

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
CONDITIONS, PRINCIPLES AND ISSUES**

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CONDITIONS, PRINCIPLES AND ISSUES

SUMMARY

Sustainable development has become an inescapable reality at all levels of economic integration. The support of most governments for the concept of sustainable development makes strong action in environmental matters all the more necessary and legitimate. The prospect of the economic integration of the Americas raises sizeable challenges for sustainable management of the environment and natural resources. The implementation of sustainable development presupposes compliance with certain conditions (democracy, autonomy, fairness, interdependence, responsibility and accountability) and with certain fundamental principles (environmental and economic integration; maintenance of biological diversity and conservation of natural resources; precaution, prevention and evaluation; cooperation, partnership and participation; and education, training and consciousness-raising). The governments of the Americas have developed a Plan of Action for the Sustainable Development of the Americas, which is based to a large degree on these conditions and principles. The plan contains specific commitments in the form of detailed initiatives respecting most of the issues at the root of environmental problems. Parliamentarians, since they stand between the public and the decision-making powers, can play a premier role in implementing the sustainable development of the Americas. They are among those in the best position to become the true ambassadors of sustainable development and the principal intermediaries between local communities and decision makers so as to facilitate the flow of information, cooperation and mediation and to ensure first-hand that objectives in this area are achieved.

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CONDITIONS, PRINCIPLES AND ISSUES*

INTRODUCTION

The liberalization and expansion of trade, the globalization of markets and the economic integration of countries have not come about without causing significant changes, both structural and cyclical, in the organization and operation of states. The growing interdependence of these is not limited merely to trade and investment, but also affects governments' social and environmental obligations. Today there can be no doubt that trade and the environment are closely related.

The public's concerns about the environment, both at home and in general, together with pressure by environmental groups, have forced countries to act together for the sound management and protection of the environment and natural resources. The support of most governments for the concept of sustainable development, particularly in the wake of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and ratification of the conventions on climatic change and biodiversity, have made strong action in environmental matters all the more necessary and legitimate. The prospect of economic integration, however, particularly across the Americas, will raise sizeable challenges for cooperation in the fields of the environment and natural resources.

The main purpose of this paper is to clarify the potential role of parliamentarians in implementing the concept of sustainable development in their own countries in the context of the integration of the Americas. First, certain general considerations regarding sustainable development are discussed, particularly its underlying conditions and major principles. Then the

* This paper was originally prepared for the Delegation from the Parliament of Canada to the Parliamentary Conference of the Americas, September 1997, Quebec City.

main global and local issues that will likely be involved with the integration of the Americas are described, as are the commitments made in the Declaration of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, which was a result of the Conference of the Americas in Miami in 1994. The role and participation of parliamentarians in the coming integration of the Americas are discussed in this context.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: BASIC CONDITIONS AND PRINCIPLES

A. The Concept of Sustainable Development Restated

The concept of sustainable development implies, first, the integration of environmental issues with the imperatives of economic development in order to meet the immediate needs of populations today without undermining the aspirations of future generations. However, the definition of the term “sustainable development” has been expanded to include the ideas of fairness and interdependence, not only between generations, but between the countries and peoples of the Earth. Social, cultural, economic and natural environments, whose harmonious development is essential to the welfare of humanity and of nature, are also included in the concept.

Sustainable development can only be achieved in a long-term perspective. However, this cannot be done reactively, but rather through applying the principles of proactive and strategic planning and management. It is therefore essential to establish clear principles at all levels of participation and decision-making, together with clear objectives and measures that are part of a long-term approach and take into consideration the various countries’ ability to act and to pay.

B. Basic Conditions of Sustainable Development

Although the purpose of sustainable development is to integrate social and environmental concerns into economic decisions, its achievement requires adherence to general principles that must be joined to the basic conditions for success. Those are nothing more or less than the five major principles governing life in society and relations between governments and nations. They have a number of underlying concepts, which are also considered essential to the attainment of sustainable development.

1. Democracy

Although they need not absolutely be linked, sustainable development can hardly be initiated or implemented in the absence of genuine democracy. It is hard to see just how to provide fairly for present needs, and without compromising the future of generations to come, without underlying mechanisms and institutions in which all can participate. To paraphrase the Brundtland Commission, which so aptly opened debate on the subject,⁽¹⁾ isn't sustainable development everyone's business and everyone's future?

