Sustainable Development as a Global Trend

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I was asked to address the issue of what sustainable development really means. This presents a challenge because sustainable development means many things to many people.

Ever since the Brundtland Commission report in 1987, academics, intellectuals, policy makers, officials and ordinary citizens have sought to understand the full meaning of these terms? There are currently over 300 different definitions of sustainable development, and the number is growing. Despite this bounty, there are a few underlying ideas that give substance and meaning to the concept. One of the most important is that "it is both morally and economically wrong to treat the world as a business in liquidation." [1] It is wrong to sell-off, use up and consume all our current stock of assets without concern for the impact on present and future generations.

The overall goal of sustainable development is an equitably distributed level of economic well-being that can be sustained over many generations while maintaining the services and quality of the environment. Sustainable development thus has several dimensions. First, it implies intra and inter-generational equity. Second, it calls for the elimination of poverty and deprivation. Third, it requires the conservation and enhancement of the resource base.

Fourth, it implies a broadening of the concept of development so that it covers not only economic growth but also social and cultural development. Fifth, it requires the unification of economics and environment in decision-making at all levels. (Brundtland, 1986) Hence, as noted in the UN's Agenda for Development, "Economic development, Social development and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development." [2]

If sustainable development is about anything, it is about interlinkages and interconnections, dealing with problems in their relationship with each other. "Its most significant area is not the individual components but in the interactions, whether we are talking about science, or the interaction amongst species, or the interaction of different ecosystems". [3] This also extends to the economic, social and political

sphere since sustainable development calls on countries to deal simultaneously with both efficiency and equity which is not only complex and interrelated but laden with value judgements. Unfortunately, the great part of our teaching, learning and research is organized into neat disciplines and categories with ever increasing specialization. This makes it particularly difficult to focus on the linkages and connections between issues. The Commission on Sustainable Development has tried to foster the idea that sustainable development is a multi-dimensional concept that requires the integrated and balanced treatment of economic, social and environmental factors. But, it is exactly on the inter-linkages where we most lack understanding and analysis.

Still, some people think of sustainable development primarily in terms of the environment and preservation of the earth's biophysical resources. For these people, development, as traditionally understood, is about economic growth and modernisation. The traditional economic growth model, however, assumes an increasing scale of economic activity that the ecosystem may not be able to sustain, particularly if the idea is to spread to all countries the present levels of per capita consumption that exist in the US and Western Europe. Our current consumption patterns and production systems, with increasing affluence and population growth, are leading to uncontrolled climate change, land degradation, deforestation, air and water pollution, and loss of essential ecosystems and biological diversity.

Moreover, economic growth by itself is not sufficient to remove social and income disparities. There is ample evidence, that it is possible to have economic growth without improving the standards of living for the great majority of people. Recent estimates suggest, for example, that in some countries, the poverty rate has been increasing despite increases in traditional economic indicators. One of the main criticisms of GDP as an indicator of welfare is that it aggregates money flows caused by both good and bad economic changes. Activities which produce pollution and depletion of natural resources are all counted as gains. Moreover, expenditures on health and education are counted as consumption rather than as investment. This is one reason why many organizations, including my own, are trying to find new indicators that provide a more complete picture of human well being, national wealth and development.

Sustainable development then is not just about growing bigger, but about growing better. This will require technological, organizational and human capital innovations aimed at enhancing our productivity through new technologies, better managerial methods and more efficient use of our natural resources, our land and other material inputs. This entails conscious decision making at national and sub-national levels involving extensive multi-stakeholder dialogue and consultations regarding the appropriate allocation of investment in physical capital, human capital and in environmental protection. What this means in practice is smarter, more efficient development – a development, as we said above, that can lead to a more equitable distribution of economic well-being that can be sustained over many generations while maintaining the services and quality of the environment.

