

What Does 'Sustainable Development' Mean?

Written by Luke Godfrey

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LUKE GODFREY, OCT 12 2012

Over the past 20 years sustainable development has risen to the forefront of environmental strategy, both at the local and international level. Despite its high profile however there is little agreement over the concept's precise meaning – “One of the most striking characteristics of the term sustainable development is that it means so many different things to so many different people and organizations” (Robinson: 373). For the most part the starting point for definitions of sustainable development is the one provided by the ‘Our Common Future’ (1987), “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987: 43), which first brought the concept to prominence.

Before the publication of the report sustainable development was little known in broader circles, and the environment was approached within a ‘traditional’ framework which treated the environment as a compartmentalised issue, separate from other policy areas (Carter: 174). The definition leaves plenty of scope for interpretation, and did not pose a challenge to the dominant neoliberal economic ideology (Clapp and Dauvergne: 61), so managing to balance between developmental and environmental concerns. Given its influence the political context of the report also needs to be taken into account, as at the time the environmental agenda was largely dominated by the more affluent countries of the North, whilst the South struggled with economic and political instability. All of this was against the backdrop of Cold War tensions. This context helps to explain why the report explicitly framed sustainable development as incorporating both developmental concerns (of the South) and environmental concerns (of the North), in an attempt to overcome their contradictions and bridge the divide both internationally and conceptually (Carter: 209). “The promise of sustainable development is that it seems to offer a way out of the economy versus environment impasse; no longer need there be a trade-off between growth and environmental protection” (Carter: 212).

Sustainable development as interpreted by the majority of actors around three subsidiary pillars; economic development, social equity and environmental protection (Drexhage and Murphy: 2), each of which help to make up the full concept of sustainable development. These can be seen as complementary, with some trade-offs between them, as indeed the concept is presented. Or alternatively as competitive discourses through which the overall meaning of the concept can be dominated by one or another. For some the multiple interpretations of sustainable development is in itself positive, benefiting from ‘constructive ambiguity’, suited to the similarly plural world of politics and policy (Robinson: 374).

Equity is integral to the concept of sustainable development because inequalities, of resources, or power, result in environmental degradation, often impacting those unable to protect themselves, the worlds’ poor. Their subsequent struggle to survive places greater stress on resources (Carter: 218), as they may be forced to move to marginal lands, or deforest large areas. This is not just equity within generations, but also across them, preserving fragile ecosystems for future generations. Without this equity then sustainable development is impossible. However in practice this encounters considerable difficulties, the ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ of the Rio Declaration (Carter: 219) whilst allowing for the greater involvement of some in today’s problems does little to point how much these actors should bear the costs. Inevitably there have been considerable tensions over where these differentiated responsibilities fall and around the ‘right’ of the South to develop in similar ways to the North which allowed them to attain such unprecedented levels of prosperity. Furthermore increased democratic participation follows on from the focus on equity, as it is seen as essential to allow marginalised groups a voice so as to define

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their own needs, and in legitimating the process, and possible costs of sustainable development (Carter: 222). A precautionary principle was also formulated within the context of sustainable development and this relates to the environmental protection pillar as well as social justice. Much of the science underpinning the environmental movement is far from fully proven, and many of its key tenets such as climate change are intensely disputed. The precautionary principle then, requires states to still act according to their capabilities, to not act irresponsibly in ways that might damage the environment irreparably, or that will have a detrimental impact on future generations (Carter: 223). Again it is far from clear how this should be applied, by whom, or to what extent do the benefits outweigh the risks.

With regard to the economic pillar of sustainable development, key is "The common theme throughout this strategy for sustainable development is the need to integrate economic and ecological considerations in decision making" (WCED 1987: 72). The compartmentalised approach to the environment ignored the interconnected nature of many problems, and was never equipped to deal with the scale and range of problems faced today, or their solutions such as sustainable development. A continuing segmented approach fragments responsibility and environmental governance, but there are considerable political and structural barriers to reform (Carter 224). The economic direction of sustainable development also necessarily involves planning due to the complexity of the interactions between the environment, economics and society. Free markets alone cannot deliver the radical reforms necessary, but sustainable development does not specify a priori what form these market interventions must take (Carter: 225). Instead sustainable development, as in other areas, beyond specifying that reform is necessary, remains neutral with regards to the implementation stage. These principles outline a general guide to the key components of sustainable development as interpreted by the Brundtland Report, and accepted by the mainstream discourse on the environment in the 20 years since.

