THE UNSUSTAINABILITY OF DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

For more than a decade now, the issue of sustainable development has been, in rhetoric at least, the load-star of scholars, organisations and governments alike. As a political buzz-word, the concept has attracted legions of supporters who rather unquestioningly aim to realise 'sustainable development'. It has been taken more or less for granted that sustainable development is achievable in the north as well as in the south. There is, however, little consensus about the meaning of the concept, or even of 'sustainability', just as there is widespread disagreement about the meaning of 'development'. Moreover, if, as is sometimes argued, development must be at the same time both ecologically, economically and socially sustainable, the concept becomes really problematic. It is, for example, often claimed that economic development takes place at the expense of social and/or ecological sustainability, or vice versa.

In spite of the enormous attraction of 'sustainable development', this paper argues that sustainable development is a misnomer and that sustainable development is not achievable. The two concepts 'sustainability' and 'development' are, in my view, not compatible (depending, of course, on how they are defined). Hence, it is futile to aim for sustainable development. There is no doubt that in parts of the world development is necessary. However, in other parts of the world it would be more realistic to strive for a sustainable level of development, rather than for a sustained process of change. In the article, the sustainability complex is analysed in terms of growth vs. development and development vs. sustainability. This discussion is illuminated by empirical examples from 'developed' as well as 'underdeveloped' societies.

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What's in a Word?

During the past decade and a half, 'sustainable development' has become a phrase on virtually everybody's lips. Politicians, teachers, researchers and many others repeat it in a parrot-like fashion as if there was a widespread agreement on what it means. As many before me have already pointed out, there isn't. In my mind, the phrase contains a contradiction of terms and is more than likely to be misleading rather than revealing, *i.e.* it obscures the development process and promises too much about sustainability.

No doubt, 'sustainable development' is a perfect slogan – it can be interpreted in a variety of ways. And indeed it has. Redclift (1994: p12) thus underlines that "much sustainable development thinking … is predicated on a social consensus that rarely exists in practice". Apart from that, Kirby *et al* (1999: p2) remind us that "[b]oth 'sustainable' and 'development' are rational and enlightened concepts. It is difficult to imagine that anyone, except out of perversity, could agree with the diverse". That may well be the case. In themselves the two concepts can be both rational and enlightened. However, taken together they are misleading. As will be argued below, the slogan 'sustainable development' is, in most cases, likely to lead us astray. I stress 'likely' because we are dealing with two highly contested and constantly negotiated concepts. As underlined by Brandin (1998: p290): both 'sustainable' and 'development' are "in various ways difficult to pin down". It is therefore somewhat surprising (or, perhaps, it isn't) that the combination of the two found its way into everybody's vocabulary with such ease. This is all the more so as we seem to be dealing with two incompatible entities.

It has been said that 'sustainable development' defies definition. Not only is it both "difficult to grasp analytically" (Barbier, 1987: p101), it is also "difficult to pin down in operational terms" (van Latesteijn & Schoonenboom, 1996: p225). Nevertheless we need to know what we are talking about, especially since we are told that our children's welfare depends on its realisation. In an effort to clarify the contradiction, I will first discuss the two-component concept. Thereafter the use and meaning(s) of 'sustainability' and 'development' respectively will be analysed and given reasonable contents. This will shed light on how the two halves of the slogan are or might be related and whether they can at all be combined in a meaningful way.

Sustainable development

In everyday language, 'sustainable development' is thought of as referring to a balance or harmony between society and nature. This may seem simple enough but, as we shall see, the concept has many more connotations. Moreover, 'environmental' aspects appear not to be the most problematic to deal with.

The concept 'sustainable development' was popularised in the so-called Brundtland report 'Our Common Future' (WCED) in 1987. Then it spread like a bush-fire and has by now become an almost mandatory buzz-word, no matter what is being discussed. During this process it has been propagated, questioned, interpreted and reinterpreted by innumerable users with varying and sometimes antagonistic agendas. Irrespective of purpose, everyone seems willing to kidnap 'sustainable development' and impose their own interpretation on it (this paper is no exception). No wonder that many have reached the conclusion that the concept has become severely devalued and meaningless. But it could also be argued that 'sustainable development' was so vague and imprecise already when it was launched that it was meaningless even before these efforts were made to squeeze the term into ready-made discourses. Perhaps it was just an empty slogan "whose time had come, without anyone really knowing what it meant" (Redclift, 1994: p3).

For researchers and politicians alike, it was a safe concept. If nothing else, going for 'sustainable development' defined you as one of the good guys (or dolls). Politicians love vague and positively value-laden slogans with no clear obligations attached. The novelty and timeliness of the phrase could also give the (perhaps correct) impression that scholars were busying themselves at the prestigious 'research frontier'. In both cases, the trick was to embrace 'sustainable development' first and engage in the struggle over its meaning later. Furthermore, lots of research funding accompanied the introduction of the concept. For a number of reasons then, 'sustainable development' has seldom been seriously questioned. Instead it attracts followers from both left and right and is presently advocated by those who propagate growth and/or development as well as by those who oppose it. Typically, "environmentalists and groups on the political left emphasise the 'sustainable' part … [whereas] those to the right lay stress on the 'development' component" (Rees, 1998: p20-21). To be sure, opportunism

was not the only driving force behind this over-night acceptance, but it did – and does – play a not unimportant role in its use.