Participation is an important dimension of sustainable development. Agenda 21, is the first international document that recognizes the role of a broad range of civil society groups as part of a major international effort to address serious social, environmental and development concerns. It gives explicit endorsement to the

importance and role of major groups and non-governmental stakeholders in the implementation and monitoring of Agenda 21, and as active partners with governments and international organisations in the decision-making process at all levels. The incorporation of major group representatives in decision-making at the national level is giving a new dimension to the concept of representative democracy. Not only are citizens electing their representatives to legislative and executive bodies, but they are increasingly exercising direct influence over and interacting with their elected representatives through the non-governmental groups to which they belong. In this sense government is becoming more participatory in addition to being representative. At the international level, civil society groups are giving new meaning to the Charter of the United Nations which opens with the phrase, "We the peoples …."

The role that civil society plays in promoting sustainable development is crucial both at the national and local level. Many countries have established National Councils of Sustainable Development and are working on national sustainable development or conservation strategies. The participation of major group representatives in these efforts have in many cases been instrumental in getting them launched and is absolutely critical for their ultimate success. A large number of local government authorities also have local Agenda 21 initiatives which depend for their implementation on the work of civil society groups and organizations. There are many examples of positive development in all parts of the world. The response at the local level is particularly dynamic and in many cases ahead of efforts at the national level. (Several cities in Australia are playing a leadership role in sustainable development efforts at the local level, including Adelaide, Victoria, Johnstone Shire, Brisbane, Liverpool, Newcastle, Melbourne and Sydney.)

The Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, adopted after our five-year review of the Rio Earth Summit indicates, however, that progress towards achieving sustainable development is slow. Despite some positive elements, "business as usual," remains the prevailing paradigm. The rate of population growth has slowed somewhat, but world population now stands at about 6 billion and may reach 9 billion by 2050. [4] Although world food production is increasing, more than 40,000 people in developing counties die from hunger or hunger-related causes every day. Food production in Africa, per head, has declined steadily since the 1960s, in contrast with every other region of the world. 1.2 billion people lack safe drinking water and 2.5 million people in developing countries suffer from illnesses linked to contaminated water and poor sanitation. Nearly four million infants die yearly form diarrhoeal diseases. One million women die every year from preventable reproductive health problems. More than a billion people, the absolute poor subsist on less than a dollar a day, while 23% of the world's population, the affluent consumers, control 85% of all income. At the same time, global military spending, despite the end of the cold war, still equals more than $185 a year for every man, woman and child on the planet.

As can be seen from these statistics, the importance of land and how it is used is an important part of the sustainable development equation. The impact of increasing populations and the decreasing area of productive croplands may turn out to be particularly worrisome as we move into the next century, dramatically affecting our ability to achieve sustainable societies. Crop yields are no longer rising fast enough to

offset the steady loss of grainland, nor to adequately feed nearly 90 million new people each year, not to mention the existing millions who are chronically undernourished or starving. [5] Thus, land and agricultural issues are central components of Agenda 21 and will be an important focus of attention at the forthcoming session of the CSD.

The problems specific to land use and tenure vary considerably from continent to continent and country to country. However, the growing number of land and resource-related conflicts in several regions point to the need for greater understanding of the pressures on land and natural resources and for action both at the national and international level to address these issues. Some of these pressures include:

- Expanding cities. Urbanization continues to appropriate crop, agricultural and forest land nearly everywhere cities are growing. The spread of roads, buildings, industrial parks and shopping malls inevitably eats up some of the most productive land. In Asia, such losses cannot be easily replaced because little room for cropland expansion exists. In some countries, the pressure for farm land can only come at the expense of the forests.

- Depletion or diversion of Irrigation Water. In many water-scarce regions such as North Africa, China, India and the Great Plains of the US, water from aquifers is applied to crops faster than it is replaced by natural recharge. If farmers deplete that water, or if it becomes too expensive to pump, they may abandon their cropland or let it revert to less productive rainfed land. Water use in agriculture therefore needs to be managed more as an economic input and users charged its marginal cost.