Because of the influence of the report it should be looked at critically when confronting the meaning of sustainable development. However "The domination of the issues of compatibility between sustainable development and economic growth, however, has led to the neglect of the broader framework of sustainable development within which the Commission attempted to integrate environmental policies and developmental strategies" (Langhelle: 130). The mandate of the report was based around attempting to bridge the North-South divide (Langhelle: 131) and this also resulted in a strongly anthropocentric outlook, which many in the environmental movement still find objectionable. However this should be seen as a product of context, given the report was concerned about immediate political circumstance, and although this may be objectionable in some respects it additionally imbued a previously instrumental concept of sustainable development with additional socio-political connotations (Langhelle: 132). This shift away from ecocentrism has brought environmental issues to a much wider audience (Carter: 212) and given the disproportionate impact which environmental degradation has on the poorest in society, and putting aside the contested linkage in the opposite direction, can be seen as widely positive. Aspects of the definition of sustainable development and links with economic growth have been widely criticised but these reflect the dominant definition of sustainable development rather than necessarily that in the report itself. The focus on growth, associated with the processes and meanings of sustainable development, is qualified in the report, "The essence of the normative-conceptual position is that GNP should be made less material and energy-intensive so as to keep within the bounds of the ecologically possible" (Langhelle: 136). Explicit discussion of energy limits can be taken to infer a direction and limits for ecologically sound growth as it is this which underpins modern economies (Langhelle: 138). Criticisms around this aspect of sustainable development are more appropriately aimed at the dominant interpretation of the concept where it interacts with realities such as national interest and states claim *carte blanche* to continue growing their economies as they always have, concern shown by statements such as "potentially more limiting for the sustainable development agenda, is the reigning orientation of development as purely economic growth" (Drexhage and Murphy: 2). As such distinction has to be made between the meaning of sustainable development as attributed by the report, and UN conferences etcetera, and the meanings which are in fact practised. Sustainable development, depending on how you take its meaning can carry very different connotations with regard to such areas (Langhelle: 142).

A way to distinguish amongst the differing interpretations and meanings of sustainable development is to measure them as 'strong' to 'weak'. Given the ambiguous and contradictory terms offered by sustainable development it allows for some measure of picking and choosing the meaning closest to an actors' own interests. Neil Carter

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characterises weak sustainable development as “integrating capitalist growth with with environmental concerns” (Carter: 213), allowing for the replacement of natural capital with manufactured capital and pricing natural capital as the best way to conserve it. As interpretations of sustainable development become stronger, the integral value of ecological systems becomes stronger, and more are characterised as having intrinsic value outside of their instrumental value (Carter: 216). So the meaning of sustainable development reflects the extent to which the actor prioritises its principles beyond rhetoric and “underlying many of the debates in the sustainability field are a serious of deep-lying questions about the purpose and meaning of human life and it relationship to the natural world” (Robinson: 380). Sustainable development is an inherently normative and political concept, as was recognised by the Brundtland Report, and which determined to an extent its ambiguous attitude.

The dominant meaning of sustainable development would appear to be a weak one, with more rhetoric than action and only occasional applications of the principles of sustainable development. For example the UK outlines its key principles of sustainable development as; living within environmental limits, ensuring a just and strong society, achieving a sustainable economy, promoting good governance and using sound science responsibly (defra: 17). However little detailed policy action is set out in this most recent strategy publication – instead “The Government will continue to develop its policies on sustainable consumption and production, and will produce, by the end of 2006, a report on progress together with an updated plan of action in this area” (defra: 45), as has been the case largely since sustainable development was agreed to. Its meaning then does not rest on how the concept is theorised alone. The dominant meaning of sustainable development must also take into account how it is interpreted in policy circles and in implementation.