Thus, all human beings, no matter what their country of origin, may legitimately aspire to clean air and water, sufficient food, comfortable housing and satisfying work, in an atmosphere of peace and respect for differences and diversity. At the same time, they must be able to ensure the protection and survival of their natural and cultural heritage. In short, all human beings enjoy a fundamental right to an environment that is of high quality and is healthful. By democracy, we must understand respect not only for individual rights, but also for collective rights and in particular the right of women and first peoples to participate actively and fully in the march toward sustainable development.

2. Autonomy

While sustainable development must be achieved in a democratic context, the autonomy of governments, peoples and ethnic groups in making their development choices must also be respected. This does not mean that governments must operate in isolation; on the contrary, they must adopt a global view of development and development planning by taking an active part in international forums and processes for determining major common objectives for sustainable development.

Nor does this exclude the establishment of common international environmental standards, although each government is free to adopt national standards consistent with these. It is important that governments adhere to the principle that, while protection of the environment is a joint responsibility, the development and implementation of environmental standards by less developed countries will take into account the limits and ability of those countries to act and pay

(1) World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987, 400 p.

the associated costs, as well as their responsibilities with respect to a particular environmental problem.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that these countries have certain potential skills and practical knowledge that often remain underexploited in the absence of appropriate support structures. Thus a greater need for mutual assistance, cooperation and the transfer of knowledge and “clean technologies” arises directly from the interdependence of countries in the implementation of sustainable development.

3. Fairness

The concept of fairness is central to the entire issue of sustainable development, being based on recognition of the global and common nature of our environment and on the need for the planet’s resources to be shared in a sustainable way. Achieving fairness in sustainable development must be addressed at three levels: (1) within populations or states, (2) between populations or states and (3) between generations.

Fairness within a single population or government essentially requires meeting the needs of all and improving the quality of life through a better distribution of wealth. Despite what is often thought, this objective does not apply solely to the poorest countries, but also to Western societies, where disparities between people have tended to increase over the last decade.

At the next level, the harmful effects of underdevelopment and the obvious disparities between developed and less developed countries show that sustainable development cannot be achieved without reducing discrepancies between the rich and poor countries, that is, without a relentless struggle against poverty. It is for this reason that sustainable development cannot be viewed solely from an environmental standpoint, particularly in the countries of the South, where it must be achieved by accelerating development.

Lastly, one of the major challenges of sustainable development is beyond a doubt the objective of fairness between generations. The Brundtland Commission wrote as follows in *A Strategy for Sustainable Living*:

Each generation should leave to the future a world that is at least as diverse and productive as the one it inherited. Development of one society or generation should not limit the opportunities of other societies or generations.⁽²⁾

(2) The World Conservation Union, United Nations Environment Programme, World Wide Fund for Nature, *Caring for the Earth — A Strategy for Sustainable Living*, Gland, Switzerland, 1991, p. 14.

Once again, at this level, making certain development choices will, in many instances, require new approaches and attitudes and different behaviour.

4. Interdependence

Interdependence, which derives from the notion of fairness, is another basic condition for sustainable development: the common interest can only be served through international cooperation. With industrialization, improved technological capabilities and the globalization of trade and commerce, has come increased interdependence, even at the local level. It brings with it its own set of problems, such as the loss of traditional rights to certain resources and increased commercial and industrial production, with an attendant reduction in the decision-making power of local communities and individuals. Interdependence extends beyond a local and regional framework, however; it is now global, particularly with respect to the environmental problems affecting the biosphere.

This interdependence of individuals and communities requires first that we acknowledge our common interest in the environment so that each decision is made and each action taken in full knowledge of the repercussions for the environment and the welfare of others. More than anything else, interdependence is based on the capability for mutual assistance and cooperation at all levels of action, from the local to the international. Although international cooperation in environmental matters has increased over the past decade, a number of aspects must still be reviewed and reoriented, taking sustainable development into account.

5. Responsibility and Accountability

Since it is in everyone's interest to preserve the environment and to use it in a sustainable way, all countries have a responsibility from the outset to preserve and restore the environment and to achieve development, without harming their own environment or that of others. Consequently, all countries must take an active part and show solidarity in this cause. Furthermore, the concept of fairness, as it applies to countries and nations or to generations and individuals, implies that the responsibilities of all involved may be different but complementary, depending on the needs of each, and may vary in proportion to the extent of damage to the environment and the abilities of each party to rectify this. Furthermore, in the context of globalized trade and environmental problems, it is vital for the economic benefits of a given

business activity to be linked with its environmental repercussions, so that the responsibilities of each stakeholder are recognized; that is to say, so that all players are accountable for their own actions.