The Brundtland report identified two major and related threats to mankind's earthly habitat: environmental degradation and Third World poverty. It concluded that in ecological terms the economic systems of the rich countries are "obviously not sustainable" (p10) at the same time as poverty and limited options force poor people in poor countries to resort to soil-mining, deforestation and other short-sighted survival strategies. For different reasons they both lead to overexploitation of natural resources and massive environmental destruction. This called for a rethinking of how (much) the populations in the rich countries produce and consume; how we measure economic growth and how we relate to nature. The report as well as many followers found that we must form our present and future societies within the limits set by the earth's eco-systems. As Hägerstrand (1994: p25) puts it: "the real long-term environmental task is … to find a modus vivendi which converts us from being devastators into partners with respect to nature". The solution apparently is 'sustainable development'.

With the two emphases mentioned above, the Brundtland report defined 'sustainable development' as a development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (p57). As suggested, there are several problems related to this concept and its definition. For example, how do we define needs (rather than wants) and who's definition counts? Here, the report merely refers to "the essential needs of the poor" but that, actually, is not very revealing. Are 'essential' needs to be understood as 'basic' needs, or (how far) do they go beyond that? Moreover, if it is difficult to define present needs (which differ *inter alia* between regions, generations, sexes, classes, and cultures), how do we determine future needs? Above the level of 'basic needs', we know that needs change as societies develop (Maslow, 1954). How then do we avoid compromising future generations' needs, when we cannot foresee which these needs will be? In reality, "the needs of future generations must be defined as those felt by the present generation on behalf of future generations" (van Latesteijn & Schoonenboom, 1996: p226). The slogan sounds good but it might not be a solution.

The report concluded, "inequality is the world's greatest environmental problem. It is also the most important development problem" (p19). The solution to this is more economic growth, not only in poor countries, which is an obvious necessity, but everywhere. The report makes it clear that it does not propose zero-growth, not even in those parts of the world that suffer from over-consumption. Instead, it equated 'sustainable development' with "more rapid economic growth in *both* industrial and developing countries" (p105, emphasis added). To be sure, this proposed "global economic growth" must be kept "within ecological limits" (*ibid*.). There are, however, many which believe that this can't be done and that this receipt is anything but 'sustainable'. Hence, "many environmentalists hate the term 'sustainable development' precisely because it … licence[s] economic growth" (Kirby *et al*, 1999: p2). Actually, says Escobar (1996: p52) 'sustainable development' "focuses not so much on the negative consequences of economic growth on the environment, as on the effects of environmental degradation on growth and the potential for growth. Growth (*i.e.* capitalist market expansion) and not the environment has to be sustained".

Moreover, the call for life-styles more in line with nature is not as unproblematic as it may sound. Advocates of 'sustainable development' highlight ecological limitations and 'deep green' and hard-nosed ecologists often go for an extreme conservationist strategy. Human impact on the environment is seen as almost entirely negative (see *e.g.* IUCN, 1980; Brown, various issues). This leads to various calls for 'back to nature' and/or an aversion towards any manmade changes. The Brundtland report actually provides some support for such a stance. It does not only stress 'ecological sustainability' but talks also about "ecological *stability*" (p38; emphasis added). As is well known, ecosystems are not stable. They evolve over time. A stable nature is not natural!

A usually unanswered question concerns what a sustainable relation with nature actually entails. What do we mean by 'natural'? Are we referring to that which is normal – and if we do, natural/normal to whom? In southern Sweden, people like to conserve the beech forest because it is beautiful, easy to walk in and 'natural' since we are used to it. But beech is alien to the area. It was imported and planted in the 18th century. At present, potatoes are a 'natural' staple food in Sweden but prior to the 18th century they were unknown.

We may thus ask ourselves: what is a 'natural' time perspective and in what sense is an eco-system natural? If we take the time-perspective of, say, 50 000 years, it would be natural for inland ice (almost without ecosystems) to cover the part of the world (Sweden) where I live. In a 200-years perspective, 'natural' features in the same area would be, for example, horse and carriage, poverty and mass migration or, for that matter, tuberculosis, crop failures and infant mortality. What appears as 'natural' is historically and culturally determined and tends to be based on value judgement rather than positive criteria. Clearly, "the present generation does not miss the dinosaur or those species which are associated with the cultivated landscape which existed in the last century" (van Latesteijn & Schoonenboom, 1996: p247). Hence, it is fair to wonder: "why … could not future generations in turn adjust to an environment with less 'Nature' or fewer specific features? The question is, however, whether the present generation actually wants this…" (*ibid*. p248). Hence, for all the talk about nature, future needs and choices, it is the present that counts. This said, the issue of ecological sustainability appears to be the least ambiguous aspect of 'sustainable development'.

