

# Redefining Sustainable Development

Neil Middleton and Phil O'Keefe

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# ETC

This book is an ETC project. Founded in The Netherlands in 1974 and now established in India, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Britain and Ireland, ETC exists to encourage and support local initiatives towards sustainable development. It is organised under the umbrella of ETC International which is located in The Netherlands. It recognises that local knowledge and experience are the building blocks for any developmental activity and that those communities for whom aid projects of any kind are constructed must have substantial influence on their design. Employing people from many and varied backgrounds, ETC can offer expertise in sustainable agriculture, agroforestry, energy, water supplies, humanitarian assistance, institutional development and training and extension courses. For further information write to ETC UK, 117 Norfolk Street, North Shields, Tyne and Wear NE30 1NQ.

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# Abbreviations and Acronyms

ALNAP	Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Aid
BNA	Basic Needs Approach
CAFOD	Catholic Fund for Overseas Development
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CARE	Cooperative Agency for Relief Everywhere
CBA	cost-benefit analysis
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DIGNAS	<i>Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida</i> (Women for Dignity and Life)
ERM	Exchange Rate Mechanism
ERT	European Round Table of Industrialists
EU	European Union
FDI	foreign direct investment
FMLN	Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GEMS	Global Environmental Monitoring System
GM	genetically modified
GDP	gross domestic product
GNP	gross national product
HDI	human development index (originated by the UNDP)
HPI	human poverty index (originated by the UNDP)
ICIDI	Independent Commission on Development Issues
IFI	international financial institution
ILEIA	Institute for Low External Input Agriculture

IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
LEEC	London Environmental Economics Centre
LEISA	low external input and sustainable agriculture
MAI	Multilateral Agreement on Investment
MSF	<i>Médecins sans Frontières</i>
MVs	modern varieties
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Association
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NGDO	non-governmental development organisations
NIC	Newly Industrialised Country
NTAE	non-traditional agricultural export
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
OPEC	Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PADF	Pan-American Development Foundation
PPP\$	parity purchasing power (measured in US dollars)
SANGOCO	South African National NGO Coalition
SILIC	severely indebted low income country (originated by the World Bank)
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
TNC	transnational corporation
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
<i>UNFCCC</i>	<i>United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change</i>
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
URL	Uniform Resource Locator
USAID	United States' Agency for International Development
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development ('Brundtland Commission')
WRI	World Resources Institute
WTO	World Trade Organisation



# 1

## Introduction: The Rich Wage War, The Poor Die (apologies to Sartre<sup>1</sup>)

The acceptance of globalisation, of universal neo-liberalism, particularly by much of the left, has allowed its consolidation to go uncontested. In promoting their world view, Clinton–Blair–Giddens have silenced the reactionary right, but only at the cost of striking dumb the struggle for social justice. Democratic rights are not a substitute for social justice and social justice itself cannot be delivered without tackling property relations – for that purpose we have to create a deeply embedded network of collective institutions for the twenty-first century.

An essential part of that creative process must be to address the issues of sustainability, particularly in the matter of rights to global commons. Ultimately, this will mean organising against, challenging and transcending the globalising dialogue. We accept Goldman's point that strong states are not simply being replaced by markets, tradition by modernity and the local by the global.<sup>2</sup> Quoting Hadaway,<sup>3</sup> he argues that 'local' does not mean provincial, limited or unscientific understanding, but understanding which is located, situated and partial; 'global' does not mean universal, general and apolitical understanding, but understanding which is distributed, layered and equally partial. Both understandings demand realism not epistemological relativism. This is why we explore, no matter how briefly, cultural canons as well as case material in order to criticise transnational corporations (TNCs) and international financial institutions (IFIs). That approach also makes us question that *deus ex*

*machina*, the international NGOs (INGOs) who see themselves as the solutions, as civil society and as the fountain of good governance.

Both the authors of this book were engaged in and around the debate of the '10 Years after Stockholm', held in Nairobi in 1982, and one of them was present at it. It was the occasion when the global powers, under a Reagan–Thatcher hegemony, reviewed environmental progress, or rather the lack of it.<sup>4</sup> The centre of attention was the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), locally translated as the United Nations Egyptian Programme (since its director, at the time, was M.W. Kassas, an Egyptian national) or sometimes, more appropriately given its lack of impact, the United Nations Entertainment Programme. UNEP had offered, as its two striking successes, its Global Environmental Monitoring System (GEMS) and its Regional Seas Programme. Since neither of them had much to do with people and their problems, we feel that they hardly add up to a success. But during this environmental menagerie, one of us was invited to two famous meals in which the future of global environmental policy was determined.

