Interpreting sustainable development: a question of values?

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Abstract

Fifteen years after the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, popularised the concept of sustainable development, it has become difficult to ignore a striking paradox. On the one hand, the power and the promise of Brundtland’s idea lay in its *reconciliatory* potential – in its insistence that growth and a high quality environment need not be mutually incompatible. The idea was welcomed, and has since been widely endorsed. On the other hand, conflict between environment and development has, if anything, intensified in the intervening period, a process that can be observed at all scales from the local to the global. There is no noticeable outbreak of consensus in any major policy arena, and trends in production and consumption continue to move in a generally unsustainable direction. This paradox implies, at very least, an implementation deficit – a failure in the short term to find ways of making a broadly consensual concept operational. But it might also point to more fundamental problems, arising from contradictions within the concept of sustainable development itself. These issues are explored in the presentation, which takes the form of a journey through four eras of sustainability. It begins in pre-Brundtland days, traces developments through initial post-Brundtland optimism to our current somewhat perplexing situation, and finally takes a cautious look into the future.

The first of these eras is the most extended, covering two centuries or more of antecedents to the modern concept. In many essential elements, sustainable development is not a new idea. It echoes, for example, concerns for ‘prudent resource use’ articulated by the nineteenth century American conservationists of soils, water and forests, as well as the long-established axiom of ‘maximum sustainable yield’. But in the years following 1987, when the modern concept was crystallised by Brundtland, its diffusion and take up was remarkable. Throughout numerous institutions, strategies began to proliferate, and by the early 1990s the credibility of politicians and many other actors required them at least to genuflect towards sustainability. In this era of promise, sustainable development seemed to meet everyone’s requirements, and to offer a pragmatic way forward.

It rapidly became apparent, however, that to operationalise the concept – indeed, probably any attempt to move beyond Brundtland’s consensual but vague definition – would raise not only scientific questions, but profound ethical and political dilemmas. To take an obvious example, how should we decide which aspects of the environment were ‘critical’, in that they must be protected in all but exceptional circumstances? Such decisions not only test our limited knowledge of interactions between the human and non-human worlds, but clearly demand judgement. Not surprisingly, then, the third era has involved a struggle over meaning, and if we have learned anything since Brundtland, it must be that there is no singular definition of sustainable development upon which all can agree. Progress with sustainable development in practice is slow not because (or not only because) we are witnessing an

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6 The substance of this presentation has been published in Owens S. (2003), "Is there a meaningful definition of sustainability?" *Plant Genetic Resources* 1 (1); 5–9.
‘implementation deficit’ – a natural time-lag in the application of principles that are widely agreed – but because we are engaged in a contest over divergent conceptions of what it means for development to be sustainable. It is this divergence that best explains the paradox identified above.

The presentation concludes by suggesting that we have few palatable options but to try to move forward on two fronts: by seeking greater knowledge and understanding of natural environments and the social world; and by engaging in dialogue about values – about what we believe to be good and right, addressing the question of how we wish to inhabit the planet. Vigorous debate, argument, challenge and counter-critique, even if at times they seem futile and inconclusive, should be seen in a positive light, as part of the vital process of interpreting the concept of sustainable development in terms of workable conceptions.