

CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Keywords: Alternative development, 77 Club, Earth Charter, enforced conformity, Human rights, Hungry world, indigenous cultures, MAB, solidarity, sustainability, theory of development, UNDP, "what is good for them"

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Summary

Environmental concerns are at the root of the concept of sustainable development. Considering the galloping deterioration of the biosphere (rain-forest, greenhouse effect, water and air pollution, acid rain, etc.), the devastating effects of industrialisation in emerging countries (Bhopal), and the global impact of radioactive fallout of military or "peaceful" nuclear energy production infesting not only waste lands in Nevada or Kazakstan, the international community has become aware of the need for harnessing development in a responsible way to safeguard prime natural resources for future generations. The peoples of these countries have their own cultures which are also exposed to similar hazards as those besetting economic development, so that the idea of sustainability extends also to the safeguarding of the ways of life of these peoples. The sober long-sighted proverb '*never shit into your own nest*' has been superbly ignored by the industrial powers of the so-called developed countries with dramatic consequences. Culture is not immune to pollution and vaccination is but another form of pollution. This article gives an overview of the joggling attempts by international bodies at stemming off the rising tide, of the inadequacy of will & means, and, finally, of the insolence of western "culture" to go out to "save" "other" cultures from ruin. (see *Modern and traditional cultures*)

1. Introduction

Intrinsically, Culture is not for development. This must sound heretical in the light of official texts, envisaging or promoting *cultural development*: in particular the UNESCO drive in this direction [Máté Kovács]. However, culture is or is not; in a way it could

participate of a given order of instability, sharing but the properties of auto-organisation and dissipative structures [Ilya Prigogine]. If culture is definite, development is perpetual expectancy. Development can generate civilisation out of barbarism, but not culture, for even barbarism has its culture. Development is an endless creative process between chaos and cosmos, a continual beginning. Culture is an accomplishment: the process and outcome of cultivation, a dynamic continually postponed end. Like flowers after the rain, culture will thrive after the strife is over. Its environment is peace. It can change and grow, but it cannot be developed, especially not from outside. It is a way of life, a live and lived community cement expressed in language, action, works and norms. It can be assimilated, but it cannot be exported or forced upon. It has its intrinsic self-contained values like other live organisms.

The title contains a dynamic tension between openness and determination [William James]. We shall try to see whether and how this tension can be resolved, and how "sustainability" fits into the picture.

Development has taken on obsessional features. Fifty-five years of efforts world-wide produced a lot of confusion, frustration, and messed up expectations. We shall also try to understand what is at stake, and why so little has been achieved. Adversity is rampant on the development scene, causing permanent suffering to the people designated for development. Designated by whom? Obviously by people more "developed" than those they want to push. And who decides *what is good for them*? And what pushes the developers to embark on the development galley? Bad conscience? Greed? Ideology? Philanthropy? The power itch? Vampirism?

The explosive mixture of underlying motivations may explain part of the frustrations and account for the fact that the UN world campaign had to carry forward its failures from decade to decade up to the present time. In addition, the development ideal had been jarred by an escalation of environmental nuisances accompanying the economic boost in developed nations, whose slow awareness of growing disaster prompted the introduction of the 'sustainable' proviso, which in turn implies, *inter alia*, cultural stakes. So much for the title.

2. Backflash

It all must have started with a Puritan semblance of remorse – or was it out of calculation? - towards the end of the last world war, when, in 1944, it was realised that a good many of those who had helped on the battlefields were wretches [Frantz Fanon] on the home front, and that they were entitled to a 'liberation' in a way similar to that brought to other 'occupied' allies. The only hitch then was that these wretches also were colonised and had neither the authority nor the practice of self-government, at least in the eyes of those who had a say in the matter. The actual people, i.e. the '*developees*', peasants to 95%, were not consulted, on the assumption that they did not know what it was all about anyway. In addition, a way had to be found to reconcile one's own benefits from the colonies with their claim for freedom and independence, i.e. independence on paper, creating only a new form of dependence, that on assistance, everything being done to curtail autarchy by discouraging subsistence farming, by enforcing chemically sustained export cropping with the concomitant ruin of soils (cotton, soya, peanuts etc.),

while the export returns accrued to the export companies owned by the rulers. Adulterated food stuffs have to be imported at higher cost, and in some cases, even free alimentary aid is resold to the needy farmers. We shall see how ingenious minds contrived various methods to mix oil with water.

