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BEYOND CATCH PHRASES : WHAT DOES SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REALLY MEAN?



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"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of

the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" — Our Common Future (the Brundtland Report).

This is the concise definition of sustainable development offered in what is arguably the most important document of the second half of the century. In many ways, the Brundtland Report is important not so much for what it says, but for the reaction it has stimulated.

It has had a galvanizing effect on international development at a crucial time. It made sustainable development a political issue by the very fact that it was a consensus document — not just from the East and West but also from the North and South.

Clearly, the Brundtland Report achieved its purpose: it got people talking about sustainable development. As a result, we have had a burst of analyses and articles about what we are doing and where we are going in both developed and developing

countries. Indeed, sustainable development has become official policy in dozens of organizations around the world, most notably the World Bank.

All of this, and yet few people can offer a good explanation of what sustainable development really means. As always, confusion and misunderstanding are frequent side-effects of lofty proposals on environment and economic development.

The Brundtland Report must take at least some responsibility for the confusion, for its own definition is ambiguous.

Its definition is not new, clear, nor is it really complete. The authors have turned out to be their own worst enemies — they failed to draw out the implications of their own statements. Simply put, the authors want to have their cake and eat it too.

Sustainable development is a fundamentally radical notion that we must learn to use in all of our work. But, at the same time, it is conservative in that it can work within the traditional framework of economic theory. It is an alternative economics not an alternative to economics.

Sustainable development does not mean economics should be ignored, simply looked at from a significantly different perspective. It contradicts many common ideas about economic growth — but it does not say, in a knee-jerk fashion, that all economic growth is bad.

The inability to understand what sustainable development means has led to its mistaken acceptance by many organizations. Those using it as a standard often do not comprehend its implications.

Some Misconceptions — and a Better Definition

Because misconceptions surround the term sustainable development, a few clarifiers should be kept in mind. The adjective is "sustainable" not "sustained." The noun is "development" not "growth" and the word "economic" does not appear.

Although these distinctions may appear simplistic, they are important. Growth, for instance, means to increase in size by adding material. Development, on the other hand, is the realization of potential.

Many people use the term "sustainable growth" but it is a contradiction in terms. Sustainable refers to limits whereas growth means physical increase — the two concepts do not mix. Sustainable development, however, means limits placed on potential — quality can always be expanded, and in many more ways than mere physical size.

A better understanding of the idea of sustainable development can be found in a report by the World Conservation Strategy, which actually predated the Brundtland Report:

"The emerging paradigm of sustainable development... seeks to develop strategies and tools to respond to five broad requirements:

- Integration of conservation and development.

- Satisfaction of basic human needs.
- Achievement of equity and social justice.
- Provision for social self-determination and cultural diversity.
- Maintenance of ecological integrity.

These challenges are so strongly interrelated that it is difficult, and indeed unhelpful, to arrange them in hierarchical or priority order. Each is both a goal itself and a prerequisite to the achievement of the others."

This definition of sustainable development is better than that of the Brundtland Report because it does not rely on one specific axis for explanation. It points to the many implications and interconnected aspects inherent within the term sustainable development. It also confronts the incorrect notion that environmentalists are not interested in people.

Where Are We Now? Sustainable Development as a Microconcept

Environmentalism has made significant gains at the individual project level. New tools such as "environmental and social impact assessments" can indicate to what degree economic activity affects the environment. These tools allow for the fact that the environment serves as a repository for waste as well as a source of materials for production. They also show an increased recognition of the aesthetic value of nature and its resources.

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