

Development and the Environment

Environmental policy which addresses the right to a quality environment in the context of resource management and economic development.

Paper presented by Chris Albertyn at the Five Freedoms Forum conference: "South Africa at a turning point: Negotiations and the future." The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of Earthlife Africa.

To say that we are living in a period of profound transformation is to state the obvious. To point out that levels of conflict are increasing while society and the environment are in a process of collapse amounts to repeating the familiar. To admit that there is a dire need to work out new solutions based on a new structure of human cooperation is to acknowledge the inevitable. Yet there are times when even the obvious needs to be stated, the familiar must be repeated and the inevitable has to be acknowledged. I believe that this conference is such a time and I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important exchange of perceived realities.

In my work with people I have become only too aware that a deep sense of crisis is the best motivator for change. That we in South Africa are caught in such an historic moment can surely not be escaping anyone. However, we are not alone in our sense of crisis. We must be mindful that our crisis, though peculiar in some respects, is but a reflection of a greater cosmic shake-up. Humanity has reached a point in its history which is as significant as the dawn of agriculture or the industrial revolution. We cannot go on as before: globally, society and the environment alike are beginning to break down.

The question posed by John Stuart Mill in 1857 becomes more relevant today:

Towards what ultimate point is society tending by its industrial progress?

When the progress ceases, in what condition are we to expect that it will leave mankind?

One of the more recent and telling answers to the question of where industrial progress is leading us was provided by Pope John Paul II in his 1990 New Year's message:

It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence. Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness - both individual and collective - are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterised by mutual interdependence.

Forums all over the world are proffering their prescriptions to cure these ills. One concept that has become central to the debate about future economic progress is that of "sustainable development". The Brundtland report of the World Commission for Environment and Development is no exception.

Human survival and well-being could depend on success in elevating sustainable development to a global ethic.¹

Now, our brief today is to discuss a new environmental policy in the light of the relationship between economic development and environmental concern. I believe this can best be achieved by focusing on the issue of "sustainable development".

While the term "sustainable development" should not create much controversy itself, it has also come to mean whatever suits the particular position of the person using it. Two trends in definition are becoming clear. The one argument, made by those with vested industrial

interests of course, claims that it is only by having industrial growth that we can have any chance of preventing environmental degradation. The antithesis is expressed by people with a green orientation; that is, a growth at all costs scenario is what will bring about collapse. It is my opinion that the choice between these two is the real issue facing us.

Indian environmentalist, Rajni Kothari, best summarises the argument I would like to make today. In my opinion this argument is as applicable to this country now as it is to the whole globe.

Economic growth, propelled by intensive technology and fuelled by an excessive exploitation of nature, was once viewed as a major factor in environmental degradation; it has suddenly been given the central role in solving the environmental crisis. The market economy is given an even more significant role in organising nature and society. The environmentalist label and the sustainability slogan have become deceptive jargons that are used as convenient covers for conducting business as usual. This is particularly the case with the world's privileged groups, whose privileges are tied to the status quo, and who will therefore hold onto those privileges as long as they can.

If we are to accept "sustainable development" as a new ethic and economic strategy, we need to evaluate what ecological, social, political, and personal values our conceptions serve. Or, in other words, we have to acknowledge that what constitutes development or progress for one person may not be development or progress for another. "Development" is a value word embodying personal ideals, aspirations and concepts of what constitutes the "good" society. The notion of development is closely linked to concepts of progress, evolution, control of the environment, and domination of both natural and of social systems, as well as of women.

What I am saying is that at the root of it all, this is a moral and ethical issue. By morality I mean our judgements and actions regarding what is right or good; By ethics, I mean the reasoning such judgements and actions require. Before anything can be claimed to be a moral obligation, or a new "ethic", its moral content must be thoroughly debated, understood and agreed upon. What I would like to do in this introductory talk is to issue a challenge to all of us here today to submit our own moral values and judgements to rigorous scrutiny. In whose interests are our own definitions of sustainable development? What is our ethical imperative?

For the purposes of this debate I am going to take an uncompromising and hard line on this issue. I am going to argue against the assumption of the Brundtland Report of the World Commission for Environment and Development, ^{is against the notion that} that economic growth is not only compatible with environmental sustainability, it is the only way of ensuring it. I will argue, in the words of Anil Agarwal, that "the current process of economic development has not only failed to meet the basic objectives of economic development - eradication of poverty, creation of mass employment, and provision of basic needs - but it has also slowly, steadily, destroyed the global environment and mortgaged the future of the world."