The first, a dinner party given by a member of the Swedish Embassy, was a rather splendid affair and the splendour was in the conversation. It was about creating, and maintaining in being, a social-democratic global initiative linking environment and development, which should be financed separately from both the UN system and the Reagan–Thatcher axis and beyond the control of either. Representatives of the Nordic countries present at that dinner applauded the idea as it emerged and declared themselves to be strongly in favour of it. That conversation subsequently led to the creation of the Brundtland Commission, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The second was a private lunch in which a leading American scholar informed us that the US had already decided to respond to global environmental issues, also quite separately from the United Nations. A leading research institute, funded by the MacArthur Foundation, was to be established; it is now known as the World Resources Institute (WRI). The environment had suddenly become politics.

Sustainability was at the centre of the Brundtland Commission's work. The concept was deliberately ill-defined to prevent unnecessary and destructive objections and much of this book is concerned with the problems produced by that diplomatic vagueness. Three broad

areas of concern were covered by the Commission – ecological, economic and social – and each of them brought its own agenda. Ecologists were driven by the work of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) which, guided by the second law of thermodynamics, addressed the tendency of systems to be entropic. They sought to maintain ecological sustainability by maintaining the complexity and variability of systems, by emphasising the non-reducibility of organisms and by paying attention to uncertainty, spontaneity and collectivity in nature. Economists looked at the environment as so much capital stock and pushed a form of analysis, macro and micro, that proposed the polluter (user) pays principle. Social concern amounted to little more than nice words designed to lower expectations, but little guidance to building stable, resilient and equitable communities was offered.

After the Brundtland Report and its follow-up, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), these areas of concern have consolidated. Ecological concern focuses primarily on rural issues and the global commons without paying very much attention to urban settlements where most people live. The denial of urbanisation, a product of the romantic tradition which we discuss at greater length in Chapter 3, is found well beyond what is commonly understood to be ‘literary’ work. Glacken’s *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*<sup>5</sup> and, more paradoxically, Hoskins’ *The Making of the English Landscape*,<sup>6</sup> both came abruptly to an end when they arrived at the Industrial Revolution and its attendant urbanisation. It took E.P. Thompson, mimicking Hoskins’ title, to carry the tale forward in *The Making of the English Working Class*, in which he abandoned rural idylls for urban reality.<sup>7</sup> Nature, for Thompson’s predecessors, was everything not industrialised or urbanised, a mistaken view still pursued by much of today’s environmental movement.

Similarly, economic concern was reduced to a very particular economic argument – external costs, resource exhaustion, discounted cash-flows, common property, valuation, regulation and cost-benefit analysis all led to an understanding of the environment as a market problem, not to an analysis of the market as an environmental problem.<sup>8</sup>

Social issues, which should have focused on community, failed to emerge, not least because Brundtland tried to square the circle of

ecological and economic concerns by arguing for growth with equity – the infamous canard of ‘trickle down’. We confront the issue of social justice and its meanings and address those organisations, particularly international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), which frequently claim to provide solutions. Table 1 summarises the argument and the logic of this book; it is, after all, our way of seeing our world and its future.

Table 1.1 Themes of sustainability

Theme	Ecology	Economics	Social Development
Policy aims	Biodiversity, avoidance of system collapse	Market prices for environmental goods	Stability, equity
Problems of intervention	Nature is not pristine, but constructed	Markets do not reflect value	Communities are destroyed, and built, by market forces

It is first necessary for us to set out the bones of the problems that we are addressing. Some adjectives, or adjectival phrases, have become so embedded in their nouns as to render them almost nugatory; thus all communists are ‘card-carrying’, all Catholics ‘devout’ and all development ‘sustainable’. No longer adjectival in popular speech, these words have become parts of their nouns. Communists and Catholics may look after themselves, in this book we are concerned with the assumptions made when the words ‘sustainable development’ are uttered in the context of relations between the industrialised and *soi-disant* ‘developing’ worlds. For some theorists they are a pleonasm since development which is not sustainable is not development, for those who see most, if not all, development as exploitative it is an oxymoron; there can be none for whom the expression is not an ideological battlefield. Since the world hovers perennially on the edge of massive financial recession and, not infrequently, begins to tip over it, we are forced to examine at least some of the meanings attached to development and, in particular, to sustainability. It is, after all, the poor who suffer the most from financial disaster, just as they suffer from every other kind.

