investment opportunity but as a trust to be enjoyed and passed on to our descendants for their use.

The Brundtland Commission's report challenged the contemporary political rhetoric that claimed that protecting the environment could take place only at the expense of economic growth. The economic growth proposed by the report was not business as usual. The report called for change in the "quality" of the growth "to make it less material and energy-intensive and more equitable in its impact ... to maintain the stock of ecological capital, to improve the distribution of income and to reduce the degree of vulnerability to economic crises."

Its prescriptions implied a kind of global bargain to protect the Earth. The industrialized countries would enable the developing world to lessen the destruction of local environments by a series of policy steps—to alleviate poverty, including increased development aid, debt relief, access to their markets and improved terms of trade. By calling for a massive transfer of resources from North to South, the report also suggested that there would have to be change in the grossly disproportionate consumption of materials and energy by the citizens of the rich industrialized nations. It called for an end to the "arms culture" that was absorbing nearly $1 trillion each year that could otherwise help economic development.

To uphold their end of the bargain, the developing countries would have to control their population growth, exercise better stewardship over the land, the forests, the wildlife, the other ecological resources within their boundaries, and pursue economic development in a way that does not degrade the global commons.

The Brundtland Commission report also stated: "Sustainable development is not a fixed state of harmony, but rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs."

Fundamental to the Commission's position were the views that sustainable development is a global issue, that poverty and environmental concerns must be addressed together, that significant improvements in the material standard of living of developing countries are a precondition to sustainable development, and that considerable opportunities exist to improve environmental quality and human development through technological development and institutional reform. In a famous and controversial proposal, the Brundtland report called for a fivefold to tenfold increase in gross world economic output to meet the development needs of the poor and to provide the wealth and technological advances required to address ecological problems.

A more rounded concept of sustainable development emerged from the discussions at the Earth Summit at Rio in 1992. Three aspects of this definition of development are particularly important. First, it has implications for all countries, rich and poor. Second, it presupposes new directions for growth and development, not their cessation. And third, it incorporates, the environmental dimension. Sustainable development does not place artificial limits on economic growth, provided that growth is both economically and environmentally sustainable. There was also at Rio an acknowledgement of the fact that all nations had a shared interest in protecting the global environment and a responsibility for domestic actions that affected the environment of other nations and the planet as a whole.

The Earth Summit also validated the essential indivisibility of environment, peace and development. It recognized that global interdependence could no longer be conceived only in economic terms. The root causes of global insecurity were now seen to reach far below the calculus of military parity. They were seen as being related to the instability spawned by widespread poverty, squalor, hunger, disease, illiteracy and degradation of the environment. Clearly, efforts to promote global security would now have to be underpinned by efforts to promote a kind of development that was not only sustainable, but also participatory and equitable.

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro allowed the nations of the world to assess their prospects for sustainable development and to begin the discussions that could, if pursued adequately, lead to important international collaboration on meeting basic human needs and protecting the global environment of the future. Meeting these needs would mean changing levels of consumption in the industrialized world to maintainable patterns, using technologies less destructive than the ones that are used now, and building the scientific and technical bases in developing countries so that they would be able to manage their own natural capital in a sustainable way.

Thus, the vision of sustainable development entails a society in which basic needs and an equitable share of life's amenities can be met by successive generations while maintaining in perpetuity a healthy, physically attractive, and biologically productive environment. Sustainable development emphasizes the quality of economic growth rather than the annual percentages of that growth.

2. Socioeconomic Linkages

There is a growing realization that as we move into the new millennium, we are faced with challenges that are in many ways interconnected. These ecological, economic and social challenges are not only linked to one another but also often interact in ways that reinforce their negative impacts.

There are several examples of these interlinkages. There has been a failure in meeting internationally agreed targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This is because governments are unable or unwilling to accept the economic costs of these reductions. The difficulty in dealing with the present land tenure systems has led to the slowing down of efforts in dealing with the environmental degradation of agricultural land. The phenomenon of globalization, trade liberalization and structural readjustment are seen as being responsible for reductions in health, education and other social programs. Most importantly, declining natural resources such as water and land have become a major cause of social tensions with the potential of armed conflicts between countries.

Socioeconomic linkages have become complicated by impacts from and upon the ecological system, to the extent that environmental factors now often influence economic and social policies. For example, irrigation and flood-control have become dominating political and economic factors in Bangladesh. The economies and social structures of Sahelian countries are heavily influenced by desertification. The long-term environmental problems of nuclear power—combined with its failure to win social acceptance have proved a major brake upon its use.

There seems to be a clear connection in many parts of the world between global economic integration and social and cultural fragmentation or even disintegration. The case of the indigenous societies is particularly instructive.

An estimated 300 million indigenous people inhabit more than 70 countries worldwide. They live in a wide range of ecosystems: from polar regions and deserts to the savannas and tropical forests. There is basic consensus that indigenous peoples possess detailed and accurate knowledge of their environments and that this knowledge represents an essential resource for efforts aimed at preserving biodiversity and promoting sustainability, both locally and globally.

As global socioeconomic factors disrupt traditional ways of life, such knowledge is being rapidly lost, causing poverty and over exploitation of the environment by both local groups and outside forces. External pressures also promote tensions and conflicts over indigenous peoples' land rights and impinge on their human rights (including linguistic, cultural and resource rights). They also foster change in perceptions and attitudes of the indigenous people often leading to the abandonment of traditional knowledge and behaviors and of the languages that are the repositories and means of transmission of such knowledge.