So pioneers of human welfare, when assembling in San Francisco shortly before the end of World War II, incorporated the idea of 'development' into the UN Charter from where it spread to the instruments of other agencies, including the preamble of UNESCO. With spreading de-colonisation, the whole UN family was then to engage in the development business. Culture at that time was lived as a white privilege. Other peoples were at best objects of ethnography.

Things have changed since. In particular, the development business got entangled in environmental fears [Lester Brown], since precisely the motor of development, namely industrialisation and mechanisation, especially in agriculture, was at the root of spreading evil. So the idea was to temper development with environmental respect, at least on paper; hence the attribute 'sustainable' became scotched to 'development'. 'Sustainable', which is rendered in French by '*durable*' ('*responsable*' would be more appropriate), means '*supportable by the community and its environment*'. The underlying ideas seem 'justification' and 'responsibility' with regard to the "duty to prevent environmental harm", (from the *Earth Charter Initiative 2nd Commitment*). We shall examine later what that Initiative holds in store. The prime duty is to develop – whatever it be. Stagnation is the worst one can be held responsible for. It is the death of economy. There is as yet no court-martial set up for such a crime, but the International Criminal Court (ICC) is bound to extend its jurisdiction, within short, to this new type of crime against mankind or the global Market.

3. The development hagggle

3.1. The file

The *aims* of development (even though they derive from the ambiguous "developer" motivations mentioned and yet to be disentangled) address an absolutely burning issue. They form, as it were, a package deal: combat poverty, hunger, ignorance, illness in the so-called Third World. The first and second have been lost sight of. In fact, the first is the rich industrialised Western world assembled in the NATO and OECD; the second, the Soviet block, has collapsed since and disintegrated like the unsustainable spaceship MIR a few weeks ago.

The *means* are as impressive as evasive. Flows of money, which since the early sixties have been funnelled into these Danaids' jars and have reached Niagara volumes by now, are mainly channelled through UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), the World Bank and Co.; however, this gigantic effort remains so far, admittedly, to little avail. While presenting, on 5 July 2000, his re-organisational scheme, Jacques Diouf, director-general of FAO, admitted that his institution has not been able to meet the challenge of hunger; [cf. <http://www.fao.org> ; similarly the World Report on human development 2000 published by UNDP: <http://www.undp.org/dpa/statements/administ.2000/june/29june00.html>]; [also Lucas

Delattre]. The beneficiary governments, federated in the "77 Club", grown to 138 members meanwhile, have always argued that the funds are too small to fill the gap and that each rich country should contribute a minimum of 1% of its GNP to development efforts, a target that no donor country has ever subscribed to. The development challenge has partly been taken up by NGOs, i.e. mostly private funds, with a remarkably better performance, mainly on account of following up on the destination of funds. It was also them which evolved the 'sustainable' argument together with the wiser chieftains of the 77 Club.

The *object* of development is eminently economic: raise the per capita income of population to a decent, "sustainable" level. It has been argued that the criteria determining this level or, more generally, the stage of economic development had to be revised; in particular the GNP per capita, expressed in US-\$ for comparison is a misleading indicator, to say the least. Globalisation distorts real values; e.g. no account is taken of the climate. Northerners are hectic because they lack sunshine, among other things, etc. Clothing and heating is a negligible expenditure item in the major part of the developing world. Apart from this, "sustainable" appeals also to developers' ethics. The concept has moral connotations. Poverty goes with hunger : the World Food Programme, set up in 1963, manages, together with the World Food Council and the World Food Safety Commission, administered by FAO, food supplies to quite a number of people of the hungry world. An empty tummy has no ears. So it is an absolute priority to look after the needy before one can think of teaching, let alone speak of culture as visualised by development planners. The developpees' culture comes under the "sustainable" label to be protected like Nature. Programme activities voted by the UN General Assembly every year testify to the importance officially given to this commitment under the Charter. The apparent zeal developed by the General Assembly entails a confusion of competencies, typical of the whole UN system: activities proper to Specialised Agencies are recuperated by the General Assembly, so that one often does not know who does what and why, let alone the waste of money.