In recent years, a morally mildly repugnant question has arisen – what is the collective noun for poor countries? ‘Third World’ is preserved as a political label by many radicals within it although they are busy redefining the phrase.<sup>9</sup> It is, for that reason, viewed with nervousness or distaste by those who would prefer to tame theory by depoliticising it. ‘Poor countries’, ‘severely indebted low income countries (SILICs)’, ‘high human poverty index (HPI) countries’ or ‘low human development index (HDI) countries’ are among the many that have been offered and become controversial because they have been found patronising. With what we may legitimately regard as a crude sense of satire, there are those, still, who talk and write of ‘developing countries’.<sup>10</sup> Recent summary figures demonstrate, yet again, the depressing contradiction contained in this misnomer (see table 1.2). These figures are little more than a guide; they conceal, for example, the substantial disparities between rich and poor in all the regions they cover, including the ‘industrial countries’. Nonetheless they demonstrate the ways in which, despite marginal absolute improvements, the relative difference between rich and poor has not lessened and, in some cases, has actually increased. We, like many others, commented on this long ago and see no reason now to change the judgement we made in 1993:

For the last few years it has made no sense to talk of ‘developing’ countries – huge parts of the world are now spinning down into national collapse and destruction involving misery, starvation and death for immense numbers of ordinary people ... we ... see not merely the ludicrous disparities, the hopeless distances to be made up, but also the chronicle of a situation rapidly worsening.<sup>11</sup>

The centripetal nature of capital has produced a politics and an economics of exclusion. Phenomena like ‘fortress Europe’, the US failure to honour even its financial obligations to the UN and the growing divisions between rich and poor within the industrialised world, as well as between rich and poor countries, are all examples. We shall return, indirectly, to the arguments suggesting that this exclusivity is structural, that is to say, built into capital and its institutions. Here it is only necessary to point to a conceptual difficulty facing, in particular, INGOs. Whatever the economic policies or

Table 1.2 Comparative trends in private consumption of selected items, by region and population

Item	Year	Industrial states	Developing states <sup>4</sup>	Sub-Saharan Africa
Meat (million tons)	1970	57	29	3
	1995	95	103	6
Cereals (million tons)	1970	91	382	27
	1995	160	706	56
Total energy (mtoe) <sup>1</sup>	1975	4338	1237	139
	1994	5611	2893	241
Electricity (b.kh) <sup>2</sup>	1980	5026	1260	147
	1995	9300	3575	255
Petrol (million tons)	1980	455	96	10
	1995	582	188	15
Cars (millions)	1975	228	21	3
	1993	390	65	5
McDonald's restaurants	1991	11970	448	0
	1996	19198	1824	17
Comparative populations <sup>3</sup>	1970	1044	2616	267
	1995	1233	4394	551

## Notes

1 Millions of tons of oil equivalent.

2 Billions of kilowatt hours.

3 Millions.

4 Discrepancies in population totals follow from insufficient data from certain states.

Source: *Human Development Report, 1998*, UNDP.

circumstances of the states at issue may be, the aim of development, the eradication of humanly disabling poverty, must, in some degree, involve substantial modernisation; that is, the admission of the world's poor to contemporary forms of production and to adequate levels of mass consumption. Figure 1.1 provides a startling image of how little the world's poor really consume. Modernisation is thus a challenge to the exclusivity of capital structures and is the source of the difficulty for the INGOs. Two major impediments stand in the way of recognising this. On the one hand there is a politically

