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## **DEVELOPING *SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT* AND ITS MULTIDISCIPLINARY IMPACT**

The beginnings of the concept of *sustainable development* (SD) are sometimes traced to as early as the 1960s to observe that it had its roots partly in the concerns of industrialized countries about the consequences of population growth and the problems of the global economy for the environment, and partly in a general rise of awareness of the environmental problems of the day, which in turn stimulated some research and political activities (Wilbanks 1994:542). More commonly the 1980s are regarded as the beginning of concern when the concept emerged [...] *in response to a growing realization of the need to balance economic and social progress with concern for the environment and the stewardship of natural resources* (UNESCO 2005:1). However, today sustainable development has come to embrace a much wider spectrum of issues including – apart from environmental issues – resource use, and social and economic well-being. As a matter of fact, the notion of interdependence of environmental, social and economic systems lies at the core of the notion of sustainable development. The most profound consequence of this mutual reliance is a proposition that the development of humanity should be harmonized with the protection of nature. This statement makes a starting point for the ways sustainable development is achieved in all spheres of human life.

### **The Debate**

Although the notion was used for the first time by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) in 1980 (Ruttan 1994), it did not receive worldwide attention until the 1987 publication of report entitled *Our Common Future*, often referred to as the *Brundtland Report*, by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) of the United Nations. The report was written by an international group of politicians,

scientists and experts in reaction to the social, economic and environmental concerns of the world. The main message it carried was that in an effort to promote economic development human actions should create conditions as to sustain the life of the natural world rather than deplete natural resources or harm the environment. It identified three main elements that could ensure sustainability of world development, namely environmental protection, social equity and economic growth. The report made a proposition that the world's current rate of development would not threaten opportunities of future generations unless political decisions, which otherwise promote economic development and social equity, fail to take into account their environmental repercussions as well. Together, the presence of the three elements on a politician's agenda is to provide both present and future generations with health, prosperity and stability (Bruntland 1987).

Awareness of the environmental problems identified by the Bruntland report grew and the following decade and years saw numerous international conferences and meetings held to debate the related problems (not all of them were strictly related to the implementation of the notion of sustainable development though). The main framework of international discussion was provided by the following key events:

- the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, later often referred to as the *Rio Earth Summit*;
- the 1995 the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, Denmark;
- the 1997 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change the Third Conference of the Parties (COP–3) in Kyoto, Japan;
- the 1997 Special Session of the General Assembly to Review and Appraise the Implementation of Agenda 21, popularly referred to as the *Earth Summit+5*, in New York, USA;
- the 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit in New York, USA;
- the 2001 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change the Seventh Conference of the Parties (COP–7) in Marrakesh, Morocco;
- the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Undoubtedly, the most positive outcome of the international debate on sustainable development in the period between the Rio and Johannesburg conferences was the rise of environmental awareness which actually prompted cooperation within the international political community to undertake specific actions in favor of the environment. As a result, on several environment fronts, a reduction in the rate of further environmental degradation was achieved. This mainly referred to the slowdown of the build-up rate of ozone layer destroying gases, the establishment of systems for the prevention of climate change, i.e.

global warming, and the elimination of chemical and biological hazards. In all three cases, successful international cooperation brought some positive results. Despite imperfections in a variety of treaties enacted to control progress towards achieving sustainable development (sluggish enactment by signatories, or even the occasional refusal to join them by some countries), the worldwide international community evidenced invaluable effort to provide for a cleaner and safer global environment. However far they may be from actually accomplishing such a stated goal, the efforts did bring the international community into line and established a worldwide environmental front which brought about some positive results.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the environmental concern should harmonize with the economic and social development of nations. In this context, the role of government and the choice and quality of its decisions acquire particular significance.

### **Linking the State and citizens**

The implementation of the idea of sustainable development has undoubtedly affected a wide sphere of human life, referred collectively as *governance*. The impact of sustainable development politics can be primarily seen in three different, yet mutually reinforcing, ways:

- it contributed to the increase of the political mobility of societies commonly referred to as citizen empowerment;
- it affected the actions and the way governments function;
- it improved citizen's access to information related to and used during the political decision-making process.

