

# INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## Summary

The article examines some contemporary challenges to sustainable development at the global and regional levels, the evolution of multilateral cooperation, as well as the problems and prospects of international cooperation in sustainable development, highlighting the roles of the USA and Canada. The framework employed utilizes insights from social theory and views sustainable development cooperation from the perspective of institutionalization -- the processes through which certain norms, meanings and practices become authoritative, dominant and legitimate. When viewed from this perspective, international cooperation in sustainable development encompasses three interrelated dimensions: the normative dimension -- the norms and rules that define and prescribe what appropriate conduct ought to be; the cognitive dimension -- the understandings of actors about the relationship between the environment and development that provides the basis for choosing meaningful actions; and the regulative dimension -- the structured contexts and settings within which actors collaborate and coordinate activities to achieve the goal of sustainability.

The evidence suggests that although some progress has been made -- in articulating norms and principles, in raising awareness about the impact of human activity on the natural environment, and in the "greening" of international institutions-- much still needs to be done to achieve the goal of sustainability. There is currently quite a divergence among the three dimensions of the institutionalization of sustainable development, revealed in a gap between rhetoric and reality. To the extent that political-economic approaches have supplanted scientific/technical solutions to global environmental problems as revealed in the preference for economic instruments, then further progress in sustainable development cooperation hinges on the ability to reconcile this divergence by addressing the distributional consequences of economic development conditioned contemporary globalization.

## **1. Introduction**

The idea of sustainable development has come to occupy a central place in the thinking and practice of environmental protection and economic development. This has occurred to such an extent that environmental issues and their relationship with development are prominent in the foreign policy agendas of most states and major international institutions. This has not always been the case, however. Traditionally, environmental issues were accorded relatively low priority in international relations. They were considered domestic issues that required domestic technical solutions, not as international or global problems requiring multilateral political solutions. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the evidence shows that while some progress has been made in raising awareness of environmental issues and of their relationship with development, encapsulated in the notion of "sustainability", as well as in establishing a multilateral framework involving state and non-state actors to achieve the goal of sustainability, much still needs to be done. While technical difficulties and degrees of scientific uncertainty do exist, the most difficult challenges for international cooperation in sustainable development in the new millennium lie in processes of international institutionalization -- the processes through which certain norms, meanings, and practices are made dominant, authoritative, and legitimate.

The focus on institutionalization draws attention to three dimensions of contemporary

efforts to construct a multilateral framework for sustainable development cooperation. The first is the normative dimension -- the evolution of norms, rules and principles that define and prescribe what appropriate conduct ought to be. The second is the cognitive or ideational dimension -- the changes in understandings of actors about the relationship between the environment and development that provides the basis for choosing meaningful actions. The third is the regulative dimension -- the structured contexts and settings within which states and non-state actors attempt to collaborate and coordinate activities to achieve the goal of sustainability. Although, in practice, the three dimensions of institutionalization are intertwined and overlap, greater explanatory insights into the evolution and the problems and prospects of sustainable development cooperation internationally are obtained by analyzing them separately. Since institutionalization establishes the dominant meanings that constitute collective action both cooperative and conflictual, the success or otherwise of international efforts to achieve the goal of sustainability lies in the ability to integrate or nest normative expectations with cognitive constructs, and to situate these within a regulatory framework of institutions.

The analysis is presented in five sections. The first section highlights some of the contemporary challenges to sustainable development that demand action at the global and regional levels. It sets the stage for the subsequent analyses by illustrating the dilemmas that confront multilateral efforts at achieving sustainability. Section two discusses the normative dimension of sustainable development cooperation. It traces briefly the historical evolution of international norms and principles governing the natural environment, from the Stockholm Conference in 1972 to the Johannesburg Conference in 2002, focusing on a critical assessment of the substance and efficacy of the norms. Section three discusses the cognitive dimension by identifying the factors that led to the emergence of the environment as an international issue and the changes in understandings about the environment and development. The focus is on illuminating the on-going debates over how best to link issues arising from governance of the global environment on one hand with the requirements of socio-economic and political development on the other. The fourth section discusses the regulative dimension by identifying and assessing the roles and functions of key international institutions and agencies charged with organizing and coordinating cooperative efforts towards achieving sustainable development. Section five, the concluding section, assesses the prospects for addressing the problems identified in the coming millennium, highlighting the roles of the United States and Canada.