- Degradation of Agricultural land. Since about 1945, land mismanagement, over-expansion, severe erosion and salinization have taken out of production an area equal to the cropland of two Canada's. This is a loss that could produce enough grain to feed 13% of today's world population. Agricultural land classified by FAO as arable or in permanent crops has been increasing but very slowly from 1960 to 1998 and is now 1.5 billion hectares. Permanent pastures account for another 3.4 billion. [6]

- Conversion of land use. The cutting down of forests for marginal or low yield agricultural purposes is an additional source of pressure.

Many other pressures are being brought to bear on our land resources. By 2020, if current trends continue, each person in the world will rely on average, on just one eighth of an acre to meet his or her grain needs. Despite past successes in raising land productivity, this small area leaves no room for error. Research and development directed toward increasing yields is therefore urgent, but integrated land use planning can help in some cases.

Along with the pressures on the land, come pressures on traditional and indigenous people, in particular. Not only are we seeing the loss of biodiversity and the extinction of species, we are seeing the extinction of cultures as the modern globalized economy scours the world for resources and markets. Of the world's 6000

cultures, half will likely disappear within a century as their people are moved from their territories and assimilated into dominant societies. As indigenous cultures vanish, so do large numbers of animal and plant species unknown to Western science. Native people's homelands encompass many of the planet's last tracts of wilderness – ecosystems that shelter millions of species and buffer the world's climate. [7] A sustainable world depends on protecting the rights of indigenous people, particularly their rights to land. This is, of course, a moral imperative from a human rights perspective. It is also in our own self-interest because the way they have traditionally used forests, grasslands, farms, fisheries and wildlife generally would sustain those resources over the long term.

The Commission on Sustainable Development, as part of its multi-year programme of work, next year will focus on the integrated planning and management of land resources. Of special relevance are the closely-related cross-sectoral themes for the next session. These include financial resources, trade and investment, economic growth, and agriculture and forests as specific economic sectors.

The results and recommendations of this present conference can directly benefit the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development and effectively contribute to the implementation of Agenda 21. Many of the issues highlighted and discussed at the Bathurst workshop can contribute and help shape the work in progress on integrated approaches to land and water management. In dealing with the management and conservation of uplands, effective, sustainable solutions emphasize watershed management with participatory, community-based approaches where land tenure issues are an integral part of the land and natural resources management approach.

Sustainable development is given real meaning by the actions of committed people, in private and public institutions in every locality, who are working and pushing to solve the problems that affect our global commons. It becomes more and more apparent that what happens in one country, however distant it may seem, impacts on the lives of each and everyone of us wherever we live. And likewise, what we do impacts on them. We live on one planet which is interrelated and interconnected in an intricate web of ecological, social, cultural and economic linkages that shape our lives and those of other people all over the globe, including generations yet unborn. The deepening of globalization and the interdependence among nations has created a new imperative for international dialogue and cooperation. While globalization has brought opportunities for material progress in many counties, long-standing as well as new problems have assumed dimensions beyond the capacity of any single nation to solve on its own. Vulnerability, marginalization, poverty, environmental degradation and related social conflicts pose threats to peace and development in all countries. Hence sustainable development is really about responsibility; responsibility for our planet, responsibility for our fellow citizens of the world and responsibility for our children who will have to live with the decisions we make.

We can meet these challenges only by working together with other like-minded people all around the world who are striving in their own localities to build a more sustainable future.

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[1] Herman E. Daly, Steady-State Economics, Island Press, 2nd Edition, Washington, D.C. 1991, p.248.

[2] Agenda for Development, United Nations, New York, 1997, p.1.

[3] Theodore Panayotou, "Knowledge, Finance and Sustainable Development," Organizing Knowledge for Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development. Proceedings of the Concurrent Meeting of the Fifth Annual World Bank Conference on Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development, World Bank, 1998, p.69.

[4] World population prospects the 1998 revision, medium variant.

[5] Gary Gardner, "Shrinking Fields; Cropland Loss in a World of Eight Billion", World Watch Institute, 1996.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Alan T. Durning, "Guardians of the Land; Indigenous Peoples and the Health of the Earth", World Watch Institute, 1992.