



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, POVERTY AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A CHALLENGE TO THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

1. BACKGROUND

The World Summit on Sustainable Development is an important occasion for the world community to assess progress in addressing sustainable development and to agree priority issues for the future. Ten years ago the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) called for sustainable development “*to ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations*”. It is widely recognised that economic well-being, social development, and environmental stability must be addressed together if development is to be sustainable. Ignoring any one of these three pillars can bring down the other two.

In preparing for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Governments, UN institutions and development agencies are focussing on economic well-being by targeting poverty alleviation as the overriding concern to achieving sustainable development. This is both welcome and necessary, and the WSSD presents an opportunity to embed this firmly in the sustainable development agenda. However, the other two pillars of the sustainable development agenda also must be strengthened in the process. The drive to alleviate poverty brings with it the caveat that social development and environmental stability must be included as essential elements.

This challenge is being issued by organisations which work within the sustainable development arena and is based on their practical experience. It is an appeal to build on previous analyses and conclusions, not least in the report of the Brundtland Commission but also in the considerable preparations to UNCED. Sufficient technical knowledge exists to implement sustainable development. Political will and appropriate incentives are now required to convert the ideals of sustainable development into practical action.

2. THE ISSUES

As we move into the 21st century, human institutions, from local to global, are facing many economic, social and environmental challenges. Sustainable development is that which is economically viable, socially acceptable and environmentally sound.

Development is not sustainable if it does not integrate all three elements. It implies long term synergy through changes in business practices and lifestyles, as well as the adoption of environmental and social standards to stay within the limits of available resources.

2.1 Economic Well-being and Poverty

The world is experiencing extremely rapid economic change, including powerful trends towards the use of market forces and market-based policies throughout the world; global economic integration driven by trade liberalisation; and increased economic interdependence among nation states and reductions in national economic sovereignty. At the same time, the disparity between rich and poor continues to grow, both within countries and between them.

Pressures to develop and achieve economic well-being through a primary focus on financial, human and physical capital is driving short-term unsustainable exploitation of the natural resource base and eroding social capital. This is occurring more rapidly and over larger areas than ever before. Such resource exploitation, while providing immediate benefits to some, imposes both short- and long-term costs on many others. These “others” are often the poorest of the poor, who depend heavily on natural resource use and the maintenance of biological diversity. As a result, poverty reduction strategies are undermined by the breakdown of the social fabric and the loss of the environmental services upon which all life depends.

2.2 Social Development

Many countries are struggling with the strains of poverty, rapid population growth and migration, the replacement of a subsistence by a market economy, and massive environmental impacts. In many developing countries faced with a rapid decline of traditional value-systems, a major challenge is the need to enlarge, strengthen, and empower a stable civil society that will build the trust and public self-confidence which enables participatory governance. Democratic, culturally diverse, and socially inclusive societies are essential parts of modern sustainable development.

High worldwide military expenditure is continuing to affect sustainable development. New instabilities, often linked to inter-ethnic tensions and the demand for the subdivision of existing states, are emerging. This situation has manifested itself in a large number of armed conflicts which current international mechanisms are unable to resolve. At the same time social cohesion is declining in many societies. Societal and cultural dislocation, fuelled by globalisation of communications, is endangering the existence of many small cultures – especially those of indigenous peoples. One result is a decline in the sense of community, leading to social unrest and a weakening of environmental responsibility.

2.3 Environmental Stability

Environmentally, it is clear that much of our industrial, agricultural and other uses of renewable and non-renewable natural resources are unsustainable. It has been widely acknowledged, both during UNCED and subsequently by bodies such as the World Bank and the OECD Development Assistance Committee, that the current trends in environmental degradation are a major threat to the achievement of sustainable development. The on-going loss of biodiversity; decline of forest, freshwater, marine and soil resources; changing climate; loss of stratospheric ozone; and accumulation of toxic substances in soil, water, and living organisms, are all threats to the environmental goods and services upon which all human life depends for food, fodder, crop production, and innumerable other goods and services. It is usually the rural poor who are the first to suffer when these systems fail, but not even the most insulated of city dwellers in the industrialized countries are immune from these effects.

Poverty is often associated with degraded rural environments. Environmental degradation has many consequences, because a healthy natural environment sustains non-monetary economies and can be viewed as the "social security" of the rural populations. When the productive functions of healthy rural environments degrade, or when people lose access to those productive environments, movement to cities in search of alternative livelihoods can exacerbate urban poverty. Environmental degradation therefore undermines sustainable livelihoods and affects the rural poor by disproportionately affecting their health, livelihoods and security, and can aggravate poverty in already stressed urban environments.

A sound environment alone will not alleviate poverty, but attempts at poverty alleviation in isolation of the environment will sooner or later be undermined. It is evident today that the costs of past environmental mistakes are being borne by the current economy. Recent data have shown that natural disasters, exacerbated by the mismanagement of natural systems, have the greatest human impact on the poorest countries.

2.4 Interconnections

While governments are now well aware of the three pillars of sustainable development, the market economy has taken priority over social development and environmental concerns in recent decades. In many parts of the world, global economic integration has led to social and cultural fragmentation. Changes in land ownership and resource tenure, changes in agricultural policies, declines in government services, and economic disruptions all have a disproportionate impact on the poor. As old political systems are replaced by new democracies, and as economies are decentralised, social tensions are leading to a desire to build a sense of community through local sovereignty and separatist groups of various kinds. Perhaps the most disturbing form of interconnectedness is that linking environmental degradation, economic development, population growth, refugee movements, and violent conflict.

It is clear that weakening in any one of the pillars leads to problems in the others. Addressing any of the pillars in isolation, without considering their interactive effects,

can give rise to unanticipated consequences. For example, raising energy prices significantly to reduce energy emissions may disproportionately affect the urban poor, who often spend a greater proportion of their income on energy, thus increasing income disparities. And agricultural subsidies in food-surplus countries may ironically undermine food production by the rural poor, who are forced to sell their crops at an unrealistically low price. Such inequities contribute to social unsustainability, which may in turn be reflected in decreasing ability to design and implement sound environmental, economic and social policy. The end result is a failure of governance.

3. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF WSSD

The WSSD presents an opportunity for the global community to re-affirm and strengthen the global view that sustainable development is the only option for a viable future. Sustainable development builds on the following principles:

- Effective actions must *deal with the causes and not only the consequences of poverty*;
- Poverty reduction, social equity and environmental security are mutually reinforcing;
- Environmental degradation has real economic and social costs that undermine long-term local, national and global sustainability;
- Access to information is an issue of economic, social, and environmental equity;
- Development-oriented research is essential to adapting to changing conditions;
- Mainstreaming sustainable development promotes a convergence of agendas at global, national, and local levels, so it must be addressed as a cross-sectoral goal;
- Cultural diversity helps communities adapt to locally-available resources.

Effective linking of economic well-being, social development and environmental stability requires a good understanding of the state of the natural resource base in a given area, the positive and negative pressures affecting that state, and the responses that society can bring to bear to reduce negative pressures and increase positive ones.

Success in this quest for sustainability requires the joint efforts of three sectors:

1. National and local governments, supported by international instruments that provide standards, incentives, and regulations;
2. The private sector, whose new freedoms resulting from globalisation place the responsibility of informed stewardship squarely on their operations;
3. Civil society, whose pressure and support can ensure that the public interest is being well served.

The challenge ahead lies in enabling these three to work harmoniously together, each providing checks and balances on the others and recognising their mutually supporting roles in achieving sustainable development.