Ecological balance and peace can never be found without directly addressing the structural forms of poverty that exist throughout the world. The priority of any sustainable development plan should be the provision of the means whereby a population to satisfy basic needs of housing, food, education and safe water. The discourse is now centering around how this can be achieved.

Many of the present arguments in South Africa with regard to our economic future and the redistribution of wealth are applicable globally. This political debate revolves around assumptions concerning the nature of the crisis facing society. Whether they argue for a high-wage low cost economy; privatisation or nationalisation; or foreign investment as the

solution, traditional politicians agree, contrary to evidence, that society needs to accelerate out of trouble: more production, more complex technology, more cost-effectiveness, bigger markets in other words generate more of the same formula that created our problems in the first place.

Though they call for "sustainable development", both the World Conservation Strategy and the report of the World Commission for Environment and Development promote the idea that the global economy should be one driven by market forces and profit. Both these documents reinforce the belief that growth and affluence are not only in order but are necessary to solve our problems.

Scaling these assumptions down to this country, this would be akin to big business saying the best way to redistribute wealth is to create more. This way the rich can stay rich, and the poor's problems can be solved by a trickle down process coming from the accelerated economic growth. This development strategy which places growth as the major priority works almost entirely for the already rich and delivers negligible benefits to the poor. Implicit is the assumption that the lifestyles and consumption patterns of the first world countries are an acceptable goal for all.

In the trickle down scheme of things advocated by the Brundtland Report, the identified agencies for change are those very power interests representing a wealthy elite vested in maintaining the status quo. Their solution amounts to more of the same industrial development, while remembering to take a little more concern for the environment. The overdeveloped countries are advised to grow further, the assumption being (contrary to much of the recent development literature) that this wealth will trickle down.

Many development experts, through past experience, are now arguing the opposite. Dr Gavin Keeton of the South African Development Bank, had the following to say in the same

year the Brundtland Report was published;

Instead of the benefits of growth "trickling down" to the poorest sections of the population, they have typically "trickled up" with a resultant deterioration in income distribution.²

The Brundtland Report ignores the vast body of literature which argues that growth impoverishes the majority, that it pre-empts and prohibits appropriate development, and that it inevitably results in massive resource wastage and environmental destruction. Australian environmentalist Ted Trainer provides some telling statistics. Trainer notes that while the world as a whole approximately doubled its economic wealth in the 8 years to 1976, "the proportion of the increase gained by the richest 1/5 of the world's people was 67 times the proportion gained by the poorest 1/5...to identify development with indiscriminate economic growth is to opt for a development strategy which works almost entirely for the already rich and delivers negligible benefits to the poor". During the most favourable period in the entire history of capitalism, the 1950 - 1970 long boom the richest 20% of the world increased their per capita incomes by \$270 per annum. During the same period, the poorest 500 million people averaged 73c per capita increase, per annum.³ In other words those in most desperate need have experienced virtually no improvement in their living conditions. (p.13; 1989)

In the first five years of the 1980s there was a net transfer of \$140 billion from Latin American nations to Western banks.⁴ It is this very scheme of things that has resulted in the richest 20% of the world's people consuming 80% of the world's resources. This same rich 20% are primarily responsible for the 100 fold increase in industrial pollution over the last 100 years.⁵ At the same time, human deaths related to malnutrition and environmental pollution amount to more than one Hiroshima every day of the year - 100 000 a day.⁶

However, to "protect" our resources this world spends more than \$750 billion a year on its annual military budgets - more than three million rand a minute, 24 hours a day.⁷ There are enough nuclear weapons to destroy all life several times over. Half of the world's scientists and engineers are engaged in the technology of making weapons while 35% of humanity lacks safe drinking water.⁸ By the end of 1986 there had been 1657 known nuclear test explosions, with an average cost of \$12 million each. The cost of just one test would finance the installation of 80 000 hand pumps to give Third World villages access to safe water.⁹

I am in full agreement with Professor Ron Engel, Chair of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Ethics Working Group, when he says:

The entire model of modern industrial development is seriously awry. Not only the economic values of competition and consumption but the expectation of unlimited material growth; not only the prevalence of technology but the view of the world as a machine; not only the hierarchies of power, wealth, status, or sex but the idea of hierarchy itself; not only the dichotomy of resource conservation versus ecocentrism, conservation versus development, humanity versus nature, theory versus practice, intrinsic versus extrinsic values but the need to think in dichotomies at all.