Some have argued that the question of accountability, and thus of every stakeholder's assumption of responsibility, may lead to a redistribution of profits so that compensation can be established, for example, for the use of natural resources or for environmental impacts. This proposal might be one way in which the richest countries can make a greater contribution to the sustainable development of poor countries and take an active part in solving environmental problems.

Collective and individual responsibility for managing the environment and natural resources in a sustainable manner must take into account both present and future generations. Making stakeholders responsible for their actions is at the same time encouraging the principle of stewardship, whereby a representative of both present and future generations acts as the "custodian" of natural resources and the environment.

C. General Principles of Sustainable Development

In addition to the five basic conditions necessary for ensuring sustainable development, five major principles underlie its implementation. These principles, to an even greater extent than the aforementioned conditions, are vital to the definition of sustainable development.

1. Environmental and Economic Integration

The environment and the economy are obviously very closely related. This link is more than a mere principle; it is a necessity for sustainable development. Various economic tools and policies may promote sustainable development, or at least lead to a more environmentally conscious use of resources. These tools or policies, such as the polluter-payer or consumer-payer approach, may be applied equally to producers, consumers and taxpayers and to enable the market to determine the correct overall cost of using resources. In many instances, however, for the actual value of natural resources to be taken into account, producers and economic agents need to change their attitudes. As a result, tax incentives or other economic tools may be necessary to promote this coming together of the environment and the economy.

The integration of the environment and the economy is as advantageous for poorer countries as for rich ones because, if production models adhere to economic and environmental rules, there may be a better balance of comparative production advantages. The result could be a softening of world trade rules whereby poorer countries would be enabled to lay claim to greater economic development.

Certain traditional economic indicators may also assist in assessing the degree to which the economy and the environment are integrated. Particular examples are the gross domestic product and per capita income; global indicators that reflect social aspects (such as the Human Development Index, which includes longevity, education and income); and strictly environmental indicators, such as water quality and land use.

2. Maintenance of Biological Diversity and Conservation of Natural Resources

Achieving sustainable development presupposes that we can preserve biological diversity, maintain ecological processes and life support systems and use the world's species and ecosystems in a sustainable manner. Development based on the preservation of natural resources calls for energetic measures that will make it possible to protect the structure, functions and diversity of the natural systems on which life depends.

These measures must focus on species and ecosystems as well as on their genetic heritage. Consequently, the limits, on and the capacity for renewal of, natural resources such as soil, wild and domesticated species, forests, pasture and farm land, fresh water and marine ecosystems, must not be compromised. As well, the life of non-renewable resources should be extended by developing and using more effective and cleaner technologies and by encouraging re-use and recycling.

First of all must come changes in the behaviour of individuals and communities and in their attitude to the environment, along with the provision of genuine means for managing it better. New approaches at the state level must then integrate development and conservation of resources on the basis of sufficient information and knowledge and through appropriate legal and institutional instruments. Effort at the international level must be on promotion of the development, and adoption and implementation of conventions and protocols on the environment and natural resources.

3. Precaution, Prevention and Evaluation

Precaution, prevention and evaluation are the starting points for genuine sustainable development; they must form an integral part of the planning and implementation of every development project. Planners and decision-makers must make it a routine to foresee and provide for the environmental consequences of their projects.

Current environmental protection measures are precautionary; however, in many cases, they are merely a band-aid solution that is not always compatible with the concept of sustainable development, particularly from a long-term perspective. However, the concepts of precaution, prevention and evaluation are difficult to instil because they are often removed from the day-to-day reality and have benefits that will be felt only in the more or less distant future. Forewarned is forearmed, foresight is knowledge and evaluation enables planning: it is imperative that countries and societies adopt these three watchwords so that present development can be transformed into sustainable development.

4. Cooperation, Partnership and Participation

Achieving sustainable development has become a collective responsibility that must be fulfilled through action at all levels of human activity. Consultation and cooperation in all decision-making are essential to the sustainable management of terrestrial, aquatic and marine ecosystems. It is incumbent upon all states and all nations to cooperate in good faith and in a spirit of partnership in implementing effective strategies to protect, preserve and restore the environment. All must take an active part and do their fair share in accordance with their capabilities and the means at their disposal.