Sustainability

Sustainability, apparently, is a no less problematic issue than 'sustainable development'. That should come as no surprise. Today "the name of the game is sustainability" (Rhodes, 1989: p12) and many are eager to twist the concept to fit their own interests. Hence, (Andersson, 1998: p13) notes that there is "no common definition of the concept" and Brandin (1998) calls for a deeper theoretical understanding of 'sustainability'. This being the case, it is, of course, problematic to combine it with, for example, 'development'. This is especially so when we are told that 'sustainability' should be considered as a "continuous process where the content of the term is formulated and reformulated (or constructed and reconstructed) constantly by whoever uses the word"(Brattén, 1998: p329). This, however, is to avoid the problem.

Besides *ecological* sustainability, 'Our Common Future' makes a plea for *social* sustainability (WCED, 1987). Others, in addition, call for *economic* sustainability (Sida, 1999). Others, yet, do not believe that this is enough and consequently add *cultural* (FRN 1998) and *institutional* (Barbier, 1987; Soussan, 1992) sustainability to the list. 'Sustainable development', it is maintained, "must be sustainable in *all*

these dimensions, not just in one" (FRN, 1998: p8). However, it is highly unlikely – if not outright impossible – that these objectives could be attained at the same time. This is misuse of 'sustainability'. Normally, one such goal is realised before, or even at the (temporary) expense of, the others. Especially, it is difficult to see how – and even if – social and/or institutional sustainability can be combined with economic growth and development. It becomes even more problematic if economic growth is to be combined – not with social and ecological sustainability but rather (as we have seen) – with social and ecological *stability*.

Here advocates of 'sustainable development' overlook the fact that development is never a smooth and balanced process (Morris 1998). Instead, it is characterised by unevenness and cultural lags (Ogborn, 1964). Consequently, Alonso (1980) identified a collection of parallel, but not simultaneous, evolutions during a development process. V*iz.* the different dimensions (economic, social, demographic, geographical, etc.) of a development process do *not* take place at the same time or with the same pace. It therefore appears that much 'sustainability' discourse is misleading.

To arrive at a sustainable society obviously entails some fundamental changes. Hence, those who have a stake in the present order of things have been quick to incorporate 'sustainability' into an otherwise reactionary arsenal. Exploiting the high rates of unemployment in the rich countries, and the fact that "consumers want consumption sustained [and] workers want jobs sustained" (Norgaard, 1994: p11), the importance of "sustained growth" (SvD, various issues) is now widely propagated. Calls for "sustained economic growth" (Swedish Ministry of Economy, 1998), and the "continuity and sustainability of development" (Brown & Thomas, 1990) abound. For such reasons, Taylor (1991) found that 'sustainability' has become a "menace inasmuch as it has been co-opted … to perpetuate many of the worst aspects of the expansionist model under the masquerade of something new" (quoted from Rees, 1998: p22). This is really to misuse the concept. Here, it may be appropriate to remind of 'Our Common Future's' estimation of "necessary" growth rates in the already rich countries. It puts the minimum desirable growth-rate at a long-term average of 3 – 4 percent annually (WCED 1987: p66). This means that the size of these economies would double in only 20 years time. Whether this is 'sustainable' remains to be seen. We may recall von Wright's

(1994: p145), notion that there is "not one convincing or even serious argument in favour of eternal growth".

'Sustainability', apparently, has different meanings to different people. My thesaurus gives synonymies such as 'continued' and 'strenhthened' (Roget's, 1987) and my dictionary translates it as 'keep up', 'maintain' or 'keep from falling or sinking' (Oxford, 1970). One could add 'prolong' and 'perpetuate'. Basically, I would say that sustainability has to do with 'robustness' or 'resilience', preferably but not only in an ecological sense. It also alludes to something relatively stable or lasting. Sustainable resource use (Mannion & Bowlby, 1992) thus refers to patterns of production and consumption that do not harm nature and therefore can be maintained over an extended period of time. Agricultural sustainability refers to patterns of land-use that have "the ability to maintain productivity, whether of a field or farm or nation, in the face of stress or shock" (Conway & Barbier 1990: p37; quoted from Jirström, 1996).

We are frequently told that "development has gone seriously awry" (Norgaard, 1994: p2) and that the present economic system is unsustainable (Cattran, 1994; Redclift, 1994, 1995; von Wright, 1994; Shepherd, 1998; Trainer, 1994). Hence, what the world needs now is 'sustainability' – and not only in an ecological sense. For many, 'sustainability' represents an effort to place politics and planning above the 'market', which is considered not only environmentally harmful but also socially and culturally disruptive (see *e.g.* von Wright, 1994; Soussan, 1992). Foremost, we are said to need sustainable societies (Brattén, 1998; Mannion & Bowlby, 1992), sustainable cities (Breheny, 1992), sustainable ways of life (Cattran, 1994), and sustainable livelihoods (Carney, 1998; 1999). However, such advocacy often tends to miss the point. Commenting on 'sustainable livelihood' strategies (SRL), a rhetoric currently adopted by a multitude of donor agencies and NGOs, Bryceson (1999: p43) notes that

> "At the moment the SRL's open-ended participatory approach and 'sustainable' rather than 'strategic' planning objectives could merely amount to time-consuming discussions and activities at the local level which fail to mobilise sufficient levels of decision-making power and are incapable of generating the sense of direction needed to advance the economic prospect of the rural people involved."