## **2. Contemporary Challenges in Sustainable Development**

Economic growth and industrialization, as well as scientific advancements and technological innovations, have resulted, in some parts of the world, in a level of prosperity and material well-being unparalleled in human history. But these very same forces have generated deepening imbalances between human civilization and the natural environment that pose serious threats to the earth's resource-base and the sustainability of its life-support systems. International politics of the environment and development that attempts to address these imbalances is not organized around a single problem, but encompasses a number of interrelated issues, each of which generates difficult dilemmas that compound the problems of developing cooperative solutions. Six sets of

contemporary challenges for international cooperation in sustainable development may be identified.

## **2.1. Maintaining World Economic Growth, and Reducing World Poverty and Inequality**

During the period 1992-1996, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in developing countries averaged approximately 5.3 percent (compared with 2.7 percent for developed countries). This translated into an increase in per capita incomes of about 3 percent per year. This growth, however, was not distributed evenly -- sub-Saharan African and other "least developed" countries witnessed stagnation or decline in per capita GDP. Moreover, the financial crises that erupted in East Asia and parts of Latin America in 1997-98 has resulted in declines in GDP growth for countries that were among the fastest growing economies in the developing world.

According to World Bank (WB) figures, as of the end of 1997, approximately 1.3 billion people were living in poverty (the WB's definition of poverty is an income of less than \$1/day). Although the proportion of the world's population living in poverty has decreased (from about one-fifth in 1990 to about one-sixth in 1997) the absolute numbers have remained constant. Of this number, the majority are women. Approximately 1.3 billion people are without access to clean water and sanitation. These numbers are roughly the same as they were at the time of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCED) in 1992. In addition, there is greater regional variation in poverty with the greatest concentration of poverty being in sub-Saharan Africa, where average incomes in 1997 were 1.4 percent lower than they were in 1992. The challenges here are to ensure continued world economic growth in environmentally sustainable ways, improve the economic performance of least developed countries and regions, and at the same time achieve significant reductions in the incidence of poverty.

## **2.2. World Population Growth and Food Production**

World population is currently (1999) estimated at around 6 billion people and is increasing by approximately 800 million people per decade. By the year 2030, world population is expected to reach an estimated 8.5 billion. Global discourse over population is conducted within the framework of the UN population conference held every ten years -- the first in Bucharest, Romania in 1974, Mexico City in 1984, and the most recent in Cairo, Egypt in 1994. Issues arising from population growth and control are among the most divisive, and have reflected differences between developed and developing countries, and between the so-called "neomalthusians" who see dire negative consequences arising from unchecked population growth, and so-called "cornucopians" who look to technology, increased production and economic growth to meet demands of increased population. Issues arising from women's rights and reproductive health are also at the center of the debate. In addition, matters of national power and prestige, culture, race and religion further complicate the debate over population growth. The 1994 Cairo conference -- by way of compromise among the competing and divergent views -- emphasized voluntary measures as the key to "regulating" population growth.

While there may be strong disagreement on the causes, effects and approaches to world population growth, what is not in doubt is that, to keep pace with this growth, world food production will need to double in the next 30 years. The challenge here is how to increase food production in ways that are environmentally sound. The last "green revolution" in food production, which resulted in a doubling of world food production, was accomplished in part through the use of chemical inputs and irrigation schemes that were harmful to the environment. The next green revolution will have to occur with less reliance on chemicals and intensive irrigation. Although the increasing use of bioengineered products such as high-yield and pest-resistant seedlings may result in increased food production, concerns have been raised about the kind of monoculture it promotes, its impact on biodiversity, and its long-term impact on human health.

### **2.3. Conserving Biodiversity, Natural Habitats, and Natural Resources**

Only 1.7 million out of an estimated 30 million species living on the planet have been identified. Natural habitats including forests and wetlands, where many of the unidentified species live, however, are disappearing at a rate of 0.5-1 percent per year. Two factors are driving this trend -- population growth and economic growth (world GDP increased by \$2.4 trillion between 1992 and 1997) -- which together lead to expansion of infrastructure, industry, agriculture, and demands for energy, as well as increased urbanization. Another problem area is conservation of resources in the world's oceans where, for example, coastal fisheries are being depleted at an alarming rate. The challenge here is how to balance the demands of growing populations and economies with the necessity of conservation.

