COMMUNICATING A POLITICS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

Communicating a politics of sustainable development is essentially concerned with the various democratic modes by which sustainable development, as a complex and contested political objective of national and global policy, is debated and implemented by democratic publics, individual citizens, nation-states (including supra- and sub-state bodies and agencies), the scientific establishment, and communities and associations. It is concerned with finding a balance between top-down and bottom-up ways of negotiating a democratically agreed view of sustainable development, such that it is citizens, not scientific or state experts or personnel, who are the ultimate decision-makers. Given the degree of ignorance, skepticism, misunderstanding or rejection of sustainable development by many citizens in different countries, communicating a politics of sustainable development is about empowering citizens and providing them with the opportunity to take part in the debate about sustainable development by state and non-state bodies within civil society. It is about persuading them of its importance and of how sustainable development is something for which individuals, as consumers, citizens, workers, investors and parents, have a shared (and differentiated) responsibility, together with state and other political institutions and economic actors, particularly global corporations.

1. Introduction

It is surprising, and for many advocates and agencies worrying, that an issue such as sustainable development which has (or can have) profound implications for modern

human life across a number of areas -- economy, society, politics, international relations -- is, on the whole, something that most people in the world know little about. While there is a growing industry in academia in defining and clarifying the moral, economic, political, social and cultural dimensions of sustainable development, and associated work in policy-making circles of national and international state and non-state organizations, this has often not been matched by an equal public awareness and understanding of sustainable development. Thus part of the reason for focusing on communicating a politics of sustainable development is the growing need to popularize sustainable development, as part of the necessary shift from it being a discourse of elites to a discourse open and accessible to the people as a whole.

At the same time, at least in the developed world, there is consistent public support for environmental protection, and concern for the environment, while not dominating the political agenda for most people, is and has been an important political issue. Equally, there is evidence that the legitimacy of the state, as well as sub- and supra-state institutions and agencies, is increasingly related to its success in addressing these environmental problems. Yet, while of course related, public concern about environmental problems is not necessarily connected to sustainable development. In part, this may be due to the fact that while environmental concern clearly relates to the "sustainability" part, it is, for many people, less obviously connected to the "development" part. The overall effect of this is that in the minds of a lot of people sustainable development is solely or predominantly an "environmental" issue. One of the consequences of this is that the "development" side is left unquestioned or unacknowledged as an integral part of "sustainable development". This silence on the "development" side lends itself to a particular interpretation of sustainable development in which development is both (a) assumed to refer to the current mode of development, and (b) technocratic solutions in which the aim of sustainable development is to simply find technological solutions to environmentally damaging development which do not challenge or question that mode of development. This partial understanding of sustainable development is, this essay suggests, the dominant way in which sustainable development is understood by the majority of people in the developed and developing world, and it is from this base-line that a politics of sustainable development must begin. (See sustainable development).

As is made clear below, given the (relative) indeterminacy of both what sustainable development means and how to achieve it, there cannot be one single view of sustainable development which can be simply achieved and implemented across the world. This leads to the centrality of democracy and democratic procedures, both in defining sustainable development as a social goal and in determining the most appropriate policy actions to achieve it.

2. What is Sustainable Development?

One of the biggest problems in communicating the political, economic and social implications of sustainable development is that there is no agreed understanding of what it means amongst environmentalists, non-government organizations, policy-makers, governments and others. Most of the latter would agree that it has something to do with "the environment", the future, and making "development", whatever that is taken to