The SD-generated empowerment of citizens has taken two forms. In the first case, it brought a boom in local initiatives. Inspired mainly by *Agenda 21*, one of the documents adopted during the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, numerous actions aimed at implementing various aspects of sustainable development have been taken by governments at a local level all over the world.<sup>2</sup> Citizens, communities, towns, cities, country regions or voluntary organizations have taken the opportunities that sustainable development offers and pooled their resources to

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<sup>1</sup> For example Creech *et al.* (2002) note that as a result of actions stemming from the implementation of the Montreal and Kyoto Protocols, the emission levels of main ozone-depleting gases have dropped significantly. That offers hope that at the current recovery rate the process of full restoration of the ozone layer to its pre-industrial state will have been completed by 2050.

<sup>2</sup> More than 6,400 local governments in 113 countries have become involved in implementation of principles of sustainable development at the local level expressed by *Agenda 21* over a 10-year period, i.e. since the adoption of the document at the Rio Earth Summit. These governments developed their own Local Agenda 21 plans to promote and execute sustainable development in their own area (ICLEI 2003:11).

make their neighborhood more sustainable, or simply a better, safer, or nicer place to live by setting up recycling schemes or programs aimed at the protection of endangered species and/or habitats, promoting environmentally friendly energy production methods or preserving the community cultural heritage. Furthermore, sustainable development has fostered a spirit of cooperation between the above subjects and contributed to the belief that what they do matters and can make a real difference. A surprising observation is that the number of activities and their attainment at the local (citizen) level generated by the idea of sustainable development generally outdoes the inadequate rate of enforcement of sustainable development policies by state governments worldwide.

Citizen empowerment meant also that people started to get involved in politics and became interested in influencing the policy-decision making process to a much greater degree than before the rise of the notion of sustainable development. This aspect of empowerment is usually referred to as the rise of civil society. Quite symptomatic in that respect is the rate of growth of non-government organizations (NGO).<sup>3</sup> In this sense, these organizations have created a window of opportunity for concerned citizens to participate in the policy-making process at all levels, including local, state governments or at international forums. Yet, what originated as a public relations exercise (Creech *et al.* 2002), has today become a common feature of interaction between governments and its citizens. Citizen associations, like NGOs, perform a key role in the political decision-making process. Firstly, they frequently provide governments with expertise and valuable information, which otherwise would be too costly or time-consuming to collect. Secondly, given the wide range of these usually problem-centered organizations,<sup>4</sup> they also provide a wider spectrum of opinions reflecting citizens' preferences for policy options. Finally, the participation of citizens or non-government related actors in the process ensures greater transparency. In this way decisions are likely to be better suited to society's expectations and make the policy process more legitimate and mutually beneficial for all its actors.

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<sup>3</sup> While in 1990 the Union of International Associations (UIA) accounted for just 6,000 NGOs worldwide, in the years 2002 and 2005 there were 26,000 and 38,000 of them respectively (UIA 2005).

<sup>4</sup> An important development is rise of institutions, called *policy networks*, built on the basis of the public sector (governments at all levels of authority and public institutions), the private sector (all types of businesses and their associations) and civil society (citizen and community associations, NGOs) which pool their resources to provide solutions to complex problems. These policy networks are places where bring together all institutions within society, or from all over the world, willing to negotiate and coordinate their actions for the common good. Among the most notable examples of policy networks are: the Development Forum, the World Commission on Dams, and the Global Policy Network.

The emergence of sustainable development further affected the way government functioned. Its impact was mainly evidenced by change in the political agenda. Governments have decided to follow steps on the way to sustainable development and adjust their policies accordingly to various degree.<sup>5</sup> With regard to national governments, it originally meant the establishment of agencies and institutions whose task was to evaluate the impact of policies previously enacted in the broad environmental context. Further actions included the construction of a framework and devising mechanisms for the implementation of sustainable development into national policy in a way that would integrate various aspects of SD and result in a coherent political agenda. Finally, these public institutions were put in charge of overseeing implementation of the sustainable policies across government departments. However, it seems that sustainable development proved a particularly attractive idea to local governments which saw it as a chance to improve the standards of living for the inhabitants of the area, which until then too often had not managed to attract sufficient funds and had been neglected as a result. Furthermore, counteracting the overwhelming trend of globalization, which became frequently and simplistically associated with unification; both national and local government took advantage of sustainable development to emphasize their environmental and cultural distinctiveness.