All governments must accept their responsibilities by introducing economic growth policies and programs compatible with the protection of their own environment and that of others. They must ensure the protection of ecosystems of particular importance for agriculture and the way of life of the populations that depend on it. Furthermore, they must facilitate the participation of non-governmental organizations and decentralized or local communities to ensure they can play a greater role in all development- and environment-related activities.

In addition, states must join forces to strengthen international law by adhering to existing environmental conservation and management conventions and protocols and by passing

the necessary statutes for their implementation. They must also promote and develop new agreements and instruments considered necessary to achieving sustainable development.

Cooperation and partnership also presuppose that the richest countries introduce financial and technical assistance measures that will enable the poorer countries to integrate environmental issues more easily into their development programs. The creation of specific environmental protection and restoration funds is certainly worth considering.

The preservation of biological diversity clearly illustrates how interdependent are the “North and South blocs” in the necessary establishment of new partnerships. The main “centres or sources of biological diversity” are situated more particularly in the countries of the South, whereas the major “technological or biotechnological centres” are mainly in the countries of the North. In other words, the countries of the South as well as those of the North must be party to all discussions, solutions and conventions necessary to the achievement of sustainable development. They must all ensure that the measures chosen are suited to the situation of each. The more developed countries will no doubt have to make the necessary efforts to bring about a higher degree of development in the poorer countries and, in particular, the latter’s improved access to the most suitable technologies.

5. Education, Training and Awareness

Safeguarding the environment and achieving sustainable development depend not only on technical and economic matters, but also on changes in ideas, attitudes and behaviour. The direct participation of individuals and communities is essential. All must become fully aware of their environment, know its demands and limits and alter their habits and behaviour accordingly.

To this end, countries must develop strategies to better educate, inform and sensitize their populations on environmental matters and sustainable development. For example, ecological and environmental concerns can be integrated into school programs; the awareness of the general public can be raised through extensive information campaigns, particularly through the media; “green” projects can be encouraged in local communities, and training programs can be developed to promote more informed resource management and the use of clean technologies.

ISSUES AND COMMITMENTS

All the evaluations, reports, discussions, conferences and conventions have not yet managed to make the global environmental situation with respect to air, water and soil quality much more encouraging. Numerous environmental problems still exist world wide: the sustainability of tropical, boreal and coastal forests, the future of plantation forests, the maintenance and long-term availability of fresh water, the emissions responsible for climatic change and the thinning of the ozone layer, and the poor management of resources in general, particularly fishery and agricultural resources.

The environmental situation also continues to be a concern in Canada. For example, Canadians use twice as much water as Europeans. Over the next 10 years, it is expected that tens of billions of dollars will be spent across the country to improve water supply and sewer systems. However, an effort to reduce water consumption by 50%, which would bring Canada down to European levels, would not only make it possible to save this colossal amount of money, but also to reduce effluent treatment considerably.

Furthermore, Canadians are among the world's greatest, if not the greatest, producers of waste on a per capita basis. One of the main reasons why they produce such a large quantity of garbage is that there is little incentive to reduce it. Reduction of waste at source and recovery must be prime factors in preventing pollution, a fundamental aspect of sound environmental management.

Transportation issues raise serious environmental challenges. Cities and towns in Canada are built and developed essentially to accommodate automobiles and the transportation of goods by truck. This is true to such an extent that it is at times impossible to consider any other possibilities.

It is estimated that Canadians consume 30% more energy than necessary, in particular because the cost of the various forms of energy is relatively low in Canada and in North America in general. Prices charged to customers do not reflect actual production costs, and, since energy costs are not really separated from business overheads as a whole, it remains difficult to take action in this regard.

In many instances, the environmental problems facing Canada may be transposed to the scale of the Americas as a whole; they represent one of the major issues that cannot be confined to geopolitical boundaries. Though the problems associated with climatic change and

the preservation of biodiversity are the subject of international agreements and commitments, their consequences and the capacity of the states to overcome them are still major concerns. To them must be added transborder pollution, the treatment and transportation of domestic and hazardous wastes, large-scale deforestation and the decline in food resources and natural resources.

