The employment effects of sustainable development policies

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Abstract
This paper argues that it is time for ecological economists to bring the employment impacts of sustainable development policies to the forefront of the research agenda. Important conservation efforts continue to founder because of their perceived employment effects. The paper examines the evidence on the employment impacts of sustainable development policies and argues that maintaining or even increasing employment depends critically on appropriate policy design and attention to the political economy of implementation of policies. The paper concludes that a better understanding of these issues, fair labour market and structural adjustment programs, and especially forward planning to anticipate problem areas, must replace the piecemeal, ‘knee-jerk’ reactions to environmental issues, such as were evident in Australia during the last federal election.

Keywords:
Employment
Sustainable development
Structural adjustment policy
Ecological tax reform
Service economy

1. Introduction

If there is one criticism that might be made of the work of ecological economists in general, it is the relative lack of attention devoted to economic policy; specifically policy initiatives to smooth the progress to sustainable scale. Where there has been discussion of policy it has tended to be at an abstract level without giving any real consideration to the political economy of implementation.

Take the preservation of old growth forests, for example. This is a priority for ecological economists, not least, because we have only just begun to understand the valuable ecosystem services they provide. We continue to research such vital areas believing that it will help policy-makers to recognise the short-sightedness of cutting down old growth forests, particularly when they are to be used for wood chips. Yet a key dimension is largely absent in our theorising; viz. political reality. As Joan Robinson is generally attributed with saying: ‘The answer to every economic problem is a political question’, an observation that, ironically, she makes in her critique of the neo-classical paradigm, given this particular brand of economics was developed specifically to ignore such questions. Ecological economists must be wary of falling into the same trap.

Recent events in Australia provide us with a stark reminder of this. If, in one of the richest countries in the world, an area of old growth forest in the state of Tasmania can be sacrificed for wood chips, and this is allowed to happen purely for short term political gain, then the ecological economics scientific community clearly needs to work a lot harder to get its message across. In the Australian 2004 federal election campaign, the issue was presented, rather melodramatically in the media, as one of ‘jobs versus the environment’. It was ‘jobs’ that won the day.
to achieve sustainable development, and discuss the inevitability (or otherwise) of unemployment at the macro level. Section 4 then focuses on the various policy instruments available and how they might be utilised to achieve the best employment outcome. Section 5 draws some conclusions.

2. The 2004 Australian federal election: the Tasmanian forests issue

The 2004 federal election in Australia saw ‘jobs versus the environment’ emerge as a central issue. As Gale (2005) documents, an estimated 320 forestry worker jobs were under threat if a ban on the logging of old growth forests was to be introduced. Several high profile campaigns to conserve these forests had attracted publicity in the 12 months leading up to the election, and Green Party leader, Bob Brown, continued to push the issue during the election campaign. Five days before the day of the election, Mark Latham, the then leader of the Labor Party (one of the two major political parties in Australia) announced the Labor Party’s proposals on the issue. Included in these was a proposal to legislate for the protection of 240,000 ha of high conservation value forests, accompanied by funding of no less than $A800 million as a ‘sustainable development restructuring fund’ (Gale, 2005 p. 20). The fund included provision for ‘exit payments’ to timber workers who did not want to retrain.

Somewhat surprisingly, the Labor government’s proposals were strongly opposed by the Labor Premier of the state of Tasmania, Paul Lennon. Lennon (quoted in Gale, 2005 p. 208) stated his position fairly bluntly:

‘To the timber workers of Tasmania, I stand beside you to protect your jobs, your families and the communities that depend on you:

• Your jobs are not negotiable.
• The RFA (current arrangements for managing the forests) is not negotiable.
• A pulp mill is not negotiable.
• Our veneer plants are not negotiable.
• Support for planned new investment is not negotiable.
• The very future of the timber industry in Tasmania is not negotiable.’

A Labor Party candidate standing for election in Tasmania also attacked the Labor Party’s proposals, labeling them as a ‘sell out’ for timber workers. Two days after the Labor Party’s announcement and 3 days before Election Day, the Coalition of Liberal and National Parties (the second of the two major parties and the incumbent government) presented a proposal that expeditiously focused on jobs, but at the same time outlined plans to place 170,000 ha of forest land into reserves.

3 A new journal, the International Journal of Environment, Workplace and Employment, is a welcome exception. Also, in the gestation period of this article, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has commenced a research series on the political economy of some existing economic instruments for environmental policy in member countries. Three completed studies may be found in the Environment Directorate of the OECD website at www.oecd.org.
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