



ANALYSIS

# Sustainable development in a post-Brundtland world

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## Abstract

Not yet two decades after the publication of *Our Common Future*, the world's political and environmental landscape has changed significantly. Nonetheless, we argue that the concept and practice of sustainable development (SD)—as guiding institutional principle, as concrete policy goal, and as focus of political struggle—remains salient in confronting the multiple challenges of this new global order. Yet how SD is conceptualized and practiced hinges crucially on: the willingness of scholars and practitioners to embrace a plurality of epistemological and normative perspectives on sustainability; the multiple interpretations and practices associated with the evolving concept of “development”; and efforts to open up a continuum of local-to-global public spaces to debate and enact a politics of sustainability. Embracing pluralism provides a way out of the ideological and epistemological straightjackets that deter more cohesive and politically effective interpretations of SD. Using pluralism as a starting point for the analysis and normative construction of sustainable development, we pay particular attention to how an amalgam of ideas from recent work in ecological economics, political ecology and the “development as freedom” literature might advance the SD debate beyond its post-Brundtland quagmire. Enhanced levels of ecological degradation, vast inequalities in economic opportunities both within and across societies, and a fractured set of institutional arrangements for global environmental governance all represent seemingly insurmountable obstacles to a move towards sustainability. While these obstacles are significant, we suggest how they might be overcome through a reinvigorated set of notions and practices associated with sustainable development, one that explicitly examines the linkages between sustainability policies and sustainability politics. © 2005 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

The publication of *Our Common Future* in 1987 marked a watershed in thinking on environment, development, and governance. The UN-sponsored World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), led by Gro Harlem Brundtland, issued

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a bold call to recalibrate institutional mechanisms at global, national and local levels to promote economic development that would guarantee “the security, well-being, and very survival of the planet” (WCED, 1987, p. 23). The call for sustainable development was a redirection of the enlightenment project, a pragmatic response to the problems of the times. While the broad goals were widely embraced, critics argued that steps toward their implementation would be thwarted; first, by fundamental contradictions between the renewed call for economic growth in developing countries and enhanced levels of ecological conservation; and, second, by the inattention to power relations among the local-to-global actors and institutions supporting unsustainable development (see Lélé, 1991; The Ecologist, 1991). In retrospect, 18 years later, the critics appear to be more or less correct. While more attention is being given now to the environmental consequences of particular development projects, the primary drivers of environmental degradation—energy and material use—have burgeoned. The cooperative global environmental governance regime envisioned at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio is still in an institutional incubator while neoliberal economic globalization has become fully operational (Haque, 1999). And inequalities in access to economic opportunities have dramatically increased within and between most societies, making pragmatic governance toward social and environmental goals increasingly difficult. Why then revisit an effort that was, in many ways, so poorly conceived and that has been so overwhelmed by history?

First, *Our Common Future* focused on the critical issues of equity and environment and raised important ethical considerations regarding human-environment relationships (Langhelle, 1999) that remain highly relevant. The decline in equity and environmental quality since this report should certainly give pause to proponents and critics alike; the failure to stem the tide of unsustainable human activities can be linked to both ineffective institutions and a general lack of political will on the part of governments and citizens at multiples scales. The rise in our scientific understanding of climate change and other global biophysical transformations and their profound implications for the health of the planet, along with the increasing awareness that solutions will have to address vast inequities in human development capabilities, underscores this point. Thus, the concept and practice of

sustainable development (SD)—as guiding institutional principle, as concrete policy goal, and as focus of political struggle—remains salient in confronting the multiple challenges of our new global context.

Second, *Our Common Future* marked, anchored, and guided the rise of a remarkable political debate, indeed a whole new political discourse across contesting interests, from grounded practitioners to philosophical academics, from indigenous peoples to multinational corporations. Sustainability may yet be possible if sufficient numbers of scholars, practitioners and political actors embrace a plurality of approaches to and perspectives on sustainability, accept multiple interpretations and practices associated with an evolving concept of “development”, and support a further opening up of local-to-global public spaces to debate and enact a politics of sustainability. Ecological economics and other transdisciplinary modes of knowledge production are vital to such endeavors.

The historical developments since the publication of *Our Common Future* bring us to the third point. The early critics of the Brundtland Report did not foresee the decline in the legitimacy of authoritative science or the rise of a more discursive, democratic science. They did not predict the breakdown in the philosophical underpinnings of the market paradigm or the grass-roots opposition to globalization. They did not anticipate the rise of ecological economics and political ecology or the new thinking generally in the social sciences stimulated by failures of equating development with economic growth.

The critics of sustainable development also did not foresee important socio-cultural changes, exemplified by the rise of fundamentalist beliefs and activism, both political and violent, across religious movements, around the world (Almond et al., 2003). While many recognize the rejection of modernity by Islamic fundamentalists and its impact on the development of nations in the Middle East, scholars are almost in denial of the influence of fundamentalist beliefs—or more broadly the “politics of particularistic identities” (Kaldor, 2001, p. 70)—on the politics of the United States, India, and Israel. Fundamentalists do not accept the separation of church, state (and economy), and science. Their religious beliefs determine their values, what they accept as knowledge, and their understanding of appropriate social order. This rejec-

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