In addition, the integration of the Americas highlights the North-South duality that characterizes all development on the planet. Fundamentally, a number of major environmental problems result mainly from the intense industrial activity that has taken place in the North in this century. However, the countries of the South are directly concerned by the scope of these problems. They, like all other countries, and in some instances even more, depending on their geographical situation, will suffer the environmental and socio-economic consequences of major problems such as possible global warming and declining biodiversity.

It is encouraging to note, however, that the states of the Americas have demonstrated their conviction of the urgent need to move toward sustainable development by clearly undertaking to put forward a series of initiatives and actions to this end. This Plan of Action for the Sustainable Development of the Americas, based on the Declaration of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, is all the more interesting as it largely includes many of the fundamental conditions and principles described above. The plan contains specific commitments by the governments of the Americas in the form of detailed initiatives addressing most of the problematic environmental issues:

- health and education,
- sustainable agriculture and forests,
- sustainable cities and communities,
- water resources and coastal areas,
- energy and minerals.

These commitments are accompanied by provisions for their implementation, mainly through institutions, financing, scientific and technology transfers and public participation.

PARLIAMENTARIANS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The parliamentarians of all the regions of the Americas often have similar concerns and common interests. Although they generally do not have decision-making powers,

they are on the periphery and are in a position to exercise a certain influence. Even more important, they are in close contact with the day-to-day reality of their electors. They therefore have a more realistic, more microeconomic vision of development, which gives them a definite grasp of its limits because they see people rather than structures. It is mainly their close link with constituents and the particular place they occupy between the public and the executive power that enables the parliamentaries of the Americas to play a premier role in implementing sustainable development.

The parliamentarians of the Americas can be said to perform three separate functions:

- being a driving force, as it were, or an intermediary between the public and decision-makers;
- acting as an agent of information, cooperation and mediation in sustainable development; and
- monitoring and controlling the attainment of sustainable development.

They perform these three functions in their role as representatives at various levels as well as in executing their legislative responsibilities and participating in various interparliamentary forums.

First of all, parliamentarians are in a position to play a major role as intermediaries between the public and decision-makers, particularly by participating in policy matters. Being aware of their constituents' needs and expectations, they can influence, and even guide, the decisions and initiatives their governments develop or implement. They are often in the best position to judge the relevance, appropriateness and feasibility of a specific initiative. In this sense, it is definitely to their advantage, and to that of their government, to exploit the potential of this concrete role with respect to the public and decision-making authorities.

Second, the fact that parliamentarians occupy the middle ground can make them excellent agents of information, cooperation and mediation, in short genuine ambassadors of sustainable development. As a result, if they can exercise a certain degree of influence on decision-makers by expressing the public's needs and expectations; in return, they can also take direct public action. They can inform people about their contribution to the attainment of sustainable development and increase their awareness on this point, before encouraging them to take an active part in concrete community initiatives. More specifically, parliamentarians should place the emphasis on the education and training of future generations, which are the generations

that will actually benefit from the sustainable development now being undertaken by the countries of the Americas.

Lastly, parliamentarians may also intervene by assuming some control of the implementation of sustainable development. This may be done in a constructive manner; for example, through active participation in the various legislative and interparliamentary forums available to them. Here again, the proximity of parliamentarians to both executive power and the public allows them to encourage sustainable development initiatives and relay any feedback in order to facilitate any needed adjustments. In all initiatives, parliamentarians must be receptive to information on the attainment of sustainable development. As a result, they will be in a better position to interact with their constituents and with decision-makers from the inception of these initiatives through to their implementation.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable development is, in a way, a question that balances the needs of present generations with those of generations to come. The need for this balance becomes clear in the context of economic integration on a scale as vast as that of the Americas.

Parliamentarians are undeniably in a position to make a significant contribution to the attainment of sustainable development and to the selection of common orientations enabling the countries of the Americas to act in solidarity with respect to their common property, the environment. More particularly, they are in the best position to become genuine ambassadors for sustainable development and the principal intermediaries between the public and decision-makers in facilitating information flow, cooperation and mediation, thereby ensuring at first-hand that objectives in this area are achieved.

It is incumbent upon the states, parliamentarians and local populations to work together, by cooperating and forming partnerships, to establish the basis for sustainable development. They are all key players and the only ones able to ensure that the economic integration of the Americas is achieved in a manner consistent with the mutual needs and common interests of all concerned.