
Thoughts on Sustainable Development: A Perspective from the Third World

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Sustainable development is an accepted part of the lexicon of international affairs. But is it the language of the majority of the world's peoples? And are governments fulfilling the commitments they have made in its name?

This paper seeks to revisit the setting and some outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), to assess a few major developments since the Conference, to point to the primary constraints to the achievement of sustainable development, and to present some ideas for the future. This perspective is one from the Third World.

The International Context

Between the publication of the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, in 1987, and UNCED, held in Brazil in 1992, convulsive and far-reaching changes occurred in the global polity. The most profound was the end of the Cold War, followed by the unravelling of the Soviet Union and the abandonment of communism by the states of eastern Europe. As for developing countries many, after having experienced the trauma of the so-called "lost decade" of the 1980s, began political and economic reform projects. So, too, in a different sense, did the states of the former Soviet bloc, euphemistically referred to as "economies in transition." The overall result was a global surge of democracy and a pervasive adoption of market-oriented economies. Some of these changes were in-

spired by Mikhail Gorbachev's "New Thinking" which in turn led George Bush to proclaim a "New World Order."

It was against this background of change-engendered uncertainties that the UNCED process began.

The UNCED Setting

Two principal features distinguished UNCED from previous inter-governmental conferences. The first was the absence of the East-West ideological polarization which had been an unfailing characteristic of past negotiations. The international system, no longer dominated by two competing social systems, was adjusting to the new and emerging reality of global political unipolarity. The second feature was the qualitatively different nature of the involvement of NGOs. The hitherto narrow participation of NGOs in inter-governmental conferences was specifically expanded for UNCED and their role, consequently, was enhanced. As a result, NGOs had more access than before to delegates, and though their representatives could not vote, they were enabled to advocate their positions at official meetings, thereby influencing the deliberations. In keeping with the temper of the times as well, NGOs were more widely represented on government delegations.

Both of the above features had important consequences for the countries of the Third World. In the first place, the "economies in transition," which were once sources of development and technical assistance for developing countries, became potential competitors in the financial markets and aid establishments of the industrialized countries and, in this respect, appeared to have been accorded a strategically preferred position. Secondly, it was the first time that grassroots NGOs, particularly from developing countries, participated so significantly and in such large numbers. Thirdly, NGOs from both the North and the South centered around environmental issues, on the one hand, and around developmental issues on the other. They found common ground and in some cases advocated positions which reflected the developmental and environmental concerns of developing countries. There were, of course, points of difference as well.

In bringing together more presidents, prime ministers, and representatives of civil society than any previous intergovernmental conference, UNCED demonstrated the seriousness of the concerns worldwide for the twin issues of environment and development. It dramatized the complex interrelatedness between human activity and aspirations and the physical environment. It reinforced the imperative need for a global interdisciplinary approach to the solution of many environmental and developmental problems and gave new insights into the nature and consequence of interdependence. It was an his-

toric encounter for humanity.

At UNCED, nation-states remained the pivotal actors. It was therefore not surprising that some attitudes and norms which traditionally shaped and guided relations between states influenced the negotiations and their outcome. This was particularly true of North-South relations which had many features of past negotiations. While the North placed emphasis on the global environmental issues, the South stressed issues with a development orientation. This differentiation was reflected in a North-South division on several issues.

A major achievement of UNCED was in the area of political process. Apart from the new forms of participation by NGOs in the preparatory work and at the Conference itself, specific roles were assigned in Agenda 21 to NGOs as well as to major groups. UNCED thus extended the platform for the operations of civil society within nations on environment and development matters. As for governments, Agenda 21 outlined obligations and responsibilities, including, importantly, the commitment to conduct wide national consultations.

The National Framework

In the promotion of sustainability nationally, the critical issue is the relationship between the state and civil society.

The role of the state is a continuing subject of debate. Several developing countries came forcibly to the issue when pursuing structural adjustment programmes under the aegis of the Multilateral Financial Institutions (MFIs). Such programs invariably involved reducing the state's bureaucracy, as well as its participation in economic production through a policy of privatization. Additionally, the donor community as a whole worked in tandem with the MFIs and often made their support for and participation in programs of economic reform contingent on the adoption of political measures leading to a more transparent democratic culture.

Structural adjustment programs focus on economic and political reform. The social dimension encompassing the deficiencies and disparities which antedated the adoption of such programs, as well as their consequences, generally receive insufficient consideration. The nation's social debt increases as a result and social reform becomes an imperative.

However promoted, whether through the route of MFI-administered structural adjustment programs or by any other means, the redefinition of the role of the state for many developing countries is not only desirable but necessary. Resistance will only serve to slow the pace of change. It is with an altered role of the state that governments respond to their obligations and responsi-

bilities as outlined by UNCED, even as they pursue the two policy priorities of social justice and the facilitation of a participatory democracy.

The forging of a mutually supportive relationship between the state, with redefined functions, and civil society, with an acknowledged expanding role, is a process. Difficulties will be encountered in regard to the memory of past experiences, and, in some cases, to existing tensions between the state and components of civil society. The new relationship will, however, arise, perhaps with a blend of cooperation and conflict.

