



# Indigenous Populations and Sustainable Development: Building on Indigenous Approaches to Holistic, Self-Determined Development

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**Summary.** — In the 1990s, efforts to operationalize sustainable development have been led by Western ecological economists, utilizing Capital Theory. This conceptual work has largely ignored indigenous peoples’ efforts to achieve self-determination and embark on development initiatives of their own. This paper argues that these grassroots initiatives have drawn on residual stocks of social/cultural capital for their impetus, and provide useful insights into problems of conceiving and operationalizing “sustainable development.” Indigenous nations often espouse holistic frameworks broader than sustainable development models. They have had to address issues such as creating alternative governance structures, and how to incorporate holistic values into tribal development without jeopardizing business operations. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Key words* — Pacific, New Zealand, indigenous, sustainable development, self-determination, holistic development

## 1. INTRODUCTION

While the concept “sustainable development” has gained in popular use, it has also attracted its share of critics. Some have suggested that efforts to “build on Brundtland”<sup>1</sup> are doomed because growth and sustainability are incompatible (Lele, 1991; Costanza & Wainger, 1991; O’Connor, 1994). Others have argued that it is merely the latest ideological counterattack of global capitalism (Escobar, 1995), that it is an ambiguous and useless concept (Rist, 1997; Young, 1995; Temple, 1992), or that it is an ideal that cannot be achieved in reality (Norgaard, 1994). Amid the polemics, ecological economists have been attempting to operationalize sustainable development using approaches such as Capital Theory.

The debate and theorizing has largely ignored attempts by indigenous peoples, particularly in advanced postindustrial societies, to articulate their own self-determined “holistic development.” There are several reasons why this is the case, not the least of which is the linking of indigenous knowledge and practices with “traditionalism” by die-hard adherents to modernization theory. More attention should be paid to indigenous initia-

tives if we are serious about finding viable approaches to sustainable development. The following discussion considers recent efforts by Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand to articulate a culturally relevant, holistic development. It indicates some of the problems and dilemmas they have confronted, for instance how a holistic perspective can guide development planning and decision-making, and concludes with some implications for international efforts to operationalize sustainable development.

## 2. TOWARD “SUSTAINABLE” DEVELOPMENT

### (a) *Beyond conventional economics*

Neoclassical economics has been criticized on at least four accounts: the assumption that growth (increase in production and consumption) will lead to well-being and environmental improvements, the failure to include natural resources as factors of production in the economy, the assumption that sweeping social and institutional change is necessary for develop-

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ment, and making ethnocentric generalizations about human behavior (Adams, 1993).

The argument over sustainability has generated calls not just for novel approaches to development (Todaro, 1996; Corbridge, 1995; Cowen & Shenton, 1996), but for a fundamental rethinking of Western economics itself (Rist, 1997; Goodland, Daly, El Serafy & von Droste, 1992). One of the more interesting developments has been the emergence of the subdiscipline of ecological economics. Ecological economics claims to address the shortcomings of conventional economic analysis, in particular by paying attention to how the ecosystem which impinges on the economic system (Alvater, 1994; Costanza & Wainger, 1991). Conventional economics tends to ignore the value of natural resource inputs, and the output costs of the absorption capacity of the environment. Ecological economics treats natural resources rather than human-made capital as the binding constraint on societal well-being. It seeks to provide estimates of the regenerative capacity of resources (depletion of resource stocks), analyzes the tradeoff decisions required for production functions to be truly sustainable, and suggests policies needed for a more sustainable economy.

#### (b) *Capital theory and sustainable development*

In the mid-1980s economist Robert Solow built upon the literature on growth and exhaustible resources to formulate the constant capital rule. It assumed elasticity of substitution between a nonrenewable resource and a stock of manufactured capital. Thus any notion of development that assumes nondeclining consumption is dependent on maintaining the aggregate stock of capital. Sustainable income is thus defined as the maximum consumption in a period consistent with maintenance of the aggregate capital stocks. For a flow of income (or more generally, benefits) to be sustainable, the total stock of capital needs to be constant or increasing over time. The definition of capital that satisfies these conditions must include all the productive assets available to the economy (Stern, 1997). Others have elaborated these sustainability conditions in greater detail (Daly, 1994, 1996; Daly & Costanza, 1992).

The question is how broadly we define "productive assets." In an effort to operationalize sustainable development, theoretical work by ecological economists and by the World Bank has sought to broaden the concept of

capital asset to include natural stocks (Costanza, 1996; Daly & Costanza, 1992; Daly, 1996; Serageldin, 1994, 1995, 1996; Serageldin & Steer, 1994). Costanza and Daly (1992, p. 58) identify three broad types of capital: manufactured or man-made, human<sup>2</sup> and natural. Sustainable development involves measuring and valuing these available stocks in a country, region, or community and making tradeoff decisions about "balanced investments" and consumption in a way that does not permanently deplete any of the stocks for future generations. Daly (1996) describes such an investment decision process, and gives several examples of possible scenarios and their outcomes.

#### (c) *Social/cultural capital*

*The Economist* (March 1, 1997) commented that economists and policy makers seem to have rediscovered that institutions, social relationships and culture matter in development.<sup>3</sup> Observing that market liberalization policies worked in some countries but not in others, they concluded there must be some other factor at work. Coinciding with these observations, Robert Putnam (1994) published his study of the historic relationship between economic development and civic institutions in various regions of Italy. He concluded that while economics do not predict the strength of civil society, the converse appears to be the case: "a region's chances of achieving socioeconomic development [depend] less on its initial socioeconomic endowments than on its civic endowments" (1994, p. 157). In other words, the existence of voluntary associations, social networks, close-knit families, and norms of cooperation and reciprocity are more important for development than finance or natural resources.

Economists have named this "X" factor *social capital*. The term usually includes social cohesion, good governance, legal frameworks and institutions for establishing the legitimacy of the social order. Similarly, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has defined social capital as those features of a society—such as networks, institutions, codes and values (e.g., tolerance, inclusion, reciprocity, fairness, and trust)—that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. It seems economists are belatedly discovering Weber. These definitions do not give sufficient recognition to the role of diversity, innovation and competition in

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