
THE EMERGING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM: A GLOBAL FORUM ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF PROGRESSIVE THINKING

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Be realistic—ask for the impossible!

A SLOGAN OFTEN FOUND IN GRAFFITI ON PARIS BUILDINGS, 1968

A DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM IN NEED OF REPLACEMENT

Today, development challenges in the Third World remain much the same as they were in the early 1980s. More people are poor and hungry today and our planet is in greater environmental distress. Governments and the Western aid establishment have had their chance and have basically failed to improve conditions. In the ‘bottom-up development’ proclamations of Official Development Assistance (ODA), decentralization and the participative democratization of decision-making still denote more lip service than reality, while structural adjustment policies (SAPs) have taken an inordinate toll on the poor. The debt burden is as intolerable to Third World countries as it was 10 years earlier, and net financial flows from the South to the North continue. In development circles, it is now amply clear that it is not enough to do things right, but rather to do the right things. Trying harder is simply not adequate. Development practitioners need to think and act differently.

Old conceptual clarities and development prescriptions are breaking down. We are post-Summit for Children in New York, post-International Conference on Nutrition in Rome, post-United Nations (UN) Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, post-Vienna Human Rights Conference, post-Cairo Population and

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Development Conference, post-World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, post-Beijing International Women’s Conference, post-Rome World Food Summit, and post so many other purported landmarks that were to represent ‘true turning-points’ (including the “plus five” series of summit meetings). The bottom line is that we have still not seen these purported turning points; their boundary is fuzzy at best. The international development community has a faint memory and a poor follow-up record.

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After the Environment and Development Conference in Rio in 1992, sustainable development—encompassing economic and ecological sustainability as well as equity issues—represented yet another attempt at re-packaging development strategies. Despite broad-based support mostly from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), sustainable development has not been able to break the ruling development paradigm. To do so, we must learn to work from within to affect change. This does not mean that we should give up the effort to replace the dominant paradigm, but rather that we recognize the reality of our situation and respond accordingly.

What steps can be taken? First, development professionals need to critique our own personal agendas. After all, some of us act as advisors to development decision makers who follow the dominant paradigm. Second, we have to take up the challenge of our age and look for new ways out or for windows of opportunity to replace the ruling development paradigm.¹

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

The challenge remains to create a new progressive sustainable development paradigm. Is the timing right? Are we at the brink of a paradigmatic breaking point? After the proclamations of the various UN Conferences, their “plus five” follow-ups, and their respective parallel NGO fora, the time has come for a paradigm shift.

To advance towards the next order, we need to change the terms of the discussion. If not, we will tire as campaigners and the campaign will fade. Such a new effort has to marry the visionary with the practical, and the vision must suggest a route for effective action. Windows of opportunity have a way of slamming shut. We need to become experimenters, risk takers, innovators, intensifiers, diversifiers, pioneers, addicts of new information, and practitioners of committed common sense. The challenge is to get away from the circularity in current Western development thinking; to see not only what is wrong, but also what there is to build on. We cannot merely denounce—we must also announce. We are in a race with time to overcome the problems before they overcome us. We must shape society to our goals and a change of the development paradigm is needed for that. We may not exert effective political leadership yet, but we cannot run away from showing intellectual leadership.

A strategic overhaul of our actions requires a crisis in our thinking and if the crisis is not there, we have to precipitate it. Therefore, a constructive confrontation with governments, members of learned societies, editors of scientific journals, international agencies, Northern and Southern NGOs, and individuals freelancing advice on development is

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unavoidable. We have to be willing to come into conflict with the ideas and values of the majority and to galvanize public discussion; it is only through conflict that new and unpopular ideas become thinkable. We need to debunk the myth that the causes of ill health, malnutrition, illiteracy, poverty, and environmental degradation are independent of one another. The challenge is to build bridges between as many ‘single-issue’ constituencies as possible (such as environment, gender, human rights, health, and so forth) to launch a progressive movement incorporating individuals, institutions, agencies, and budding civil society organizations.

THE THREE PILLARS OF AN EMERGING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM

Essential to the new sustainable development paradigm is the integration of the scientific, ethical, and political bases for change. Strong imperatives that oppose the current prevailing development paradigm in the Third World gained peak momentum in the late 1990s. Each of these three areas of global concern has distinct constituencies; each carries imperatives that have traceable underlying sources of motivation and identifiable basic theoretical and practical determinants at its roots. Explicating these sources of motivation that lead to the day-to-day decision-making on development issues is crucial to the new paradigm. This is a double attempt to find out where

every actor is coming from, and to help identify and select our strategic allies and strategic enemies in this battle for a more truly sustainable development process.