In connection with 'sustainable livelihoods', Barbier (1989: p185), among many others, declares that real improvements can not occur unless environmentally sustainable strategies also are "consistent with social values and institutions". How this is to be combined with a development process, I find hard to understand. Among other things, development "is not homogenous and balanced, it is not necessarily 'development' in any progressive meaning ... It is always painful, associated with deteriorating quality of life for large parts of the population, even if it, in a longer perspective, may imply progress for the majority of people. But the transformation process is always connected to a reformulation of values and beliefs" (Jacoby 1983: p181). Hence, I find it rather absurd to claim that such an uprooting process can be associated with sustained livelihoods or social and institutional stability. On the one hand, during a development process, social values and institutions wither and, on the other hand, social values and institutions must already have been weakened for development tooccur in the first place (see further below). The assumption that development carries no social, cultural or institutional cost does not have much with reality to do. It might, however, be useful for those trying to 'sell' the idea of sustainability to claim that this is a harmonious process. (1) But what with social institutions like, for example, shifting cultivation, cast-system, patriarchy or female circumcision? Should they be sustained too?

It is also widely suggested today that 'sustainability', like 'development', must come from below, especially in the Third World and not least because natives and grassroots in poor countries are believed to be more immanently in harmony with nature. Allegedly representing the 'voice from below', and demanding participatory approaches to development, there are apparently many social conservationists who somewhat naively plea for 'sustainability'. We are advised to let grassroots sustain the kind and quality of life that they desire. Redclift (1995: p150), for example, stresses that "[m]any rural people using simple technologies in developing countries possess a fund of information about their environment and can effectively manage that environment in ways that are sustainable in the long run". Kirby *et al* (1999: p3) likewise believe that "indigenous people are excellent environmental guardians: if untouched their lives are infinitely sustainable".

Such romanticism and social conservationism grossly idealises the 'native' community and overrates the subsistence economy's ability to realise sustainable solutions to underdevelopment. This is particularly severe since the earth's population is expected to increase from six to eleven billion in only a few decades, with most of that increase taking place in the Third World. Hence, one "recalls the not altogether unfair stereotype of an anthropologist living in a village for years and emerging at the end with the view that the villagers are all splendid chaps who ought to be allowed to get on with [their lives] in their own way regardless of the fact that the world around them will not allow them to do so" (Simmonds, 1985, quoted from Jirström 1996: p108). It might of course 'sustain' ethno-tourism for those who are so inclined. Yoshihara (1999: p83-84) has the following to say about such ideas:

> "If pure romantics are not many, there are plenty of environmentalists who hold a similar view. They may love the region, but do not want it to develop. People kept that way are good for romantics, as animals in a safari park are, for their primitiveness or naturalness has a healing effect on romantics' minds, which get overworked or even wounded in the complicated modern market economy at home. Of course, the people of the [Third World] do not want to be like animals in a safari park. Tell the romantics and environmentalists to go to hell if you encounter their likes."

Sustainability is an extremely exploited and misused concept. It is currently used to cover anything from "sustained change" (Bryceson, 1999) to "sustainable stability" (Redclift, 1995). As it is understood here, 'sustainability' has to do with robustness and resilience and the relative stability of systems, no matter whether these are ecological, social or economic systems. Various sustainabilities are difficult to combine and some seem not to be at all compatible. Ecological sustainability, I should think, is desirable by all. Other aspects of sustainability are more controversial. There are situations in which certain sustainabilities should not be strived for. At least in the Third World, development seems to be a much more viable – if not the only realistic – option. Presumably, development can be kept within ecological limitations, but it will unavoidably disrupt or even destroy contemporary social values, institutions and ways of life. To claim otherwise is wishful at best and deceitful at worst.

Development

If 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' are cumbersome concepts, the term 'development' appears to be even trickier. There are many different meanings attached to the word and perspectives applied vary greatly between writers on the subject. Previously optimistic writings about 'development' and modernisation have now been superseded by an 'impasse in development theory' (Shuurman, 1996) and 'anti-development' postures (Crush, 1995; Escobar, 1995). Today, "the entire notion of development is under challenge" (Shepherd, 1998: p264) and "[p]eople tend to disagree on the meaning of development as soon as an effort to define it is made" (Hettne, 1992: p4).