While some view emerging biotechnologies as possible solutions, the reality is that biotechnology cannot be an effective remedy to the problem of species-extinction and biodiversity. Bioengineered plants and animals tend to be genetically-uniform and ecologically-fragile themselves; and, through "genetic pollution", genetically-modified organisms may pose new ecological threats in already fragile ecosystems. A related problem is that of intellectual property (patents, copyrights, trade secrets and trademarks) -- an issue that surfaced during the negotiations for the convention on biological diversity at UNCED -- that raises a number of political and ethical questions about the ownership and control of genetic resources. Are they part of the "common heritage" of humanity or are they, through patent protection for example, privately-owned resources? The growing trend to convert knowledge into proprietary intellectual property, while it may increase research and development, may reduce the total stock of knowledge, and reduce access to innovative products and processes for those without the means to purchase access. Achieving sustainable development, however, requires access to the best products, technologies, and processes that do not contribute to the destruction of the natural environment.

### **2.4. Meeting the Demand for Renewable Energy**

Contemporary global energy sources (particularly the use of fossil fuels -- oil and coal) are environmentally unsustainable. They cause environmental degradation at the local level (through particulate emissions) the regional level (acid rain deposits) and the global level (greenhouse effect and climate change). Approximately 1.4 billion people

world-wide suffer from the effects of air pollution. Energy use in developing countries is projected to more than triple in the next 20 years such that by 2020 total energy use in developing countries will be double that of the OECD. Since economic growth and population growth generate increased demands for energy, the challenge is how to meet these demands in ways that are environmentally sound. This will require a shift from reliance on fossil fuels (currently around 80 percent of all electricity generated) to cleaner, more climate-friendly means.

## **2.5. Political Instability and Violence, and Social Disruption and Dislocation**

There are two apparently contradictory trends at the close of the twentieth century. While the forces of globalization (technological changes, the information revolution, etc.) appear to be pulling the world together, at the same time there is evidence of increasing fragmentation of political and social systems and structures throughout the world. Between 1990 and 1996, for example, there were on average 30 on-going violent civil conflicts in various regions of the world. There is an apparent link between the incidence of violence and poverty -- more than one-half of all low-income countries have experienced a major civil conflict in the past 15 years. There is also evidence that resource-scarcity (declines in arable land, shortages of fresh water supplies and so on) can contribute to the incidence of violent conflict, both within nations as well as between them, lending further credence to the link between the environment and security.

Over the past decade there has been a dramatic increase in displaced persons (internal refugees) and international refugees -- over 70 million people. Mass migrations of people across borders seeking better economic conditions (particularly from poorer developing countries to developed countries) can also be a source of conflict. There has also been a dramatic increase in violent crime within nations as well as internationally -- leading to the recognition of the phenomenon of transnational organized crime as a global issue. Especially disturbing are increases in violence against women and children. Both phenomena are associated with economic transitions and dislocations in what are termed "transitional economies". The challenge for the international community is to develop principles and programs that explicitly address issues of domestic governance and political reform; develop programs that alleviate the socio-economic inequities which fan the flames of ethnic violence; and develop programs explicitly targeted towards the most vulnerable groups -- women and children. It remains to be seen whether the recent trend towards democratization throughout the developing world and in Eastern Europe can be sustained, and whether it can lead to greater political and social stability.

## **2.6. Finance for Sustainable Development**

One of the most dramatic aspects of globalization over the past 30 or so years has been the extent to which private capital flows have dwarfed official capital flows in the global economy. For example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), originally intended to be the central provider of international liquidity, with approximately \$300 billion in its reserves in 1998, accounted for less than 3 percent of global liquidity. Private international financial flows (foreign direct investment, commercial bank loans,

portfolio investment, and equity securities) are the primary vehicles for development finance and investment in the contemporary globalized economy. World-wide, private capital invests about \$4 trillion annually, of which about \$1.5 trillion is invested in developing countries. This figure is six times greater than the amount invested by governments. Two challenges for sustainable development arise from the dominance of private capital flows. First, how to ensure that private investment is channeled in environmentally responsible ways. Second, how to ensure that regions of the developing world that are less attractive to private investment, especially sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia (the fastest growing regions in terms of population growth), are not further marginalized.