A good working partnership between the state and civil society can have several positive benefits. First, it could release resources of energy, creativity and material which would otherwise be untapped, for economic activity and social good. Second, in an interactive way it can effectuate better resource allocation at national and other levels. Third, with an appropriate regulatory framework, it can compensate for the deficiencies of the marketplace and forestall the emergence of private sector monopolies. Finally, it can be a striking building block of national consensus for policies which are geared to promote sustainable development.

The Post-UNCED Scene

How have the prospects for sustainable development fared since UNCED? In a certain sense, sustainable development has long been part of human experience. Conventional wisdom credits indigenous people with adopting lifestyles which respect the balance between development and environment, and attributes to them the capacity to pursue the former without irreversibly damaging the latter. Appreciation for those practices by indigenous people is expressed in Agenda 21: "[T]hey have developed over many generations a holistic traditional scientific knowledge of their lands, natural resources and environment." Non-indigenous local communities have equally been pursuing patterns of consumption and production which are geared towards sustainability.

Although the incidence is untested, the UNCED process has given a fillip to people, whether as individuals or as communities, to set sustainable development as a goal and to engage in appropriate activities to promote it. The reality, however, is that the transition from unsustainability is confronted by obstacles, some quite formidable. A major impediment is the global persistence of underdevelopment and overdevelopment. This roughly translates as the parlous conditions of the poor on the one hand and the ecologically irresponsible affluent on the other, both of which reside in the South as well as the North.

The issue of overdevelopment—unsustainable affluent lifestyles—re-

ceived marginal attention at UNCED. This was done essentially under the rubric of a "Changing Consumption Pattern." The treatment was, however, far from adequate. Poverty, on the other hand, received sharper focus and more extensive treatment. It had indeed, at the beginning of the nineties and in the welter of fundamental and far-reaching global transformations, been given high priority on the international agenda to such an extent that it was felt that "no task should command a higher priority for the world's policy-makers than that of reducing global poverty."

The lack of development manifests itself as poverty. This is not only an unsustainable and degrading lifestyle, but is also the greatest scourge of the environment, making the poor both agents and victims of environmental degradation.

Viewed from the perspective of the world's poor, the present situation is, in several respects, unpromising. After a negligible reduction in the incidence of poverty in the second half of the 1980s, levels of poverty began to rise. In 1992 more than one billion people, that is 20 percent of the world's population, lived in absolute poverty. This is now estimated to reach 1.5 billion by the end of the century.

Therefore, there has to be progressive movement away from both overdevelopment and underdevelopment for the enhancement of the prospects for sustainable development. In this regard, a critical question arises: is it possible for a lifestyle which makes relatively high living standards compatible with the conservation of the environment to be enjoyed universally?

This is, after all, the essential objective of Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development which states: "Human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature." This principle reinforces the right to development which was reaffirmed at the UN Vienna Conference as a basic human right and is now an established norm in international law. The spatial expansion of sustainable development is therefore heavily constrained by its present co-existence with oceans of overdevelopment and underdevelopment.

Some Substantive Outcomes

Returning to the substantive outcomes of UNCED, a few general observations are offered on positive and negative developments. There is an intensified activism by NGOs to promote awareness of the UNCED decisions and practices which encourage sustainability. Recognition by the private sectors of commercial and economic opportunities which the pursuit of sustainable development holds is increasingly being attained. On the negative side, govern-

ments have hesitated to take "ownership" of the outcomes and to pursue them with the same vigor as purely national decisions. At the same time, the rise in worldwide poverty is a grim reminder of the road that has to be travelled if sustainable development is to remain a realizable objective. It would be one of the greatest paradoxes of the global surge to democracy if so many people who have so recently acquired the basic human rights of free speech and voting at elections cannot enjoy their right to development and have their basic needs met.

More specifically, however, from the perspective of the developing countries, there are other implementation deficits. UNCED recognized that "the financing for the implementation of Agenda 21 will come from a country's own public and private sectors." It did, however, endorse the concept that "new and additional resources" are to be provided to developing countries. In the result, the donor community was short on commitment of such resources at UNCED and has been even shorter on the delivery of them since then.

Focusing on the development aspect of the environment-development equation, it is apposite to note that a series of World Conferences held since UNCED in 1992 are developmentally related, including Cairo in 1994 on Population and Development, Copenhagen in 1995 on Social Development, and Beijing in 1995 on Women and Development. Overarching these conferences, however, is the Agenda for Development as developed by the UN pursuant to a resolution adopted by it in December 1992. Whether all these efforts will accelerate the process of development to the satisfaction of developing countries is not yet certain.

An Equitable Global Partnership?

The prospect for sustainable development within nations will be helped immeasurably by two parallel developments—the consolidation of democratic practices and a good working relationship between government and civil society. Assuming significant advancement in this respect, is action within nations alone sufficient for sustainable development to be achieved globally?