Finally, one of the most significant changes necessitated by placing sustainable development on the governmental political agenda was the improved access of citizens to information. On the one hand, access to information was guaranteed by the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* (Principle 10) and *Agenda 21* (Chapter 40) – two of the most significant international agreements promoting sustainable development. They also obliged national governments to contribute efforts to educate their societies on government activities. On the other hand, a majority of international agreements enacted to promote the idea of sustainable development required national governments and companies to disclose information on hazardous substances, health risks and

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<sup>5</sup> Among examples of such institutions at the federal level in the United States was the President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD) established 1993 to provide the President with advice on sustainable development, including [...] *forging consensus on policy [...]*, *demonstrating implementation of policy [...]*, *gathering and disseminating information on sustainable development [...]*, [and] *evaluating and reporting on progress [...]* PCSD (1997). Furthermore, a counterpart agency, the Council on Sustainable Development, was established within the Department Agriculture in 1996 as a forum for policy and program development, implementation and evaluation on sustainable development issues. In Europe, the first European Commission's sustainable governance agenda, *Towards Sustainability*, was adopted in 1992. Among further developments of the policy was a proposal for an *integrated product policy* (IPP) which would promote establishment of market of sustainably-produced goods and services across all countries of the EU (Creech *et al.* 2002).

environmental pollutants. Although originally, the availability of information concerned primarily environmental problems, soon most other aspects of government actions faced a similar fate. The situation had two profound repercussions: firstly, government and many business activities – the decision-making process in particular – was made more transparent; secondly, improved availability of information stimulated greater citizen participation in the political process. In turn, both undoubtedly contributed to the empowerment of individuals and communities (Creech *et al.* 2002).

### ***Science to serve us all***

Among other positive effects of sustainable development observed in the post-Rio decade was the increasing link between the results of scientific research and the outcomes of political decision-making. On the one hand, science helped to define problems; on the other, it frequently provided solutions (Creech *et al.* 2002). Global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer, degradation of the environment, or the decrease in the Earth's biodiversity are just a handful of examples of the most pressing problems faced by human kind identified by the natural sciences (Schnoor 2005) The same can be said about the economic well-being of societies in the context of the immediate and general natural surrounding with regard to the social sciences. These examples of a science-based understanding of the world's status quo set a new global policy agenda. Although far from ideal, science managed to prompt world leaders to take decisive steps to decrease the rate of natural degradation and provide for a more just distribution of wealth – these two formed the main rationale behind the most spectacular international political agreements of the decade. However, the most significant impact of science could be observed in the practical application of its outcome. Advances in technology like the identification of alternative energy sources, new means of communication, or the gene revolution – in spite of all their past and present misuses – have offered new ways of dealing with the problems. Although people are still far from finding solutions to the majority of the world's most pressing problems, it is scientific development, coupled with the wise implementation of its outcomes by political decision-makers, which can hopefully bring human kind a more promising future.

### **... and so does business management**

Sustainable development also influenced the way business was managed. It contributed to the rise of a new management paradigm which emphasized a company's responsibility towards society (Grossman 2005). Business

performance was to be evaluated, not only in the context of maximizing a profit or compliance with regulations but also in its influence on the surrounding people, community and the environment – as one of its major determinants, and was in short referred to as *the triple bottom line* (Elkington 1997). Hence, the principal objective of any business enterprise was threefold and included economic prosperity, social justice and environmental quality. Furthermore, the change of the business management paradigm accounted for the situation when the very success of the enterprise depended on a company’s involvement in social matters as demonstrated by its socially responsible management strategies. Hence, apart from profit maximization and regulatory compliance, other ‘intangible’ aspects of business have gained in importance like consumer trust and stakeholder confidence, ethics, corporate culture, employee satisfaction, environmental behavior and community responsibility.

### Concluding remarks

The idea of sustainable development has demonstrated a profound extension of its application and emphasis from typically environmental to more social, political and economic issues. As observed by Rajamani (2003) it results from a shift in political accents and development of the international environmental dialogue. While the 1992 Rio Declaration proclaimed sustainable development as a guiding principle to govern international ecological and development issues, the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit shifted the concept’s emphasis from environmental protection towards social and economic development. Sustainable development has helped the international community realize the link between environment and development in the above mentioned spheres. In this way, the interplay between the diverse elements of human life and the identification of the mutual relations of its factors have come to constitute the central part of the notion of sustainable development. However sluggish and disappointing the process of its implementation on a global scale may seem, the most noteworthy feature of the theory is that it promotes a truly holistic view and interpretation of the world problems and it links various disciplines of science to explain causes and suggest ways to achieve human socio-economic progress.

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