For the poorer developing countries that are less attractive to private investment, official development assistance (ODA) will continue to be their main source of development finance. However, while almost all developed countries at UNCED in 1992 made commitments to raise their ODA levels toward the target of 0.7 percent of GNP set by the United Nations in 1974, to date this has not occurred. In fact, in 1995 ODA as a share of donor GNP actually declined to 0.27 percent (down from 0.34 percent in 1992), the lowest level in 45 years. The challenge is to get developed countries to live up to their commitments, and to ensure that special facilities targeted towards assisting developing countries such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF) are replenished.

### **3. The Normative Dimension: The Evolution of Norms, Rules and Principles on Sustainable Development**

Most analysts agree that the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) held in Stockholm in 1972 represents a watershed in the history of the international organization of the environment. The UNCHE served to institutionalize the necessity of explicit management to deal with the problem of environmental degradation. International instruments designed to protect the environment did exist prior to Stockholm, in the mandates of international organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) mandate for the conservation of natural resources, and the International Labor Organization's (ILO) standards on occupational hazards in the work place, for example. There were also a number of treaties such as transboundary agreements on water resources. Prior to 1972, however, rules for the protection of the environment came primarily in the form of customary rules of international law.

#### **3.1. Customary International Law and the Environment Prior to 1972**

In customary international law, issues concerning the natural environment were defined in terms of states' territorial jurisdiction. Under the doctrine of state responsibility, while a state had sovereignty over the natural resources within its territory, it also had a duty to protect other states against injurious acts by individuals from within its borders, and was held responsible for any damage to the environment of another state. Support for the existence of such a customary principle, also known as the principle of "good neighborliness", is found in a number of judicial decisions, the most well-known being the *Trail Smelter* case. Thus, although states had the jurisdiction to act in the manner they chose within their territorial jurisdiction, there was an obligation not to do so in such a way as to damage the property of another state. This limitation on states'

sovereign jurisdiction was exercised on the notion that transboundary environmental harm adversely affected other states, and thus injured states had the legal right to insist on the abatement of such harm.

Thus prior to 1972, customary rules for the protection of the environment operated within a state-centric paradigm that emphasized inter-state claims to transboundary environmental harm. As a result, it suffered from at least three major weaknesses. First, although the customary principle of state responsibility did include a notion of preventing environmental harm, in practice -- as manifest in judicial arbitrations -- the emphasis was on reparations that arose after environmental harm had occurred. The system was essentially bilateral and adversarial in that the injured state whose territorial rights had been infringed would press a judicial claim against the offending state. The second weakness of the traditional approach was its bilateral character. Only states that were directly affected by a transboundary problem had the legal standing to press a claim. Thus, for example, a state that did not share a watershed with another state could not press a claim against the latter if the latter was involved in polluting underground water. The third main weakness was that environmental issues were defined in terms of states' territorial boundaries. The limitation here is immediately obvious -- the notion of territorial boundaries is somewhat absurd when attempting to deal effectively with problems such as air and water pollution, ozone depletion, ecosystem preservation, climate change, and other issues arising from the global commons. Thus although the principle of state responsibility remains a cornerstone of international environmental law, since the UNCHE it has been recognized that dealing effectively with modern environmental issues requires a multilateral preventative regime rather than a bilateral adversarial one.

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**James Busumtwi-Sam** is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, Simon Fraser University (SFU). He specializes in International Relations and Comparative International Development. He has published articles in journals and books on the politics of development finance and the role of international financial institutions; the politics of macroeconomic policy reform and financial liberalization in developing countries; international organizations and regional security; the political economy of conflict and peacebuilding in Africa; and on human security. He is co-editor of *Turbulence and New Directions in Global Political Economy* (Palgrave, 2002) and *Global Instability: Uncertainty and New Visions in Political Economy* (Kluwer, 2002). His current research focuses on the institutional bases of collective action in a number of areas in contemporary world politics.