The Rio Declaration projected as a goal the establishment of "a new and equitable global partnership through the creation of new levels of cooperation among States, key sectors of society and people." Tentative but encouraging signs of this process have been seen unfolding positively within societies between NGOs and other social partners. Internationally as well, there is a growing body of activists—environmental, developmental, feminist, scientific, and organizational—advocating ideas, strategies, and programs which are transnational in character. They are promoting different causes and are far from being cohesive. The depth of the controversies and their fragmentation

are revealed when they interact. Despite this, however, they seem to represent an embryonic global civil society. It was, after all, the combined advocacy, persuasion, and pressure of this emerging global civil society and the more established national counterparts which helped to “green” governments and essentially caused Rio to happen. At Rio de Janeiro and subsequently at the UN Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (Barbados 1994), there was much evidence of networking with good results between representatives from national civil society.

On the other hand, there is little evidence of an “equitable global partnership” between states. If there is

partnership, there is no equity. Neither the “New World Order” premised on peace and development nor “New Thinking” has induced fundamental change in the bases on which relations between states are conducted. The present situation for developing countries as a whole may indeed be worse in some respects than before the glo-

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bal transformations which the end of the Cold War presaged. Indeed, in the present, politically unipolar, world, the management space of developing countries in global affairs generally, and in universal institutions in particular, has been eroded.

The clamor from developing countries as well as from within the incipient global civil society for the democratization of international relations continues. It remains the case, however, that democracy, which is now so pervasive within nation-states, has not yet made any significant impact on relations between states. Therefore, it is ironic that while people as individuals and as communities enrich their interactions through the attributes of a spreading democratic culture and an active and functioning civil society within a nation-state, the manner of relating to each other as nation-states has basically stayed unaltered.

The Way Forward

How can the cause of sustainable development be further advanced? Movement forward on several fronts is necessary. The words of one president provide a pointer for action:

The world, led by the developed countries, has taken a huge overdraft

on the planet's environmental account. It is, at the same time, confronted with the necessary but monumental task of promoting development in fulfillment of the aspirations of peoples, especially the impoverished. That overdraft has to be reduced and liquidated. All nations have a part to play, but a heavy responsibility falls on the industrialized countries of the world.

Much valuable technical work in specific areas, such as public awareness, education, coastal zone management, protected areas, and waste management, which are ongoing should continue. It is in the political and economic fields in the areas of decisionmaking and consequential action that much unfinished business remains at the national, regional, and international levels. In this respect, governments bear a heavy responsibility. They have a primary duty to their citizens and at the same time are required to meet their international obligations. This often leads to a tension between independence and interdependence. In the easing of that tension, the will of governments to act in accordance with international arrangements made by consensus is considerably influenced by their contemplation of the vagaries of electoral politics.

On the other hand, civil society has an enormously important role to play. In the first place, it has to attend to its assignments under Agenda 21. Secondly, NGOs and major groups, through advocacy and other related activities, can persuade domestic constituencies and governments to accept "ownership" of the UNCED outcomes.

From my perspective, the two most critical obstacles to sustainable development are the entrenchment of poverty and the continuing divide between the North and the South.

The eradication of poverty demands action at the national level. Within nations governments in the South, no less than in the North, should not shirk their responsibility for the creation of an enabling environment and the adoption of appropriate economic and social policies which address comprehensively the causes of poverty. The goals of such policies must be a form of human development which is people-centered and promotes equity. With this approach of working cooperatively with civil society, a better understanding of the causes of poverty could be achieved and the perceptions of the poor themselves considered. In this way, policies to eradicate poverty would be informed by a bottom-up approach. They will, therefore, be more likely to provide solutions which are enthusiastically embraced by the potential beneficiaries and are more cost-effective. While such action at the national level is necessary, it is not sufficient. International cooperation is required.

The experience of the negotiations on this issue and others seen in a North-South context shows that cooperation ensues when there is a recogni-

tion of mutual dependence. In other words, a convergence of national interests facilitates agreement. When dependence is one-sided, as is the case with certain features of the global political economy, cooperation is more difficult to achieve. The outcomes of negotiations in such circumstances reflect inherent inequities.

The determination of national interests involves perception which by definition can be changed. In this regard, it has been observed that by the end of UNCED "many more decisionmakers from the developed world recognized that if they are to persuade the Third World to consider Northern concerns about the environment, they must first deal with Southern concerns about economic development."

There is, therefore, scope for a perception of mutual benefit to take hold in areas in which it has so far been absent. The marketing of ideas is therefore called for. In this respect, NGOs and other sectors of civil society can be helpful in widening domestic constituencies to be supportive of sustainable development and all that entails for the future of North-South relations.

In the performance of these tasks, the emerging global civil society is a potentially powerful key player. That society will, in my view, become increasingly influential in shaping the attitudes of people and governments on environment, development, and equity in international relations by promoting human interests as an important factor in the determination of national policies. Developing a new way of looking at things and building a global political culture, in which new thinking and a democratic world order can flourish, will be a long haul. It may take a generation or more. But it is an eventuality whose time will come. ♀