Not only this, but also different perspectives may impart different meanings. The South has from the start, and in many cases still does, regard sustainable development with suspicion, with some vindication considering the way that it has been a vessel for special interests, and as some see it, ‘eco-colonialism’. Although on the surface sustainable development is positive conceptually, and incorporates the concerns of the South in some respects, it has since been ‘emasculated’ by a failure to implement positive action programmes that produce results (Nayar: 1327). So if the South’s interests are not taken into account then the concept’s meaning for them becomes radically different from that of the North. The vague terms of sustainable development in the Brundtland report combined with a prioritisation of areas such as the poverty-environmental degradation thesis, and focus on the issues raised by rapid population growth was seen by some to reflect the North’s dominance in interpreting sustainable development. The poverty-environmental degradation thesis outlined in the report gained far more prominence than the inequalities of a globalised world and the actions of developed industries which many argued had a far more direct link to environmental degradation, especially since much of their effects resulted from the ‘out-sourcing’ of the environmental costs of 1st world patterns of consumption. Sustainable development’s sincerity in equity etcetera has been interpreted as hollow, disguising developed countries concern with preserving the natural capital of developing nations in order to sustain their own living standards and patterns of consumption (Nayar: 1328).

These concerns, although overblown at times also reflect sustainable development’s meaning for many, and as such they have persisted to the present day and become more developed. The North/South divide, although not the only fault line, is still key to the environmental discourse (Najam and Robins: 49). Broken promises, trade barriers, etcetera, have contributed to a very different meaning for sustainable development in the South than in the North – “As a result, the preambular commitment to sustainable development in the WTO agreement [Seattle, 1999] and the repeated statements about making trade, environment and development ‘mutually supportive’, remain essentially hollow” (Najam and Robins: 50). Whilst the developed countries still impose substantial barriers in the globalised economic system to the South the meaning of sustainable development will remain one of eco-colonialism, rhetoric disguising and legitimising the continued dominance of the North (Najam and Robins: 52). The difficulties with this interpretation for the South lie in conceding the environmental debate and sustainable development discourse. This is illustrated by tensions over the naming of the ‘UN Conference on the Environment and Development’, where developing countries lobbied hard to have development included in the title. Nevertheless the summit still ended up informally know as ‘The Earth Summit’, the dominant discourse making little mention of the South’s developmental concerns (Victor: 93), mirroring the contestation of the meaning of sustainable development. Additionally, despite the qualifications attached by the Brundtland Report to sustainable development it was more purely environmental concerns which became top priorities at the international level, despite the failure to provision for basic needs as

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outlined by sustainable development (Victor: 99), and a side-lining of the other two pillars. However recalcitrance has allowed the South to be portrayed as the scapegoat (as at the Copenhagen negotiations where China was widely seen as blocking any substantive agreement), and allowed the meaning of sustainable development to be narrowed in such a way as to exclude or minimise the interests of developing countries (Najam and Robins: 52). In 2001 Najam and Robins argued that this position was mistaken, and that it was necessary for the developing world to re-engage to play a role in the continuing evolution of the sustainable development discourse (Najam and Robins: 55). To do otherwise is to concede the meaning of sustainable development and the wider environmental debate to the more affluent states.