All social problems have a scientific, ethical, and political dimension as well as a theory and praxis. Sustainable development recommendations have to be based on solid scientific evidence and on explicit ethical and political positions that take into account the existing correlation of social and political forces in each historical context. This is indispensable if we want to avoid falling victim to political naiveté, a frequent development-linked disease. Explicating the positions of the different development actors calls for regularly carrying out social and political mapping exercises as a baseline and then conducting follow-up activities in regular development work under the new paradigm.

GETTING FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW PARADIGM

The transition process of reaching the desired sustainable development outcomes will be determined by the interactions of science, ethics, ideology, and politics in the evolving processes that will lead us out of the present context and towards the various sustainable development outcomes we desired. In each specific national and local context, concrete transition strategies will have to be developed to fit local realities. There is no 'one size fits all' prescription. If we are to pursue the development outcomes we aim for, we are tacitly or explicitly accepting the idea of the need for a new sustainable development paradigm. The question we are left with then is what to do next—both strategically and tactically—to consolidate the desired transition.

Our strategy, out of necessity, must be political. That is simply the way the world works. Depoliticizing issues certainly does not lead to a more rational or faster resolution of conflicts and contradictions. The political, economic, and social factors in development are inseparable. But what we are still seeing today is that economic growth interventions are applied to solve social problems. The ruling paradigm tells us that underdevelopment is primarily an economic problem while associated poverty is a secondary social problem. This is equivalent to saying that when the workers enter the workplace they are an economic factor, and when they leave work they are a social factor.

Current orthodox Bretton Woods institutions are still not giving social, health, nutrition, ecological, and other objectives enough prominence in their attempt to maximize economic growth. This simply perpetuates inequity, as we know that the fruits of economic growth do not really trickle down. Faster growth does not lead to the eradication of poverty. For example, token calls by the World Bank to address the social costs of SAPs for the most destitute will just not do, because the processes that lead to impoverishment remain untouched.

Paradoxically, poverty reduction has long been declared a high priority for the World Bank. As former World Bank President Lewis Preston stated, poverty reduction is one of two World Bank benchmarks, as is economic growth. But it so happens that the SAPs imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have deepened poverty. Numerous examples can be cited of the impact of SAPs on poverty in developing countries; the reader should perhaps keep in mind Tanzania and President Julius Nyerere's efforts in the mid-1980s and early 1990s.

As early as December 1993, the UN General Assembly asked that special attention be paid to eradicating poverty and addressing the social impact of SAPs. The World Bank is of the opinion that the direct assault on poverty must come from wider development and investment programs. It even defines success as a turnaround in per-capita growth, clearly

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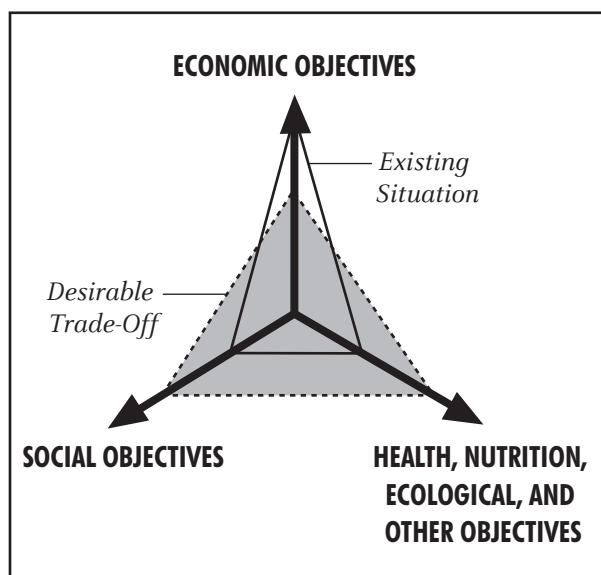
calling for macroeconomic, fiscal, and monetary policies. These policies have, almost by definition, no impact on poverty reduction. With World Bank/IMF imposed reforms delivering only low levels of growth, the impact on poverty reduction is almost nonexistent. According to the World Bank, Ghana should begin achieving poverty reduction goals by 2050. Do the people of Ghana have to wait that long?²

Both the state and the global free market, traditionally relied upon by the World Bank and IMF to solve development issues, basically serve the vested

interests of the wealthy. Neither the state nor the free market is motivated to reverse hunger and put an end to misery and environmental degradation. The solution, therefore, is to change the direction of the development process. Both the state and the free market need to be democratized before they can genuinely serve the public. Short of that, the new paradigm would require that both the state and the global free market be bypassed in favor of working through non-governmental and civil society structures, and by strengthening 'real' markets, defined as existing local networks of exchange among specific producers, traders, and consumers who themselves determine the conditions of access to needed goods.³ Focusing on the process of transition to the new paradigm shows only half the picture of the challenges ahead. What the new paradigm will strive for is explored next.