After the failure of the first development decade ending 1970, a higher gear was felt necessary. So a "strategy" was adopted, as well as an Action Plan to bring about a "*new international economic order*". Since nothing changed over the next three decades, a Charter of economic rights and duties was drawn up, declarations went galore, and an Agenda for development had no effect, nor had, naturally, committees. Indeed, the confirmed rule, devised and implemented in Sumer, Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome and successors, viz. if you have a vexing problem endangering public relations, set up an *ad hoc* committee, (which will focus and disperse attention, with an ensuing report bound to disappear in an indistinct drawer, prior to safety-storage in a dustbin), has been successfully adopted by the UN.

The disturbing awareness of the dangers to the environment led to the creation of a respective UN Programme (see *The Earth movement*) together with the "sustainability" development Commission (1983) and the Action 21 scheme in 1992.

The next higher gear were Summits : for "Earth" (in Rio de Janeiro) in 1992, for social development (in Copenhagen) in 1995, for world trade (in Tokyo, Bangkok, Seattle) in 1998, 2000 and 2001, of "sponsors" (G-7) (in Cologne) in 1999, (and Davos) in 2000

and 2001, for the FAO world campaign against hunger (in Rome) in November 2001 etc. The speed was increasing, yet the storm remained in the glass pot. Summits on all sorts of things spread to every constituency and to every corner of the earth, if one may say so.

The concern for Earth's health has taken on new dimensions. It is not that there were no good reasons for serious concern, but the *not-only-technical* turn it is taking all of a sudden is nevertheless surprising, especially considering the rather innocent inception of the Earth movement on 22 April 1970 (first celebration of Earth day). It looks as though this movement was gathering swirling power to finally condense into an Earth-cult, reviving, as it were, ancient traditions of Demeter-Ceres or Persephone-Proserpine or of Artemis. After all, Greek "democracy" serves as benchmark for our power structures....!

3.1.1 The Earth movement.

It started in the early 70s, when UNESCO launched the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme. Good ideas find quickly customers, and, notwithstanding competence interference (between the UN General Assembly and its Specialised Agencies, as already mentioned), the subject was taken up in 1972 by the UN at the Stockholm Conference, creating the UNEP (United Nations Environmental Programme) a twin brother to the UNDP, as it were. A Fund of 65 million \$ was set up in 1994, collecting voluntary contributions from Member States. A long list of tasks was drawn up, a world environmental monitoring system (GEMS), together with a data bank on world resources (GRID), and a world intelligence network (INFOTERRA) covering over 170 countries were put into operation. An Office for Industry and the Environment, relying on an international Register of potentially toxic chemical substances (IRPTCS) covering some 70'000 chemical products used in the world, can be consulted by industries and governments alike to evaluate environmental hazards of industrial schemes. While UNESCO went on with the MAB programme, entitling its 1988 report "*Man belongs to the Earth*", the UN-headquarter competitors came up with the big bang '92 Rio Earth Summit, already mentioned, introducing "sustainability", and setting up a 53 members *sustainable development commission* to monitor the application of the 21 Action plan by governments, NGOs, corporations, companies, and other polluters. A special eye was to be thrown on climatic change and bio-diversity. The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 was to commit the polluting community to reducing contamination, in particular CO₂ emission; however, the main polluter, the USA, accounting for 25% of the obnoxious gas production, typically refuses to sign what their delegation had voted on, so that the whole conference was a stroke in the air, the Japanese had once more to pay for Pearl Harbour.

The reason why we have listed all these activities and frantic efforts is only to show that it resembles a pageant, the message being: "Earth is sacred; we are watching!" It is not sure whether public opinion was as relieved as the lot of people who got and still are being paid the dividends of the show. True, there are real reasons for concern and a lot of problems call for urgent remedies and action, but the appalling inefficiency, which the UN-System has never tried to conceal, apparently does not bother anybody, not even the Member States which have to pay for the poor service. Admittedly, there are

periodic requests for change, and reports and recommendations are made, with zero effect. The delegates and bureaucrats who swarm around the honey pot have no interest in refusing the pot to be filled.

An incredible dilution, if not evasion, of responsibility seems to prevail in the management of tax payers' money, where one finds a rather relaxed handling of issues like development, environment and peoples' safety and vital rights, as opposed to the many words and texts, speeches, programmes, strategies, declarations, resolutions, reports, initiatives churned out by all sorts of task forces and other busy bodies... in the end, the Aesopian mountain will give birth to a mouse... or a *paper tiger*.

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Biographical Sketch

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