There are several reasons for this state of affairs. One is contemporary post- and anti-modernist critique in the rich countries. (2) Another is that after fifty years of development 'aid' and development programs, the Third World is still poor and underdeveloped. But, most of all, 'development' has been heavily politicised. Following Friedmann (1992) "development has never been a scientific concept, it has always been ideology". Commonly, writers on 'development' have written about what they *would like development to be* (development as project), rather than trying to understand what it *is* (development as process). Development studies are full of receipts for how 'development' is to come about but few have set out to study 'development' in order to learn more about it. As noted by Hettne (1992: p2), many writers on 'development' "want to change the world, not … analyse it". No wonder that disagreement abounds and progress fails to appear.

Due to the delicacy of the matter, rather vague and empty definitions of 'development' are currently presented. Pearce *et al* (1990: p2) simply find 'development' to mean a set of "desirable social objectives; that is a list of attributes which society seeks to achieve or maximise" (quoted from Breheny, 1992). The Brundtland report believes that 'development' is "what we do in order to improve our situation" (WCED, 1987: p10). Giddens (1990), to the contrary, finds development more or less to be 'the unintended consequences of human action'. Such statements do not reveal much about the nature of the process. Another way to get around the problem is simply to say that development "defies definition" (Cowen & Shenton, 1995: p28). Others argue that 'development' is impossible to generalise (Johnston *et al*

1997) and that "[t]o imagine that the Western scholar can gaze on development from above as a distanced and impartial observer… is simply conceit" (Crush, 1995: p19). But it does not help us much to avoid the problem. Hence, it would be tempting to explain what 'development' really is. However, it can rightfully be argued that all we have is visions or interpretations of development. Nevertheless, a more constructive(!) approach than propagating 'development' as project is to analyse it as process. A short paper like this cannot delve too deep into the matter and only a brief sketch can be presented here.

A lexical definition says that 'development' suggests "the evolution of human social systems from simpler to more complex, mature, or higher forms" (Riggs, 1984: p27). If we abolish the value-laden "higher", we can, with Spencer, state that a totality (society) "is more developed the more differentiated it is in parts with specialised functions [and] the more integrated these parts are for the functions that are specific for the totality" (von Wright, 1994: p41). This is "probably as good a definition as one can hope for" (*ibid*.). Whether we want it to happen or not, history tells us that increased complexity is accompanied by the abolition of subsistence production (if that hadn't already happened), and (increased) division of labour, the move from *Gemeinshaft* to *Gesellshaft* and from mechanical to organic solidarity. Usually it also means increased productivity and the ability to support more people and/or to improve their diet. The number of external contacts likewise increases and the local community becomes in various ways linked to a wider world. In the process, its independence diminishes and established institutions are transformed or replaced by new ones.

If these are general characteristics of the process, 'development' can still take many forms and follow different trajectories. Some see 'development' as a steady process of *decline*, others as a *linear* process of gradual improvement and emancipation. Still others interpret 'development' as either a *cyclical* or a *stepwise* process of change. Sometimes, these various ways to look at the process are presented as if they illustrate the sequential evolution and history of (western) development thinking. Hence, in ancient Greece 'development' was seen as a cyclical process in which cultures were born, grew, matured, withered away, died and finally were replaced by others. During Europe's 'dark ages', the world was thought of as declining from a distant 'golden age' and since the day that Adam and Eve were

suspended from the Garden of Eden, things are getting worse. Then Enlightenment with its optimism and belief in emancipation and continuous progress took over. In the end, this view has been challenged by the observation that 'development' is not a smooth and linear process but rather takes place irregularly in step-wise transitions from one socio-economic system or mode of production to another. This is a convenient way to look at the 'evolution of development'. However, it doesn't give the true picture.

All four ways to look at 'development' live a parallel life through western history of thought, albeit with temporal dominance for one of them at any point in time. They all exist in contemporary society. The idea of decline has been strong throughout western history and has influenced the theories of, for example, Malthus, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer and Nietzsche. Today it is found in neo-Malthusian and some environmentalist misery-discourses (Herman, 1997). The vision of development as a cyclical process of maturation and degeneration likewise lives on and has influenced thinkers like de Toqueville (*ibid*.), Spengler (1996) and Thurow (1997). The vision of development as a linear progression towards the better, accompanied by steady (sustained) growth remains strong, not least among mainstream economists, but can be criticised on the ground that it doesn't have much to do with reality. As is well known, societies and cultures throughout history have declined or stagnated after a period of growth and maturation. It is also easy to see that improvements, growth, or 'development', have occurred in an irregular fashion (*e.g.* Turner *et al*, 1995). Hence, there is much to support the interpretations that cyclical and step-wise 'development' come closer to the truth. However, some qualifications are needed before that conclusion can be accepted.