REEVALUATING MAJOR DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES

An innovative tool has emerged that can potentially strengthen the hand of those attempting to impose a new sustainable development paradigm: multicriteria analysis. This methodology is being used to assess development policy options when progress depends on multiple objectives that are measured by different criteria.⁴ The diagram below illustrates the principles of multicriteria analysis:



Economic objectives are traditionally measured by growth and efficiency indicators, both of which are translated into net monetary benefits. The new sustainable development paradigm suggests that eco-

nomics objectives be measured more as economic development objectives (for example, as gains in equity and poverty reduction). Adequate social policies are, therefore, deemed a prerequisite for achieving economic development objectives in an effective and sustainable economic reform.

The vertical axis of the diagram should thus be renamed 'Economic Development Objectives.' We are aware this will require a change of mentality by

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orthodox economists, to make them accept that equity and poverty reduction are economic not social objectives. This tradeoff entails a replacement of the ruling development paradigm.

The tradeoff would reduce economic growth from the tip of the 'existing' triangle to the tip of the 'tradeoff' triangle in the diagram. One can call this 'the (monetary) cost of poverty reduction.' By choosing this approach, the new sustainable development paradigm attempts to demonetize the optimization of development goals. It does so by effecting a desired outward movement along the axes of the social and the cluster of health, nutrition, ecologic, and other objectives. These outward movements from the smaller triangle to the larger, shaded triangle in the diagram trace improvements in those indicators that measure the achievement of social, health, nutritional, environmental, and other objectives. The above refers to relative weights society decides to place on improving the indicators in each of the three axes—with all the ethical, scientific, human rights, ideological, and political connotations this choice carries.

The new development paradigm thus firmly advocates social gains as justification for economic growth sacrifices. Its focus is, therefore, on the non-monetary benefits and the tradeoffs or payoffs of poverty reduction. In Amartya Sen's terminology, the key to the new paradigm's success is the balance between growth-mediated and support-led security. One should constantly be measuring the tradeoffs between gains and losses when emphasizing one type

of security over the other. The equity issue (poverty reduction, social justice, and distributional fairness) is very much at the forefront in the tradeoff equation.

Economic growth alone does not guarantee trickle-down benefits. Direct interventions leading to the provision of public services, such as health and environmental, by themselves promote equity only indirectly and weakly. Therefore, directly increasing the income of poor households is a must to improve standards of health, nutrition, and the environment in the long run. Moreover, it is critical to target the provision of public services to the neediest people.

From an equity perspective, effective income or wealth redistribution is equivalent to economic growth, at least for the lower quintile income group. This is true because an increase in their disposable income will then occur, even in the absence of increasing the size of the overall economic pie as a whole. In fact, the resources required to eliminate poverty

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amount to approximately 10 percent of total national income in Sub-Saharan Africa and India; for extreme poverty eradication, four percent suffices. If growth rates of income per capita reach one percent a year, poverty in these regions could be eradicated in 10 years and extreme poverty in four years if the entire increase in income per capita accrues to the poor. One must be cautious with these numbers, however: India has routinely exceeded growth rates of one percent per capita and income has not trickled down.⁵

The new sustainable development paradigm contends that the proper balance between growth-mediated and support-led security can be reached if and when periodically measured indicators of income distribution consistently move in favor of the lower quintile income group. In other words, the mixture of direct income redistribution measures (such as estate taxes, taxes on luxury goods, VAT, land reform, and

targeted subsidies) and the provision of direct interventions in public and environmental services would have to assure an ongoing shift towards decreasing the imbalance in income and wealth distribution. Preferably, the financing of the expansion of services to the poor should come from targeted direct interventions in public health or nutrition, financed with state revenues or insurance premiums mostly collected from the two upper income quintiles.

