

THE RIO DECLARATION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

L. Hens

Human Ecology Department, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Keywords: Rio Declaration, intra-generational equity, intergenerational equity, ecological footprint, and polluter pays principle, user pays principle, precautionary principle, public participation principle, environmental impact assessment, environmental standard.

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Rio Declaration on Environment and Development
 - 2.1. Preamble
 - 2.2. Principle 1
 - 2.3. Principle 2
 - 2.4. Principle 3
 - 2.5. Principle 4
 - 2.6. Principle 5
 - 2.7. Principle 6
 - 2.8. Principle 7
 - 2.9. Principle 8
 - 2.10. Principle 9
 - 2.11. Principle 10
 - 2.12. Principle 11
 - 2.13. Principle 12
 - 2.14. Principle 13
 - 2.15. Principle 14
 - 2.16. Principle 15
 - 2.17. Principle 16
 - 2.18. Principle 17
 - 2.19. Principle 18
 - 2.20. Principle 19
 - 2.21. Principle 20
 - 2.22. Principle 21
 - 2.23. Principle 22
 - 2.24. Principle 23
 - 2.25. Principle 24
 - 2.26. Principle 25
 - 2.27. Principle 26
 - 2.28. Principle 27
3. Conclusions
- Glossary
- Bibliography
- Biographical Sketch

Summary

The “Rio Declaration on Environment and Development” defines sustainable development in 27 principles. Using these principles in an effective combination provides an important guideline on the road to achieving a more sustainable world. In this sense the Rio Declaration is complementary to other approaches which clarify “sustainable development” (SD) and provides the ideal perspective. Among them are definitions, paradigmatic descriptions, guidelines, action frameworks and ethical interpretations of the concept.

This chapter lists the preamble and the 27 principles enshrined in the Rio Declaration. Each principle is discussed in terms of background, implementation and future perspectives. Particular attention is paid to the principles of intra- and inter-generational equity, the precautionary principle, the polluter and user pays principles.

The Rio Declaration also highlights the importance of the use of interdisciplinary, managerial instruments for environmental management, and in particular environmental impact assessment and environmental standards. The Declaration stresses the participation of citizens as an important ingredient of effective policy development and implementation. It attributes particular roles to women, children, the youth and indigenous people.

Although the Declaration of Rio is not the stronger “Earth Charter”, it was originally intended to be, it is still an important landmark in our interpretation of sustainable development, worldwide. In this context it has therefore definitely contributed to the emergence of a pragmatic new environmentalism. Next to this, it is characterized by political compromising which explains its fragmentary appearance and the lack of a systematic and a clear philosophical line. Finally, it is also a milestone step in the process towards a more sustainable world.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is a complex concept. An obvious way to approach it is to put the problem in context and to provide a definition. This was done in an authoritative way by the United Nation’s World Commission for Environment and Development (WCED, 1987), which was chaired by Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, who in 1987 was Prime Minister of Norway. The Commission concluded that if we continue to use up natural resources as we do at present, if we ignore the plight of the poor, if we continue to pollute and produce waste, then we can expect a decline in the quality of life.

To describe the way of halting this decline, the Commission coined the term sustainable development. This is economic progress which meets all of our needs without leaving future generations with fewer resources than we enjoy—a way of living from nature’s income rather than on its capital account.

The Commission suggested the following definitions: sustainability is “the rearrangement of technological, scientific, environmental, economic and social resources in such a way that the resulting heterogeneous system can be maintained in a

state of temporal and spatial equilibrium”. Sustainable development in its turn is defined as the type of human development which “fulfills the necessities of the actual generation without impairing the possibilities for the next generations to meet their necessities”.

In this way the Commission points to a number of basic characteristics of the sustainable development debate:

- it is broad in its concept and all (relevant) scientific disciplines should add to it;
- it is worldwide in its space frame. and
- it is long term and trans-generational in its timeframe.

Although the definition produced by the Brundtland Commission is still most frequently cited today, less than three years after its publication the literature contained more than 300 definitions of sustainable development. This points to the amazing heterogeneity which exists when it comes to turning the glittering generalities into practical action.

Therefore, it is important to describe, analyze and catch the shift advocated by sustainable development in different ways. This has been done by describing it as a scientific paradigm.

Simply phrased, it is the playground on which the discussion on balancing environmental, economic and social conditions is evolving (Box 1). Central to the sustainable development paradigm is the fact that the actual scientific disciplines are too reductionistic and too limited in scope, to provide a sensible framework to facilitate understanding the major problems the planetary ecosystem faces.

The *Utilizing* paradigm expresses the attitude that human activities have an effect on the environment but the impacts can be absorbed, the risks are small and technology is self-regulatory and will change within certain limits. The *Saving* paradigm admits that the environment, or “nature”, has a limited absorbing capacity and mankind must adjust to lower levels of consumption. In the *Managing* paradigm, nature is vulnerable and the solution is technologies that adapt to the environmental condition, as consumption levels cannot be drastically altered. Finally, the *Preserving* paradigm considers nature to be very fragile and society has to adapt in many ways. Society is very flexible and changes in its behavior can be made before the environment is damaged.