So where too then?

Rather than argue about how the economic cake should be divided, the Green path disputes its size and ingredients, saying that it is the issue of the quantity and quality of the productive forces themselves that needs to be addressed. Yes there is an urgent need for growth. Growth that is geared to meet the basic needs of the majority, not the wealthy minority - in other words bottom up, not top down.

If only a few upper and middle class people reap the benefits of development the masses can never be convinced of the value of the environmental ethic. It is only by aiming at an equitable distribution of resources, particularly for the poor majority, that makes the broad assumption of such an ethic possible.

Greens are calling for a society that bases itself upon the features found in undisturbed ecosystems - sustainability, diversity, a multiplicity of niches, efficient energy use and the recycling of materials. European Greens have begun translating principles of soft technology, a steady state economy, human scale institutions and a population size within the environment's long-term carrying capacity, into practicable policies. They are talking deeper than just environmental protection for the efficient control and management of the natural environment for the benefit of humankind. They are talking about profound changes in our perception of the role of human beings in our planetary ecosystem.

What we need to do here in southern Africa is to articulate these principles into a working proposition that is appropriate to our African context. Along with the question of growth comes the question of how much, if any, industrialisation is needed. There is a strong argument saying the problems in Africa are not going to be solved by imitating the capital intensive technological pattern of free enterprise. Also pointed out, by President Nyerere of Tanzania, is that European Socialism and Soviet Communism are meant for large-scale industrial economies with highly centralised beauracratc planning.

We need to very carefully question the commonly held assumption that industrialisation is the answer to our problems. The Brundtland report estimates that a 5 to 10 fold increase in industrial development in the Third World will help solve its problems. Leaving aside the logistics of such an exercise, what would this mean for the environment, resource and energy problems? What would happen to this increased Third World export potential in a world of chronic gluts, protection and trade wars with even the richest countries struggling to solve

their huge deficit and balance of trade problems by increasing exports? Then we have the fallacy that such a development will solve unemployment.

I quote from Nedbank's February 1990 "Guide to the Economy"

If anything employment receded in the productive sectors during the 1980s. In the mining sector it declined from 715 000 in 1980 to 704 000 by August 1989. Manufacturing (remained the same) at 460 000 ... In all there was a mere increase of 19 000 in employment in the productive sectors in an era when the economically active population in South Africa, excluding the TBVC countries, grew from 8,2 million to 10,7 million, that is by 2,5 million people.

Africa needs to pioneer its own way of development, avoiding the pitfalls of both capitalist and communist industrialisation. Urban and rural development should be organised specifically to suit differing conditions. Development should be localised. The people most likely to live with the consequences of development decisions should have the most active role in reaching those decisions. The Greens in Europe are beginning to translate exactly these principles in practicable policies for their context. We need to do the same here.

If we are to have any hope of succeeding it is crucial that non-governmental organisations concerned with poverty, human rights, population and environmental issues form broad coalitions. After all, our goals are ethically coherent and mutually reinforcing.

In closing I would like to quote an African environmentalist who is at the forefront of such moves, Professor Jimoh Omo-Fadaka, executive chair of African NGOs Environment Network based in Nairobi:

The solution that appears most obvious is that grassroots movements all over Africa should form a coalition. Together they can mount pressure to protect

the African environment and improve the quality of life. Yet, it is easier to say this than to say how it can be done. So we end, as we began, with the all-important question of "how". How do we make the modern state an instrument of moral transformation, first by demilitarising it and then by liberating it from the global tentacles of domination, monopoly, and ecological and cultural exploitation.¹⁰

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3. Trainer, F.E. (1988). Developed to Death: Rethinking Third World Development. Marshall Pickering: London. (See chapter three).
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5. Clark, W.C. (1989), Managing Planet Earth, Scientific American, 261(3), 19-26.
6. George, S. (Ibid) page 270.
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