Such a sustainable development emphasis would require setting up a frequent, perhaps semi-annual, household-level monitoring system on a sentinel basis of one or two simple proxy indicators of income distribution. These indicators could include the proportion of the population consuming less than \$7 per week at purchasing parity exchange rates, or the percentage of income spent on food by the lower quintile income group. The latter reflects competing non-food consumption choices that come with modernization.⁶

If the income distribution indicators do not move in favor of the poorest, this would be a sign that more direct redistribution measures are needed. This ensures that a tilt towards support-led security does not hamper growth-mediated security for the lower quintile income group. A 'poverty redress objective' and its corresponding indicators are, in such a scenario, built in and monitored regularly. Poverty alleviation will then also decrease certain types of environmental degradation associated with poverty. Ultimately, it must be understood that the new sustainable development paradigm is dealing

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not with many different problems but with several aspects of the same problem, just as the pieces of meat in a shishkebab are united by the skewer. This understanding needs to be promoted and disseminated from the transition period onwards.

Capacity building to bring about the new paradigm is meant to expose people to relevant information they themselves should get involved in collecting, especially information about the real causes behind the problems they face on a daily basis. The use of a conceptual framework is indispensable for widely sharing such a better understanding of causes of underdevelopment; it will educate and train people, and will prepare them to assess, analyze, and act on their surrounding reality and to press on with the needed advocacy and with effective lobbying activities. An example of this is the conceptual framework the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been using since 1990.⁷

The aim is to have people go through a politically motivated and empowering 'assessment analysis and action (AAA) process' which can lead them from felt needs to making concrete claims and to exerting effective demands on those claims. From there they go on to exercising their de-facto new power and engaging in networking and coalition building.⁸

We are faced here with the challenge to convince and persuade others and to build and participate in growing constituencies. For that to happen, we have to plan new strategies and launch bold interventions. The problems of underdevelopment ultimately must be turned into social and political issues to create global embarrassment amongst our leaders and a sense of outrage amongst the poor.

The approaches called for by the new sustainable development paradigm thus require a transformation of development workers into activists. There is a role for a range of actors, including:

- Moral advocates who will influence perceptions by giving guidance on what is permissible and fair;
- Mobilizing agents or social activists who will influence action by giving guidance on what is possible and doable, on how it can be done, by whom and by when; and
- Political advocates who will raise political consciousness by giving guidance on what people's empirical and de-facto entitlements and rights are.

The role of these three types of actors is to engage in capacity building and social mobilization that lead to empowering development's beneficiaries so they can become real protagonists. They ultimately have to

help the poor gain access to and control over the human, financial, and organizational resources they need to address their own problems.

As a closing remark, it is fitting to quote Herman Daly, former senior economist with the World Bank's Environment Department:

I'm going to continue to work toward the way I think things should be. My working hypothesis is that the movement I am a part of will ultimately be successful. I have independent evidence that I'm not a genius and that other people are very smart. I think that the same arguments and facts that convinced me will ultimately convince others. I have faith that they will. Of course, I have to remain open to persuasion as well.⁹

That is what this global forum on the cutting edge of progressive thinking is all about. Remaining indifferent will only give us more of the same. ■

NOTES

- 1 Claudio Schuftan, "Multidisciplinarity, Paradigms and Ideology in National Development Work," *Scandinavian Journal of Development Alternatives*, VII: 2+3 (1988): 241-290.
- 2 *Africa Recovery* 7 (34) (Dec.1993-March 1994): 18-19, 47.
- 3 Cynthia Hewitt de Alcantara, "Real markets: Social and Political Issues of Food Policy Reform" (London: Frank Cass/EADI/UNRISD, 1993).
- 4 Mohan Munasinghe, "The Economists' Approach to Sustainable Development," *Finance and Development* (December 1993): 18.
- 5 Partha Dasgupta, *An Inquiry into Well-being and Destitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
- 6 Claudio Schuftan, "Malnutrition and Income: Are we Being Misled?," *The Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 37 (2) (1998): 101-121.
- 7 UNICEF, *Strategy for Improved Nutrition of Children and Women in Developing Countries* (New York: UNICEF, 1990).
- 8 Claudio Schuftan, "Towards Operationalizing a Sustainable Development Beyond Ethical Pronouncements: The Role of Civil Society and Networking," *Community Development Journal* 34 (3) (July 1999): 232-239.
- 9 Mr. Daly was seen as a 'maverick' for leaving his position at the World Bank after six years there to pursue a different vision of development.