Box 1. Paradigm of sustainability

Sustainable development is not easy to achieve. It demands changes in lifestyle, particularly for the more wealthy nations who continue to draw on nature’s capital and to use ten times more per capita resources than people in the poorest countries.

More attention needs to be paid to the destructive and wasteful effects of poverty. To facilitate this shift in lifestyle and thinking, sustainable development has been described in terms of practical guidelines. One of the most widespread examples of this is listed in Box 2.

- Every human being is a part of a community which is made from all living things. The community ties human society, past, present and future, with the rest of nature.
- All humans have equal and basic rights. These include the right of life, liberty and security of person, freedom of thought and speech, freedom of religious choice, participation in government, education and within the limits of the earth, the right to necessary resources for healthy standard of living. No individual, community or nation has the right to prevent another from access to their means of living.
- Every person and society is responsible for the protection of these rights of all others.
- All life forms have the right to respect independently of their value to people. Development should not threaten the survival of other species. Humans should avoid unnecessary killing and cruelty to other species.
- Each person is responsible for his/her own impact upon nature. People should conserve ecological processes and the diversity of nature, and endeavor to use any resource efficiently and sustainably.
- Each generation should ensure that the world left for future generations is at least as diverse and productive as the one inherited.
- Responsibility for these actions is both individual and collective and transcends all cultural, political and economic boundaries

Source: Environmental Education, Ed. J. Fien, 1993 (after IUCN, UNEP, WWF, 1991)

Box 2. Guidelines for a sustainable lifestyle

Also the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil, June 3-14th, 1992) added to the specification of sustainable development. The main document the conference agreed upon was Agenda 21, a comprehensive blueprint for the global actions to affect the transition to sustainable development. Four environmental problems dealt with in Agenda 21 were thought to be that urgent in 1992 that special action was pledged:

- two legally binding conventions which aim to prevent global climate change and the eradication of biological diversity were signed by representatives of more than 150 countries;
- a third convention on desertification was concluded in the aftermath of Rio, in Paris in March 1994;
- a set of principles to support the sustainable management of forests worldwide.

But the first document Rio concluded during the first day of the conference was the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, a series of principles defining the rights and responsibilities of the states when it comes to sustainable development.

More precisely, the Rio Declaration, as it is commonly called, consists of a preamble and 27 articles, reflecting the general principles on which Agenda 21 is based. It actually defines sustainable development as a set of internationally agreed principles, many of which have never been accepted before.

The principles laid down in the Rio Declaration should be seen as the (intermediate) product of an important evolution of the way of thinking about the environment, its problems, and indicated solutions. This evolution might be illustrated by referring to the two main conferences organized by the United Nations, prior to UNCED.

The first, “Conference on the Human Environment”, was organized in 1972 in Stockholm, Sweden. The dominant idea was that environmental problems are essentially by-products linked to intense industrialization and the use of technology by society, and, therefore, a scientific-technical approach would be able to solve these problems.

The second conference was organized in 1982 in Nairobi, Kenya. It was marked by a growing awareness that environmental problems in fact have a much wider reach than their technical-scientific scope. In 1982, socioeconomic factors were already seen to be essential co-determinants of environmental issues. This insight was at the basis of establishing the Brundtland Commission, which published its report entitled “Our Common Future” in 1987.

The Rio Declaration extends this evolution towards more complexity and higher degrees of interdisciplinarity in studying environmental problems. It addresses sustainable development in terms of a set of 27 principles. This contribution overviews these principles and comments upon them, in terms of the ensuing international debate.

2. Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

2.1. Preamble

*The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development,
Having met at Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992,
Reaffirming the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, adopted at Stockholm on 16 June 1972, and seeking to build upon it,
With the goal of establishing a new and equitable global partnership through the creation of new levels of cooperation among States, key Sectors of societies and people,
Working towards international agreements which respect the interests of all and protect the integrity of the global environmental and developmental system,
Recognizing the integral and interdependent nature of the Earth, our home,
Proclaims that:*

The preamble puts explicit reference on the fact that the text represents to a large extent, an attempt to balance the concerns of both Northern and Southern countries. Far from a perfect text, each side achieved success in enshrining those specific principles that are of particular importance to their respective political agenda's. The developing countries were able to obtain agreement around those key principles that will hopefully support their own economic development.

These include concepts such as: the eradication of poverty as an indispensable component for sustainable development; recognition of the special needs of developing countries, and promotion of a supportive and open international economic system. The

countries with economies in transition (the former USSR, and the countries in Central and Eastern Europe) acknowledged the public trust doctrine. The industrialized, free market economy countries introduced in the Rio Declaration the most liberal economic principles such as the polluter pays and the user pays principles.