First, improvement is not inevitable. The possibility of decline is there. However, when 'development' occurs, it is 'a great leap forward' which fundamentally alters society. Second, 'development' can not simply be equated with 'growth'. For one thing, there is the question of how we measure growth. GNP or GNP per capita is not a proper measure since the costs for repairing, for example, environmental damage 'improves' the economy. 'Green' accounting without 'externalities' would perhaps give a better picture of the *real* economy. But 'development' cannot be measured in purely quantitative terms. Primarily, 'development' means a *qualitative change*, not just more of the same (Schumpeter, 1951). And qualitative changes do not come

about at any point in time. Societies have in-built protection against disruptions and qualitative changes. We call these protections 'institutions'. Institutions – *i.e.* rules, regulations, norms and habitualised ways of thinking and doing things (Veblen, 1945; North, 1993) – function as *restrictions* for human behaviour. They do not only minimise economic transaction costs, they regulate all kinds of social encounters. With varying degree of efficiency, they say what can be done and what cannot be done and make the behaviour of others predictable. Without institutions, society would simply not be conceivable. It can be concluded that institutions are *obstacles to development*, at least as long as they remain strong. "What could have been seen 'at the start' as an ensemble of institutions in the service of society, becomes a society in the service of institutions" (Castoriadis,1987: p110).

It follows that institutions must be weakened before 'development' takes place. And for that to happen some kind of "pressure for change" has to accumulate (Gunnarsson & Rojas, 1995). This can happen in many ways. Boserup (1998) argues that intensification of land use, such as a change from shifting cultivation to permanent agriculture (actually a qualitative change accompanied by alterations in social structures and power relations), is a consequence of a mounting pressure of population growth and escalating problems to feed the population. It is not, she says, because more primitive agriculturalists vision (or know about) a materially richer life that they make these changes, but because their known way of life is threatened (*ibid*.). Harris (1979), similarly, describes a sequence of population growth — intensification — environmental degradation — development. The point is that when pressure increases, man is likely to intensify known production techniques – *i.e.* to do more of the same – which further exhausts the resource base and increases the pressure. Not until then is mankind ready to make major alterations in life-styles, modes of production, etc. It is in this phase, when the old system is no longer efficient, that institutions erode and new solutions are sought for. Marx similarly talks about a step-wise transition from one mode of production to another (from slave society to feudalism to capitalism). Again, it is not until the 'inner contradictions' of each such 'mode of production' become sufficiently manifest to overwhelm the system that the transition is possible. When that occurs, a 'revolution' takes place. (3)

The circumstance that there is no simple progression from 'lower' to 'higher' forms and that known – at some stage inefficient and possibly destructive – forms are actually intensified as pressure accumulates, can be illustrated from the modern history of Sweden. In the 19th century, Sweden was a poor agrarian country with a growing population that could hardly feed itself. The answers to the pressure were of different kinds. One was to extend agriculture into marginal lands (cropped area peaked in the 1930s), *i.e.* 'more of the same'. Another response was emigration (a quarter of the population emigrated between 1870 and 1914), again 'more of the same' – but elsewhere. The third reaction was 'development' which occurred through industrialisation and urbanisation (Hägerstrand & Lohm, 1995). All these things happened simultaneously. This illustrates that even in a situation of strong 'pressure for change' people tend to stick to the institutionalised way of doing things until they have no other choice. Emigration and agricultural expansion temporarily eased the pressure but did not alter the socio-economic system. In the end 'development' was the solution to the prevailing situation.

What I have discussed above are all internal pressures but also an external pressure – or a combination of both – can eventually do the trick. A military threat can add to the pressure but, presumably, in itself it is not sufficient to trigger the process. Poland, for example, although it was squeezed between two great powers, did not develop in the 1920s and 1930s and, hence, had to defend itself against the German *Blitzkrieg* with outdated cavalry. Taiwan, on the other hand, in a very short time took the step from an agrarian to an industrial, outward oriented society. This has been explained as the combined effect of a direct threat to the regime's survival (a possible military attack from China), a limited resource base, high population density, and the fact that the government enjoyed relative autonomy from indigenous power structures. *Viz.* it was not institutionally tied to its constituency (the Kuomintang regime came to Taiwan as an armed force) (Gunnarsson & Rojas, 1995).

From the above discussion we can conclude that 'development' is a rather exceptional event that doesn't come easily and which is not a permanent phenomenon. In fact, one could say that 'development' is quite unlikely. Like Marx and Harris, Mabogunje (1989) makes a distinction between phases of 'growth' and phases of 'development'. Growth, he says, takes place within a system whereas 'development'

represents the transition from one system to another. (4) In a similar vein, Thurow (1997), characterises 'development' as a "punctuated equilibrium", *i.e.* the interruptive phase between relatively stable systems. He likens 'development' with plate tectonics. In a period of equilibrium, small changes can occur (landslides happen and a volcano may erupt) but that doesn't cause any fundamental changes and the plates are left fairly intact. But under the earth's surface, pressures slowly build up and do not only cause earthquakes, on rare occasions the collisions of the tectonic plates fundamentally change the face of the earth. "Relatively quickly something significant happens – Nanga Parbat becomes the world's tallest, as well as the world's largest, mountain" (Thurow 1997: p6). A parallel is drawn to human societies. Normally they are relatively stable but occasionally these equilibria are interrupted by 'development' – a comparatively quick and dramatic transition to a different system.