mean, less environmentally destructive. Some may also connect it with having to do with not passing on the environment in such a state as to undermine it, lessen its value, or otherwise negatively impact on future people (and perhaps non-humans). However, the policy implications of sustainable development remain contested and ill defined. Does sustainable development require massive redistribution of economic, technological and other resources from the developed to the developing world? Does sustainable development mean the imposition of eco-taxes on fossil fuel use? Does sustainable development mean a decrease in the standard of living or comfort of those in the developed world? Does sustainable development mean a rethinking of "development" and a restructuring of the economy, and indeed what we mean by "the economy"? Does sustainable development simply require technological solutions so that the present global economy can continue and grow, but using fewer natural resources and creating less pollution? (See sustainable development). The competing and often conflicting implications of what sustainable development means in practice in terms of its impact on the lives of people is one of the greatest challenges in communicating sustainable development. However, the fact that sustainable development is contested and subject to debates (both scientific, political, moral, economic and social) can also be seen as an advantage. To talk about "sustainable development" is necessarily to talk about the politics of sustainable development. That is, the contested status of sustainable development in and of itself conveys its ineliminable political character. And given the range of political and other debates and implications about both what sustainable development is (that is, how we are to define it as an agreed social/political goal or end) and its policy implications (how we are to achieve sustainable development by appropriate means -- policy tools and/or structural changes in the economy and society), it is clear that sustainable development presents contemporary societies across the world with the greatest challenge ever faced by human societies.

The view advanced here is that sustainable development identifies a range of future development paths for societies, as it is difficult to uphold the view that there is one such path which, if identified, would achieve a once and for all route to sustainable development. Thus there is not one particular level or type of interaction between human societies and their environments. The view developed here is based on a conception of sustainable development which lies somewhere in between radical and "business as usual"/technocentric interpretations. That is, it is not accepted that sustainable development is concerned with finding technological solutions to environmental problems. While of course technological innovation is important, it is also the case that sustainable development does require structural changes in modes of production and consumption, as well as affecting the structure of the political system. However, unlike radical views of sustainable development, the changes implied by the view of sustainable development developed here, are not so radical as to imply a complete reorganization of society, such that a more sustainable society would be completely different and unrecognizable from contemporary society.

3. Public Understandings of Sustainable Development

Coupled with debates and controversies about what sustainable development is and how we are to achieve it as a social goal, there is also the large and potentially fatal problem of public ignorance about sustainable development. For the ordinary person the term

"sustainable development" often means nothing, and most people, if asked to express what it means, would find it difficult to do so. Or if they do have a sense of what it means (in general terms) there is also the problem that they may fail to connect it to their own lives and activities which have an environmental impact, or they may simply choose to disregard or reject it as something which would mean changing the way they think or act. Equally, sustainable development may be viewed by the public as something the "government" or "big business" does rather than as something to which they, as individuals, parents, consumers and citizens, have a right and responsibility to contribute. (See agency, agents and sustainable development, the state)

While public ignorance, misunderstanding or rejection of sustainable development as a social goal is clearly a big problem, it must be remembered that this problem is not particular to sustainable development. Other social goals and generally agreed values and practices such as democracy, social justice, income redistribution, gender equality, tolerance, paying taxes, obeying the laws and so on are equally subject to the same difficulties. Indeed, that sustainable development is subject to the same difficulties as these other social goals and practices demonstrates how sustainable development must now be ranked alongside them rather than as being seen as a social aim completely different or inferior to them. As Jacobs puts it, "The search for a unitary and precise meaning of sustainable development is misguided...The crucial recognition here is that, like other political terms (democracy, liberty, social justice, and so on), sustainable development is a 'contestable concept'." And as a contestable concept it can only be discussed, defined and implemented in democratic rather than undemocratic forms. (See democracy, social justice, human rights)

As outlined below, in keeping with other dominant social values or goals, such as democracy or social justice, sustainable development needs to be actively supported by the state, or at least the state must provide part of the institutional space within which it may be communicated, debated and hopefully promoted. In part this is due to the simple fact that, as a contestable concept, sustainable development requires open and public deliberation, the free exchange of ideas and competing interpretations, and as an objective of public/state policy, it requires public, democratic accountability and legitimacy.

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Biographical Sketch

John Barry has taught, written and published widely on the normative aspects of green/ecological politics, especially the relationship between sustainability/sustainable development, democracy and social justice, environmental ethics and green political economy. His books include, *Rethinking Green Politics: Nature, Virtue and Progress* (1999, London: Sage), *Environment and Social Theory* (1999, London: Routledge), and (with John Proops), *Citizenship, Sustainability and Environmental Research: Q Methodology and Local Exchange Trading Systems* (2000, London: Edward Elgar).