United Nations Environment Programme's publication *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity* points out that out of 6000 languages that are spoken today, 2500 are in danger of extinction. The threat to linguistic resources is now recognized as a worldwide crisis.

Modern cultures abetted by new technologies are encroaching upon once isolated peoples with drastic effect on their way of life and on the environments which they inhabit. Destruction of lands and livelihoods, the spread of consumerism, individualism and other values, pressures for assimilation into dominant cultures and conscious policies of repression aimed at indigenous peoples are among the factors threatening the world's biodiversity as well as its cultural and linguistic diversity. Recent research has also pointed to the connections that exist between environmental degradation, economic development, population growth, refugee movements and war.

If we are to escape from this deadlock, we need to forge integrated approaches that recognize and consolidate ecological, social and economic conditions and goals. It is not always possible to impose ecologically-based constraints on economic behavior. Such limitations will be resisted. And more importantly, these constraints represent an "end-of-the-pipe" approach to environmental concerns which treats ecological needs as an add-on, to be incorporated after the fact. It is clear that we must move towards sustainability in all three areas and we must ensure that our policies in each of these areas reinforce each other.

To ignore the social dimension would mean denying spiritual, philosophical and societal needs. To ignore the economic imperative is to accept that two fifths of humanity shall continue to live in absolute poverty. And to ignore the ecological imperative is to invite massive disruptions in both economic well-being and social justice in the future.

In virtually all the countries, public policy is determined in a sectoral way within each prime system, by separate ministries or agencies, in pursuit of relatively narrow and often conflicting goals. This is clearest in the case of economic policy, which is determined by finance and trade agencies, sometimes with post hoc attempts to reconcile these policies with the ecological and social imperatives.

3. Environmental Policies

Options for add-on environmental policies have been exhausted in many sub-regions. Better integration of environmental thinking into the mainstream of decision-making relating to agriculture, trade, investment, research and development, infrastructure and finance is now the best chance for effective action. This will require innovative policy, social, institutional and economic changes, and considerable perseverance at the political level backed up by convincing and forceful arguments. Environmental economics can be put to good use, for instance, to stress the high economic value of environmental goods and services, and the high costs of poor environmental management or inaction.

Environmental policies that encompass broad social considerations are the most likely to make a positive and lasting impact. This holds good across the gamut of environmental issues – for example, water, land and other forms of natural resource management, forest conservation, air quality control, and urban and coastal area management.

Integrated management requires an understanding of the interlinkages involved, and an assessment of the results and risks that actions may have. Furthermore, management policies must always take into account the realities of the situation. For example, it may make no sense to try to improve land and water management if secure property rights are not in place.

Further research is needed on the socioeconomic causes of environmental deterioration and the interlinkages within and among environmental and sustainability issues in order to define the priority issues and suggest ways of addressing them. Multisectoral approaches are needed at national level, with planning carefully tailored to local or regional circumstances as appropriate.

Stakeholders need to be involved from the start when formulating and introducing integrated policies.

Improved international coordination on environmental issues is a prerequisite of the trend towards a more integrated approach. Bilateral and multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) have proven powerful instruments of change. Understanding of the key factors governing the success of agreements has evolved considerably. The ultimate and combined effect of the many global and regional agreements remains uncertain but it is clear that all multilateral agreements can make positive contributions to environmental policy.

There is a trend towards agreements with a wider scope, not only at the global but also at the regional and sub-regional levels. At the same time, the common ground between many global conventions is becoming increasingly apparent. This provides room for synergy and avoiding duplication of effort. Coordination between MEAs and regional agreements

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Biographical Sketch

Klaus Toepfer is Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, Director-General of the United Nations Office in Nairobi. He was born in 1938 in Waldenburg/Silesia, and is married with three children. He graduated in 1964 from the University of Munster with a Diploma in Economics. From 1965 to 1971 he was Assistant to Professor Schneider, Director of Economic Research at the Central Institute for Regional Planning, University of Munster, where he obtained his Ph.D. in 1968. From 1970–1971, he was Head of the Economics Department at the Central Institute for Regional Planning in Munster; from 1971-1978, Head of the Department for Planning and Information in the State Chancellery of Saarland. In 1972 he joined the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Germany, and from 1977–1979 was District Chairman of the CDU in Saarbrucken. From 1978–1979 he was full Professor at the University of Hanover; from 1978–1985, he served as State Secretary at the Ministry of Social Affairs, Health and Environment of Rhineland-Palatinate; from 1985–1986, he was Associate Lecturer in environmental and resource economics at the University of Mainz; from 1985–1987, Minister for Environment and Health of Rhineland-Palatinate; and from 1987–1994 as Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety. Between 1990 and 1998, Klaus Toepfer was a Member of the German Bundestag; he also served as Chairman of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (1994–1995), and as Federal Minister for Regional Planning, Building and Urban Development, and Coordinator for the Transfer of the Parliament and Federal Government to Berlin and Compensation for the Bonn Region (1994–1998). Since 1998 he has been United Nations Under Secretary-General and Executive-Director of UNEP.