Arab states	East Asia	S.E. Asia & Pacific	South Asia	Latin America & Carib.
2	8	3	3	10
5	53	8	8	23
20	142	41	112	33
49	236	82	212	57
67	407	102	180	306
287	1019	296	457	531
98	390	73	161	364
327	1284	278	576	772
12	11	8	6	48
27	38	19	13	72
2	0.5	2	2	12
10	7	7	6	27
0	123	113	0	212
69	489	409	3	837
128	882	289	724	280
251	1296	482	1198	464

powerful romantic nostalgia, which we shall examine in later chapters, which makes many otherwise progressive people shy away from what they understand to be involved in modernisation. It is a sort of utopianism, heavily influenced by writers like Thoreau, in which we feel that others should be helped to avoid the errors that we have made. On the other hand the extent to which we have been persuaded of the rightness of private entrepreneurship, a belief which ludicrously encompasses the forms of late capitalism, persuades us also that incorporation into the present order is the only way

forward. The extent to which this is so may be observed from the rise of green movements. It is a phenomenon accompanying the growing strength of capitalism and, unengagingly, frequently reproduces its priorities. There are honourable exceptions, like the groups around the CNS agenda, but the overwhelming majority of them concentrate on interference with nature, but not on interference with people. Protests are mounted against genetically modified plants, but not, for example, against the human genome project. We shall examine the ideological separation of nature and people in Chapter 3.

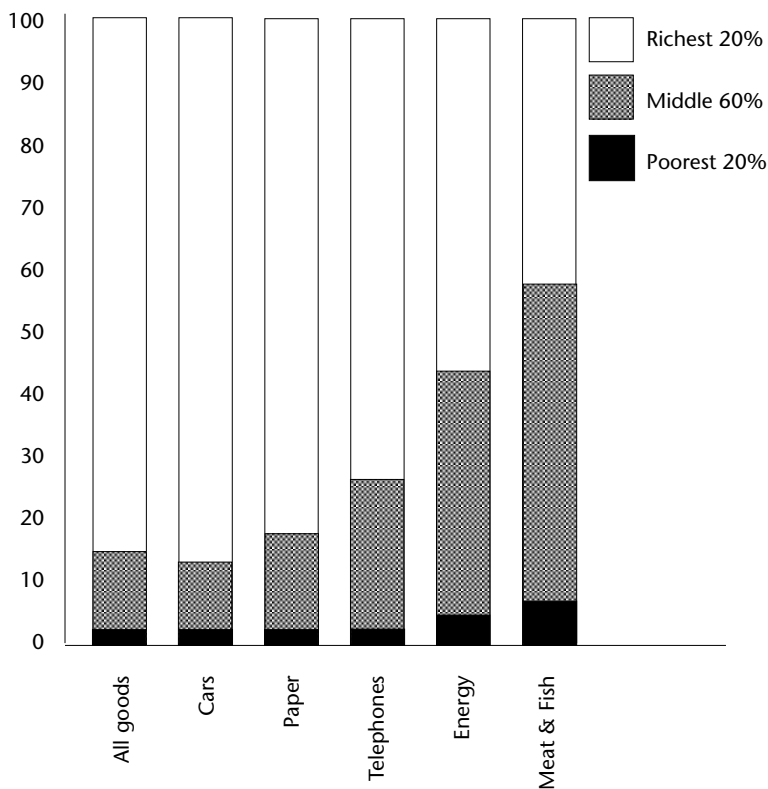


Figure 1.1 Patterns of unequal consumption

Source: Compiled from UNDP, 1998.



In his otherwise admirable book, *Striking a Balance*, Alan Fowler, writing about ways in which INGOs can be more effective, points out that it is wrong to suppose that 'economic growth is always good'. He goes on to say that development activity should be 'more holistic, people-centred ... unimpeded by the blinkering made necessary by IFI's limited economic mandates'. Social justice, the reduction of poverty leading 'to the growth and functioning of strong, autonomous organisations',<sup>12</sup> are the aims of development. These organisations, founded geographically and socially around the small projects for which they were created, will 'collaborate, associate and form other social structures within which they exert themselves' and thus have a profound effect on governance. In other words, they would be politicised and politicising. Fowler begins his analysis by looking first, and for this reason, at micro-projects in development, but in doing so overlooks the two principal difficulties in the way of widespread success.