Interpreting 'development' in this way implies that stability is the norm and 'development' the exception. *Viz.* the evolution of human societies is characterised by relatively long periods of relatively stable social orders, which are interrupted by transitory phases of comparatively short duration – *i.e.* by 'development'. Then new rationalities, 'modes' of production, social relations and, for that matter, social classes, become gradually institutionalised. The system stabilises (grows) and remains in relative equilibrium until, some day, it again reaches its limits. Then a new crisis occurs and the patient/society may survive or not. Both Marx and Mabogunje see these 'developments' as moves to higher forms. However, we need not forward value-judgements as to whether the new system is 'better' or not. It is enough to acknowledge that it will be different. It is likely to be 'better' in some respects (*e.g.* the ability to feed more people) and 'worse' in others (*e.g.* less personal freedom). To be sure, whereas development does solve some problems, it also gives rise to new problems. In time, these may 'overwhelm' the new system.

It also follows from this that Marx was mistaken when he labelled capitalism a 'mode of production'. Modes of production are the relatively stable social orders. The way I see it, capitalism rather signifies the shorter, transitory phase with no strong institutions or hegemonic value systems. The, for development to occur necessary erosion of institutions, I believe, best corresponds to what Schumpeter (1951) referred to as capitalism's 'creative destruction'. This 'revolution'

is an interlude where *anomie* prevails, where status substitutes for prestige, where the winner takes it all and profit-hunger (one of the 'mortal sins') is elevated to be society's governing ideal. Under capitalism, instead of treating the economy as one dimension of society (and not necessarily always the most important dimension), economics is somehow treated as if it hovers above society – the 'free' market is the ideal and society an obstacle. As long as profits are maximised, this 'rationality' is said to be 'effective', no matter which 'externalities' it causes. This is a very creative period. It is also a very disruptive period where everything is more or less in flux. If this is the proper way to understand 'development', it can hardly be sustained very long (for a few generations perhaps). Rather soon society will need to re-establish itself as the master of the economy, to develop new institutions and slow down the speed of change.

Sustainable Development Reconsidered

If, as argued above, no society is conceivable (in the long run) without social institutions; and if 'development' is interpreted as the disruptive, anomic and largely institution-free transition between relatively stable social orders; then it follows that 'development' is hardly sustainable. Hence, 'sustainable development' is a misnomer and development only takes place when social orders are not sustained. Personally, I do not believe that ecological sustainability is our greatest concern. We have to find environmentally appropriate ways to deal with nature and, in fact, much has already been accomplished in that direction. Whether we will be able to realize economic sustainability largely depends on how we measure and count. A new kind of book-keeping is urgently needed. Social sustainability is something we might arrive at when development comes to a halt or at least is dramatically slowed down. In the long run we cannot have both social sustainability and disruptive development. This, obviously, has implications for what we can expect – and try to accomplish – in terms of development and sustainability in different parts of the world.

We live in a world of great inequalities. We also live in a world where we are told that the very foundations of life are seriously threatened. But to opt for 'world-wide sustainable development' (Shaw, *et al.* 1995) is *not* an omnibus solution. Not only is our world unequal, foremost it is diverse. Pressures are building up all over the world. But

we are not dealing with the same pressures everywhere. Hence, global solutions are not what we should be looking for.

In today's poor countries, different societies are differently positioned along the stability – development sequence outlined above. In some places the established social order is still strong enough to withstand emerging pressures for change. Here, development is not (yet) probable and development aid is likely to fail. In other places, the old orders have, to varying degrees, been eroded and some societies are just beginning to develop whereas a few have already come quite a long way into the process. The possibility of development arouses both enthusiasm and resistance. Inevitably it will show many trials but also many errors. No doubt, these will be difficult transformations. But the alternative is likely to be even more difficult – especially for future generations.

It is of outmost importance that these about to begin or already begun developments will be sustained (for some time) and that they will be helped by external forces – if that is at all possible. (5) Ninety percent of future world population growth is projected to take place in the Third World. If billions of people are to be fed and increase their production and consumption, their waste and emissions; recycling, green production and lean consumption will be imperative. With so many people involved, development *must* be kept within the absorbtive and regenerative capacity of ecosystems and the bio-physical environment. If these developments are not ecologically sustainable, not only is the whole development process of the Third World likely to fail, everybody will be affected. It is, therefore, as the Brundtland report told us, in everybody's interest that development in these countries is sustained, ecologically *and* otherwise. But it cannot, as some would have it, be done in a way that 'sustains' prevailing livelihoods, culture and social orders. This development will unavoidably be accompanied by much frustration, social tension and upheaval (as it did in today's rich countries), but this is the price to be paid for future social and ecological sustainability and, in time, for more appropriate new social and economic arrangements to evolve. Development, no doubt, can be the solution to many of the poor countries' problems of poverty and inappropriate utilization of the biophysical environment but it must be emphasized that this a temporary, not a sustainable process. What the Third World needs today, is *more development and less sustainability*.

In today's rich countries, the situation is quite different and the problems to be solved of very different kinds. First, a rethinking of how economic growth is measured and distributed is paramount. The costs of economic activity must be deducted from, not added to, the credit side in the balance sheet. Moreover, if development in poor countries is to have a chance to become environment-friendly, the (companies in) rich countries will have to share their knowledge and technology with would-be developing societies in poorer countries. This runs counter to the prevailing logic of safe-guarding patents and technological supremacy of the 'western-based' TNCs and will not come about easily.

Second, assuming that the environmental problems can be solved (much remains to be done but much has already been accomplished in a fairly short time), other problems are now calling for attention. Unemployment remains high and soon, it is expected, only a minority of the populations will be fully integrated in society while the majority becomes increasingly marginalized (Martin & Schumann 1997). The well-fare society is being dismantled, as corporations stronger than governments reach out for global dominance. The 'market' rules and neo-liberalism has become the prevailing ideology. But more than this, the relatively institution-free, anomic transition-phase has now prevailed for a few generations. This seems to be too long and it has taken its social toll. Reports abound about a loss, or even absence, of shared social values (von Wright, 1994; Cattran, 1994; Thurow, 1997). The rich societies are increasingly suffering from 'well-fare diseases', atomization, superficiality, consumerism and narcissism (Lash, 1981). The speed of change is far too high (Toffler, 1971). Together with post-modern critique, that "everything that was stable withers" (Lyon, 1999), these are signs of far-reaching alienation and societal decay. (6) It is no wonder that 'social competence' is now to be introduced as a subject in the Swedish school system – apparently because 'social competence' is in disturbingly short supply in fast-changing societies.

If these are correct characterisations of the current situation, such a state of affairs can hardly be sustained. That, which currently seems to be needed in the capitalist world, is *more sustainability and less development*.

Here, rather than a pressure for change, we find a pressure for slow-down, for stabilisation and new institutions. But also this has a

price. It will not be easy to (make people) let go of fashions and reduce consumption. Few politicians would build their election campaigns on such a message. But it is not only the freedom to consume that is at stake. Harris (1979) states that every stabilisation of a new social order increases social control. Actually, that is what institutionalisation is all about. Inevitably, says Cattran, (1994: p15), "the sustainable society will be in many ways a conformist society". So, the question is whether this will be acceptable to people who have become used to sustained materialism and to strive for (often faked) individual self-realisation?

Notes

1. For 'sustainability', it is stated, *is* a process, not a stable state (WCED 1987; FRN 1998; Brattén 1998). Soussan (1992, p31) explains that 'sustainability' entails changes which "cannot happen overnight, which is why the idea of a process has been continually stressed".
2. "In discussions about the future, one needs to remember to whom one listens. If you hear a voice expressing pessimism, bitterness, disappointment, you can be sure that it belongs to a European" (Kapuscinski 1998, p41).
3. It is important that we agree on the scale and time-perspective applied. We need not confuse 'revolution' with an armed uprising or a communist take-over. A 'revolution', as understood here, is not that sudden. In fact, it may take a century or more for it to be accomplished. From the perspective of a single human being's average life-time, this is a very long period of gradual change. But if we apply a longer historical perspective that allows us to identify a sequence of relatively stable socio-economic systems (modes of production), this transition *is* swift and revolutionary.
4. Mabogunje's distinction between 'growth' (within systems) and 'development' (between systems) is a bit confusing. If it implies that there is no economic growth during 'development', he is simply mistaken. For those countries that have enjoyed the industrial revolution, the latest two centuries have definitely been a period of extraordinary economic growth. The point is that 'growth' and 'development' are not the same thing (and growth is not a proper measurement of development) although they can sometimes occur simultaneously. However, 'growth' does not only mean economic growth, it also implies the maturation, strengthening and institutionalisation of a new

system or socio-economic order after the development phase has come to an end.

5. Development 'aid' has not been very effective – if it was ever intended to. Often it has been given without a real intention to develop recipient countries. Moreover, the way 'aid' has been given it has, more often than not, led to a 'population explosion' without concomitant improvements in productive capacity. At the same time, food-aid and politically motivated "aid' – *i.e.* artificial life-lines to dependent governments conserving the *status quo* – have actually served to reduce the pressure to innovate and thereby delayed or even prevented development. 'Real' and effective aid that the rich countries *can* provide would be to eliminate the debt-trap and to do away with protectionism and trade-barriers, since these are the great external obstacles to Third World development. Thereby, those opportunities could be presented that these societies need. So far, the rich countries have been reluctant to do so.
6. Actually, much (but not all) post-modern writing in itself – with its relativistic tendencies and its ambition to deconstruct and negate established 'discourses' and sometimes outright nihilism – gives a good illustration of how far anomie and alienation have gone.

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