



Toward Integrated and Sustainable Development?

UNRISD Overarching Concerns - Paper 1

Solon L. Barraclough

The author argues that should present economic growth follow past trends, social polarization and environmental degradation will cause increasing political tensions and conflicts. Human society would probably extinguish itself in conflict long before it faced any imminent danger of exhausting its means of subsistence. The only way out of this dilemma is for the meaning and content of development to change in practice. The burden of adjusting toward more sustainable development must fall primarily on the rich. Sustainability will be out of reach without a redistribution of wealth and power from rich countries to poor ones, and from the rich to the poor in both.

How have mainstream development agencies interpreted and applied approaches to “sustainable development”? Are they stimulating progress by governments and other social actors toward reaching the goals enunciated, for example, in the Declarations and Plans of Action adopted by the World Conference on Environment and Development (Rio, 1992) and the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995)? Can development agencies adopt integrated, holistic approaches to complex issues? Can they become more effective? In attempting to answer such questions, this paper looks at some of the interpretations, ambiguities and contradictions associated with the term “sustainable development”.

The paper considers attempts by some UN agencies to apply the concept of sustainable development in their operational programmes. It finds that their adoption of “sustainable development” goals and programmes tended to be more a terminological than a conceptual innovation. Furthermore, they had not

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succeeded in integrating socioeconomic and environmental issues into a unified approach to guide their wide-ranging operations.

The paper also considers efforts by other development actors—international financial institutions, bilateral organizations and international NGOs—and finds that they had similar problems in carrying out integrated programmes on the ground.

The author speculates on what impacts efforts to promote sustainable development might have had in practice, and what might be done by principal actors to contribute toward more integrated and effective approaches to sustainable development.

The paper finds that there seem to have been few systematic attempts to trace how sustainable development policies and initiatives have been interpreted and applied at various levels, from headquarters through regional and national decision-making centres, to their impacts on livelihoods and the environment on the ground. Even less is known about the extent to which such initiatives may affect broader processes that contribute to social inequalities and environmental degradation. The author notes that absence of systematic assessments with critical feedback from the field can have negative repercussions on and influence future policies and programmes.

The author states that such structural adjustments are far more urgent for humanity's future than the current structural adjustment programmes promoted by most agencies. Industrial countries will have to play a major role in bringing sustainable development into practice. The rich, however, can probably only be persuaded to adjust after their own internal contradictions become intolerable. Appealing to their own longer-term self-interests in survival may accelerate this process. Growing pressures emanating from increasingly organized groups of the hitherto excluded in alliances with others standing to gain from more sustainable development could help. What social forces could be mobilized to bring about the policy and institutional reforms required to approach socially and ecologically sustainable development at international, national and sub-national levels is the key issue for international development agencies.

Solon L. Barraclough is a Senior Consultant at UNRISD.

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