Sustainable development is largely unobjectionable, so long as it is kept vague, and apparently will have little impact on lifestyles or carry additional costs. It is when this theory is applied to reality that cracks begin to appear. "The last decade of UN summits propagated the myth that sustainable development can promote international harmony through 'global action plans' and 'universal principles'" (Victor: 95). Sustainable development may be a neutral concept in itself, but is open to debate. Because of this, by virtue of being embedded in a wider neoliberal framework dominated by the more affluent countries, it is in reality more narrowly prescribed in meaning and means than might be immediately obvious. The core subsidiary principles are similarly affected by their incorporation into the wider neoliberal discourse: "some would argue that the Brundtland Commission's real legacy was to create a concept that secures the hegemony of a coalition of the moderate market-liberal and institutionalist views of environmental management within the global community" (Clapp and Dauvergne: 61). Agenda 21, the action plan based within the framework provided by sustainable development is characterised by Doyle (1998) as the 'bible' of sustainable development. "Its commandments of sustainable development have successfully managed to co-opt, weaken and almost completely dismantle active environmental critiques of existing political and market systems" (Doyle: 771). Sustainable development has lent itself to this process as interest groups opposed to the environmental movement have moved away (largely) from 'astro-turf' etcetera, and instead these special interest groups have defined the meaning of sustainable development in such a way as to re-frame the environmental discourse in their own favour (Doyle: 772). Simultaneously whilst dominating the environmental discourse, agreements such as Agenda 21 are vastly underfunded, a fraction of what is needed being pledged (Clapp and Dauvergne: 65).

Of the issues with sustainable development, particularly problematic is its failure to re-define and assign a new meaning in practice as in theory to economic growth (Drexhage and Murphy: 8). It has resulted in favouring the standard interpretation of economic growth and the status-quo over its other aspects because of the dominance of the wider discourse by the advanced industrial states and their associated industries. Economic growth still continues in its usual channels, and as the Rio Summit in 1992 demonstrated there was an over-emphasis on the environmental aspects prioritised by the more affluent nations (Drexhage and Murphy: 8). "What makes it [anthropomorphic sustainable development] more dangerous is it's lack of explicitness, it's exquisite use of language, it's Orwellian doublespeak" (Doyle: 774). Although this characterisation may be going too far, the point that sustainable development's meaning has been captured by a narrow group of interests is valid. More radical interpretations and meanings have largely been lost, few entering the mainstream literature or debate at the level of policy, and social justice reduced to token aid pledges – a far cry from the technology transfers and radical redistribution called for by some, especially in developing countries. Sustainable development in this way serves to legitimate inaction and maintenance of the status-quo. The ambiguous meaning of sustainable development could have gone a number of ways, but in reality has largely sidelined the more radical issues of equity and social justice which were part and parcel of its meaning at its inception, but which are maintained incoherently now and often only at the level of rhetoric. Instead it has been reduced to meaning an incremental, technocratic approach focused on the 'management' of problems rather than their solution (Doyle: 775). A recent UN report found common cause with many of these criticisms of sustainable development: "While sustainable development is intended to encompass three pillars, over the past 20 years it has often been compartmentalized as an environmental issue" (Drexhage and Murphy: 2).

Whilst sustainable development's meaning may be clear in theory, it is still nebulous in practice (Drexhage and Murphy: 6). From the Rio Summit in 1992 and Agenda 21 sustainable development has been key, and is still the dominant paradigm for environmental discourse. However its meaning has varied over its history and the three pillars outlined at the beginning have pulled it in different directions (Drexhage and Murphy: 9). Although its flexibility has

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been seen by some as a weakness, it has allowed sustainable development to be integrated, in one fashion or another in civic society, state administration, the private sector and international institutions (Carter: 226; Drexhage and Murphy: 10). Sustainable development's position is relatively clear, if flexible, according to circumstance with the core pillars and associated principles being widely accepted. However reconciling the different positions and contradictions in sustainable development is dependent on the actors with their beliefs and values ultimately informing sustainable development's meaning (Robinson: 382). If actors were committed to even a 'weak' meaning of sustainable development this would entail some action such as regulation or subsidies for clean energy as is the case in much of the developed world. Where actors are not committed to the concept, however it is interpreted, sustainable development serves as thin legitimization for other interests and policies and despite its own meaning in theory, in these instances it serves as a vessel for others. This is because ultimately sustainable development is a product of "conflicting values, moral positions and belief systems that speak to the issue of sustainability" (Robinson: 382) – as such it is determined politically on a 'discursive playing field', dependent on context and perspective rather than having a fixed meaning.

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