The first difficulty is that of scale: even within a single, unitary, non-industrial state, organisations formed in this way would be tiny in number and would combine very slowly; worldwide the progress would be infinitesimal. In a way we feel that the model here may be that of early trade unionism, but if so, precisely because the unions emerged from rapidly industrialising societies, it is inappropriate. It is less than apt for another reason: in Britain it took trade unionism over two centuries from the repressive acts of 1719 and 1726<sup>13</sup> through the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800,<sup>14</sup> to the smashing of the General Strike of 1926,<sup>15</sup> to achieve the relatively short-lived success of trade unionism from about 1946 until Margaret Thatcher's successful onslaught on it in the 1980s. There is no reason to suppose that the process would be much faster, or any less confrontational, in the societies that Fowler is considering. The second difficulty arises from the existing political and economic structures. These include repressive states commonly in pawn to what Fowler calls the IFIs; global agreements, frequently forced on weaker governments and backed by a body of international, even if dubious, law; and most importantly, *force majeure*, as in the war against Iraq designed, among other things, to protect the USA's hegemony in general and its control of oil and gas resources in particular. All these are in place precisely to circumvent the political threat to the stability of client regimes throughout the Third World which would be posed by the

politicisation hoped for by Fowler. It is not our contention that these difficulties are insurmountable, merely that they must be recognised by INGOs for what they are – difficulties which are largely created by the very societies from which these international organisations, including INGOs, come.

It is possible, without too great an abuse of historical method, roughly to trace an ideological progression which has led to contemporary understandings of development. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries a number of philosophers, much influenced by Nicolaus Copernicus's cosmology and by Galileo Galilei's polemics in Italy's universities in support of new astronomies and physics, began to propose a new cosmogony. Among the most significant were Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), a monist who tried to identify an infinite universe with God and nature, and Tomasso Campanella (1568–1639) who, among other things, suggested that the study of nature in the light of reason would be the most fruitful means of improving the lot of humankind. For their pains, the Inquisition burnt the former and imprisoned the latter for very many years. A Spanish philosopher, Francisco Suárez (1548–1617), may also reasonably be seen as a founding father of much contemporary consciousness in his influential assertion that all reality is solely made up of individuals (he was, no doubt, Margaret Thatcher's bedside reading). These philosophers, late representatives of the Renaissance, prepared the ground for the emergence of that intellectual world in which an immutable natural and social order could be abandoned in favour of an individualism exemplified in the works of others like Descartes and, especially in the work of the German philosophers, Leibniz, Kant and Hegel.

Many people assume a simple historical progression from the rise of mercantilist capitalism in the late Renaissance, through the Industrial Revolution to modern capitalism, a progression marked by technological development which allows each new phase to come into being. But that history is far more complex than such a simple model would allow. The relationship between technology and social change is part of that complexity, and so, too, is the rise of the nation state. What the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries produced was contemporary finance capitalism which bears little relationship, if any, to mercantilism. The ideological sea change that we have just sketched accompanied and, in a sense, validated the

capitalist revolution in which it became possible to believe in John Stuart Mill's view that 'the very aim and object of action is to alter and improve Nature'.<sup>16</sup> It would not be entirely unreasonable to see this ambition as the means by which capital sold its tyranny to the people, but Marx, almost in response to something of the sort, magnificently made the crucial point that:

Nature is man's *inorganic body*, that is to say nature in so far as it is not the human body. Man *lives* from nature, i.e. nature is his *body* and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.

In the next paragraph he formulated a proposition that became fundamental to much of his life's work:

Estranged labour not only (1) estranges nature from man and (2) estranges man from himself, from his own active function, from his vital activity; because of this it also estranges man from his *species*.<sup>17</sup>

We shall have occasion to return to this point, particularly in Chapter 3 where we first discuss David Harvey's major contribution to debate about this relationship in his book *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. The ground for this discussion is laid in Chapter 2 where we consider the ways in which nature has been socially produced and continues to be so by contemporary means and understandings and by, above all, capital.

Assumptions, not only about development, but about all its constituent parts, are made at countless levels and frequently differ widely. Development theory is dominated by a liberal (in the older sense) world view, even doughty defenders of those vast and commonly white-elephant enterprises visited on poverty-stricken countries make their cases in terms of their benefits to society at large. At the slightly less heroic end of development practice, local, communal advancement lies at the centre of most theory and activity based on a model of the kind illustrated in figure 1.2. Basing himself on Brown and Korten,<sup>18</sup> Wahab remarks that: