INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

International cooperation and sustainable development are interwoven. The language and principles of sustainable development influenced the shaping of major international accords and the redefinition of international relations and security agendas. International cooperation is a necessary factor in the pursuit of sustainability, when dealing with global environmental issues. Such cooperation involves difficult distributive issues within and across countries, and over time. This article starts with a brief analysis of the reciprocal influences of international relations and sustainable development. The flourishing of international environmental agreements is taken as an illustration of the connections between international relations and sustainable development. The links and tensions between global and local dimensions are also explored. In particular, the processes of globalization including trade flows, the "local" responses to such processes, and the notion of economic and ecological interdependence are examined as they set the background of current and future forms of international cooperation and of sustainable development policies. A discussion of distributive and equity issues related to international environmental protection and sustainability policies and approaches to these issues (e.g. property rights) follows. Intergenerational and intra-generational equity and definitions of responsibility (e.g. "shared but differentiated responsibility") are important dimensions shaping debate about distributive issues. In the concluding section, a forward-looking perspective is suggested concerning the role of international cooperation in moving towards sustainable development.

1. International Relations and Sustainable Development

Until the early 1970s international cooperation was meant to focus on war prevention (as exemplified by the treaties banning nuclear tests in the 1960s) and on economic growth (as exemplified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development—OECD). Other areas of international cooperation—such as scientific development—were seen as supporting one of the two main foci (e.g. scientific cooperation as a means of East–West dialogue or, more prominently, as a means to foster economic growth through technological innovation). In 1972, with the United Nations (U.N.) Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, environment protection began developing as another major focus of international cooperation. This was, for instance, the case in relation to the problem of "acid rain," which was a main concern for the host country and which became the focus of major effort in East–West European cooperation leading to the Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution. In the American context, acid rain took mainly a bilateral dimension and became a factor of tension and negotiation between the USA and Canada.

Twenty years after the Stockholm Conference, over 900 bilateral and multilateral environmental agreements could be counted. In addition, the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)—held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992—made the link between environmental protection and social and economic development an explicit focus for international cooperation. In other words, sustainable development—a concept that is subject to different definitions, all converging, however, on the aim to foster equitable socioeconomic welfare while protecting the environment—became part of the international cooperation landscape. In addition, concerns related to acute conflicts that can emerge as a consequence of natural resources depletion introduced to the international agenda the notion of "environmental security." This notion will be discussed in the last section.

A number of factors can be singled out as driving the rapid growth of international environmental agreements (IEA). A number of cases of transboundary air and water pollution problems pointed to the need for cooperation among states to address them (e.g. acidification due to transboundary air pollution, pollution of shared seas and rivers, such as the Mediterranean Sea or the Mekong River). Changing societal perceptions of the environment led to the emerging of environmental movements and—later on—green parties in several countries; through them, organized pressure was put on governments to act and to cooperate with other countries to protect the environment. Economic competitiveness issues related to environment protection fostered supranational organizations—in particular the European Community (E.C.)—and international ones—especially the OECD—to develop "harmonized" environmental policies across countries in order to avoid distortion of competition that could be caused by unilateral environmental regulation.

IEA cover a broad range of issues (from acidification to biodiversity, climate change, chemical and nuclear accidents, ozone layer depletion, waste transport, and so on) and areas (polar regions, regional seas, oceans, coastal zones, rivers and river basins, wetlands, and mountains). In addition, the relations between ecological processes and economic and social developments and the related debate on sustainable development

lead to increased attention towards the synergies or tensions between different areas of international cooperation and international law; for example, between IEA and trade agreements, or between IEA and international policies related to demography and health.

The flourishing of IEA is the most evident aspect of the new environmental focus of international cooperation that emerged in the early 1970s. The formulation and implementation of IEA involves not only governments but also a wide range of actors including business, environmental groups, and scientific organizations, and its outcome is not only international "soft" law but also common principles and institutions. It can thus be argued that the flourishing of IEA led to the strengthening of multilayered governance, that is of rules and institutions interacting at various levels and involving not only governmental actors but also nongovernmental ones. While such flourishing can be seen as a success in its own right, problems concerning the effectiveness and efficiency of IEA have been identified.

Implementation and verification problems proved very severe in many cases, leading to initiatives intended to tackle these problems at the stage of formulation of the agreements (e.g. through technical committees and involvement of authorities responsible for implementation). Distributive issues proved to be the most difficult issues to handle, often hampering the very formulation or ratification of IEA, as well as leading to lack of implementation by some parties. Distributive issues will be discussed in the third section; for now it is sufficient to note that they are at the core of attempts to move from international cooperation and agreements focused simply on mitigating or preventing environmental pollution, to international cooperation and agreements tackling natural resources use and sustainable development more generally. Such a move means that a relatively simple principle to solve distributive issues in relation to pollution—the polluter pays principle—is not applicable in a straightforward way to usually diffuse and uneven pressures on natural resources. More complex, and often more controversial, principles and means are needed to tackle use of natural resources by countries, economic sectors, and social groups that vary in terms of wealth, institutional and technical capacity, and so on (see *Organizations Involved in Ethics, Justice and Human Rights Issues*).

2. Global and Local Dimensions, and the Management of Interdependence

Contemporary societies are characterized by increasing interdependence—economic, geopolitical, technological, cultural, ecological—at world level. Globalization is the term used to refer to such interdependence, often with a focus on economic aspects either to praise world trade and economic growth for creating wealth, or to blame them for exacerbating the divide between wealthy and poor countries and causing environmental and social deterioration. As far as ecological interdependence is concerned, in the 1970s environmentalists coined the motto "think globally, act locally" and inaugurated Earth Day to indicate that ecosystems and natural processes do not necessarily fall within political borders, and that everyone should take part in protecting the environment. More recently, global environmental problems such as ozone layer depletion, climate change, or biodiversity loss have proved that not only the scale of the problems is global but also that the solutions require action at all levels, from local to

global. This was acknowledged, for example, at UNCED where a comprehensive and quite detailed Local *Agenda 21*—LA21—was endorsed together with a broader *Agenda 21* and two international conventions—the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

This means that rather than opposing local to global, it is necessary to recognize that while social, economic, and ecological changes are experienced at the local level, they can be understood and managed only with reference to what is happening elsewhere in the world. International cooperation can thus be seen as a necessary component of any strategy aimed at protecting the environment in a globalized world; conversely, local action (as exemplified by LA21 and by many spontaneous initiatives by local communities) can be seen as a necessary complement, rather than an alternative, to international efforts. When examining international cooperation in relation to sustainable development it is necessary to have a closer look at the relations between the two above-mentioned faces of interdependence—economic globalization and global ecological interdependence.

A main component of economic globalization is trade liberalization; it is thus useful to focus on the relations between trade, environment, and sustainable development. These relations take three main forms. First of all, terms of trade determine the way environmental resources, from forests to species of flora and fauna, water, soil, and so on, are valued in the global economic system and exploited as goods for export or import. Biases in pricing systems that undervalue environmental resources, combined with debt crises, compel developing countries to overexploit their forests, fisheries, and so on and to supply the pertinent resources to industrialized countries that have already overexploited and destroyed a good part of their own resources. This situation involves important ethical issues that will be discussed later.

Secondly, environmental policies of one country—including standards, taxes, subsidies, and other regulatory and economic instruments—can have an impact on other countries in terms of imports and exports. And international environmental agreements can include provisions that may have an impact on global trade. Examples of the latter include the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, the inclusion of trade provisions in the Montreal Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, the debate on intellectual property rights (IPR) in relation to the CBD, and the controversy on greenhouse gas emissions trading in the context of the Kyoto Protocol to the FCCC. Ethical and distributive issues play a crucial role here, too, as shown in the next section.

Thirdly, global trade accords limit the possibility for countries to enact national, as well as international, environmental measures that may hamper free circulation of goods (these economic goods include environmental resources, as mentioned earlier, but also environmental "bads" such as toxic waste). This applies also to health measures, social protection measures and other areas of social life that, together with environmental quality, are important aspects of sustainability. In other words, global trade plays a crucial role in determining whether and which policies can be implemented to achieve sustainable development.

The need to tackle the complex relations between trade and environment was officially recognized by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1991, when the GATT Working Group on Environmental Measures and International Trade was convened. Following the replacement of GATT by the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994, a Committee on Trade and Environment was established. In addition, the preamble of the agreement establishing the WTO mentions the need to allow for optimal use of the world's resources in accordance with the objective of sustainable development. Nevertheless, the real endorsing of sustainability principles and objectives in global trade policy remains highly problematic and contested by both supporters of full liberalization and environmentalist critics of trade agreements.

Part of the problem concerning trade and environment relationships, and the broader issue of managing economic and ecological interdependence, lies in the difficulty of dealing with distributive issues—such as unequal distribution of natural, economic, and technological resources as well as power and institutional capability—and ethical issues such as the definition of responsibility or the allocation of rights (see *Indigenous People and Their Communities* and *Biodiversity and Social Well-Being: The Case of South America*).

3. Distributive and Equity Issues

Distributive and equity issues are of an explicitly normative nature. Some people are tempted to disregard them as merely matters of perception, or subjective values, to be distinguished from "real facts." Distributive and equity issues are, however, crucial when it comes to finding agreement on what should be done and by whom, and to implement any action requiring access to resources, including administrative, financial, or technological ones. This is clearly the case with the formulation and implementation of international cooperation in relation to sustainable development. The following distributive and ethical issues are particularly important: definition of responsibility, allocation of rights (including IPR), notions of intra-generational and intergenerational justice, acknowledgment of gender differences, approaches to the management of uncertainty, and relationships between equity and efficiency.

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Biographical Sketch

Angela Liberatore works in the Directorate General for Research of the European Commission on issues related to governance and citizenship. She was involved in the preparation of the Commission's White Paper on Governance. Earlier on, Dr. Liberatore worked on social and institutional aspects of sustainable development and global change. She holds a Ph.D. in political and social sciences and a degree in philosophy. Dr. Liberatore has published on environmental and sustainable development policy, European integration, science/policy relations, and risk management, including *The Management of Uncertainty. Learning from Chernobyl.*