2.2. Principle 1

Human beings are the center of concern for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

Essentially this principle entails two important notions:

(a) Humans are the center of the concerns for sustainable development: although this aspect was strongly advocated by the developing countries, it is most uncertain whether it is the best option for the environment. Of core importance to an anthropocentric vision on the environment is the issue that human well-being depends upon the quality of the environment, and therefore it is in the interest of humans to preserve their environment. The environment is seen as a means to human ends and values. As these arguments clearly point towards human interest, they have a powerful appeal.

An alternative view is offered by ecocentrism. The core idea of this viewpoint is the postulation that humanity is inseparable from nature. Neither individuals nor living organisms are important, but it is the totality of nature which should be our concern and the target of environmental management and policy. In the reversed sense, it is not possible to injure nature without injuring an integral part of humanity.

Moreover, there are philosophical approaches which are intermediate between the outspoken anthropocentric and the “deep” ecocentric vision. “Animal liberation” thinking, for example, does not use the arbitrary criteria of rationality to separate animals from humans. Rather it anchors on the research findings that animals are the same as humans in having the capacity to suffer and enjoy. The central tenet in these intermediate trends is that it is not particularly humans, animals or living organisms that deserves respect but the biosphere as a whole. Humans are an inseparable component of this much broader vision of nature.

(b) The first principle also asserts that the care of people is the main aim of the measures taken to provide a stable environment, a characteristic of the notion of the “productive life in harmony with nature”. However, different authors have described this principle as a weak basis, for example, for establishing environmental standards and related instruments for environmental management. Different national constitutions, like those of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Byelo-Russia, and the Republic of Kazakhstan recognize explicitly the right of humans to live in a safe environment. On the other hand, the constitutions of most “classic European States” such as France, Italy, Germany and Belgium do not recognize this right. These different approaches are partially explained by the insufficient theoretical underpinning of the notion “the right to a safe environment”, but also by the relative lack of practical criteria to define a “safe environment”. In practice, the right of humans is reduced to the right to live in an

environment which corresponds to legally established standards. This first article of the Rio Declaration and its differential counterparts in national constitutions are illustrative of the growing conviction that the right of citizens for a safe environment corresponds to vital necessities. However, at this moment there is no proper guarantee for putting this right into practice.

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE 25 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

Bibliography

Abrahamson K.V. (1997). Paradigms of sustainability. In “The Road towards sustainability”. S. Sörlin Ed. Upsala, Sweden. [This is a critical paper in the first booklet in a series of ten, exploring the many faces of sustainability. Particular reference is made to development problems in the area around the Baltic Sea.]

Johnson S.P. (1993). The Earth Summit: The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). Graham and Trotman/Martinus Nijhoff, London, UK. [This book is a compilation of the key documents associated with the United Nations Conference on Environment and development. It includes the annotated full texts of the UNCED documents.]

Oberthür S., Ott H.E. (1999). The Kyoto Protocol. International Climate Policy for the 21st Century. Springer-Verlag, Berlin, Germany.[This book overviews the 10 years process of negotiations on global change action which has resulted in the Kyoto Protocol in December 1997.]

Steer A. (1996). Ten Principles of the New Environmentalism. *Finance and Development* 33: 4-7. [A basic discussion on “new environmentalism”, that offers a fresh perspective on the policies traditionally implemented in industrialized countries.]

Von Weizsäcker E., Lovins A.A.B., Lovins L.H. (1998). Factor Four: doubling wealth, halving resources use. Eathscan Publications, Ltd., London, U.K. [In this book the idea is explained that by increasing technological, managerial and economic efficiency, we can reach twice as much output, with half of the resource use and generation of pollution.]

Wackernagel M., Yount J.D. (1998). The ecological footprint: an indicator of progress toward regional sustainability. In: *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* 51:511-529. Kluwer Academic Publishers. Dordrecht, the Netherlands. [This is a classical paper in which the authors discuss the concept of the “ecological footprint”. This is an evolved indicator for sustainable development measuring the environmental impact of individuals, groups, sector or societies.]

WCED – World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). *Our Common Future*. Oxford University Press. Oxford UK. [This is the basis report of the Brundtland Commission on the interface between environment and economics. It is a key document in bringing sustainable development in the forefront of the international environmental discussion.]

Biographical Sketch

Professor Luc Hens obtained his Licentiate in Biology from the Free University of Brussels (FUB) in 1974, Aggregation of Higher Secondary School Teaching from the FUB in 1975, and PhD from the Faculty of Science of the FUB in 1981.

Professor Hens is a member of several professional societies and recipient of a number of honours and awards, including the prestigious award of the Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences and Arts which he was awarded in 1984. Currently he is the Head of the Department of Human Ecology at the FUB.

He has been responsible for organizing and/or participating in several international research and postgraduate teaching programmes in many countries including Bolivia, Bulgaria, Brazil, Brussels, the Czech Republic, Ghana, Hungary, Turkey, the Ukraine and Vietnam.

To date the publications of Professor Hens number about 200, including twenty-six books. He is also the co-editor of the journals *Environment, Development and Sustainability* and *Environmental Pollution*. His teaching and research interests include environmental management, sustainable development, human ecology, and related issues.