

THE UNSUSTAINABILITY OF 'SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT' IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

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Over the last decade 'education for sustainable development' has become a central concept in environmental education (EE). In 1980 the *World Conservation Strategy* (WCS) was established by the International Union of Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), in collaboration with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Its three objectives of conservation were: the maintenance of 'essential ecological processes', the preservation of 'genetic diversity' and the 'sustainable utilization of resources' (Chennells, 1993:4). In 1987, a year after the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster, the World Commission on Environment and Development issued its landmark report, *Our Common Future*, which tackled particularly the third WCS objective and put the concept of 'sustainable development' before the world's political leaders. Broadly, 'development' is,

the modification of the biosphere and the application of human, financial, and living and non-living resources to satisfy human needs and improve the quality of human life (IUCN, 1980:para 1.4).

'Sustainability' is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987:47). What the WCED report did was to locate 'sustainable development' within the economic and political context of international development.

Instead of trying to enter the debate in the usual way about what exactly 'sustainable development' is, I am going to approach it from a different angle and start off by looking at what it is *not*. It should *not* be equated with sustaining the present patterns of consumption and waste generated by

economically dominant societies. Redclift (1993) suggests that sustainability is often linked to development which asserts the notion of 'progress', usually economic progress. The implication of such a view is that it takes for granted the desirability of dominant economic practices and seeks to impose these as widely as possible, without encouraging a critique thereof. Daly (1993) also warns of the dangers of developing sustainability along the lines of current growth patterns. "It is impossible for the world economy to grow its way out of poverty and environmental degradation" (Daly, 1993:267). In fact, he claims that sustainable development means less economic growth.

I will not add to the burgeoning volume of literature that tries to address the question, 'development of *what*, by *whom*, for what *purpose*?'. I shall pick up on two key concepts that are central in the divergent debates on sustainable development. After identifying these two key concepts, I try to make sense of them by discussing their implications in a South African context.

The first central notion is that traditional communities (i.e. marginalised from the mainstream economy) have great worth: they have often managed to sustain themselves for centuries before being crushed by 'progress'. Their long-term sustainability is evidence, it is claimed, of their extensive knowledge of and love for their local natural environment. When making decisions about local environmental issues in particular and about sustainable development in general, the *knowledge and participation of local communities are essential* (See Adams & McShane, 1992; O'Donoghue, 1993; Orr, 1992; Prakash, 1995). This is also echoed in the Rio Declaration:

Indigenous people and their communities and other local communities, have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognise and duly support their identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development (UNCED, 1992, Principle 22).

Prakash (1995) argues that although the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 claimed to encourage participation by local communities, it saw 'sustainable development' as something to be managed by 'ecocrat' experts, informed by complicated legal issues and specialised scientific data. The alternative Global NGO Forum at the same time drew up *The Earth Charter* which, according to Prakash, redefines what we mean by sustainability. The Global Forum, made up largely by grassroots community groups, claimed to represent the millions of people struggling on the margins of national economic systems, attempting to survive the destruction of their environment and to regenerate their "own ways of living in their non-modern cultural spaces, in their formerly flourishing 'commons'" (Prakash, 1995:5).

The Global Forum's multitude of alternative quests for redefining cultural flourishing, social justice and ecological sustainability do not proclaim a universal recipe or mould. Instead, resisting the unsustainable global agendas of the dominant societies, they urge the humble acceptance of a multiplicity of cultural notions of what constitutes a good life ... (*ibid*).

The second key notion embodied in 'sustainable development' also emerges in Prakash's discussion. Despite the attempt by local communities to redefine their *own* cultural notion of what constitutes the good

life, there is an assumption of a *common* moral goal: the duty to care for the environment. Principle 2 of *The Earth Charter* notes that "we recognise our diversity and our common partnership", but makes no attempt to address the assumed link. The notion of a common good is in seeming contradiction to the first key concept, in that instead of focusing on 'multiplicity', it focuses on 'commonality'. In another paper (Bak, 1992), I looked at the tension between own notions of the good life and global common goods, but this is not an angle I wish to pursue here. What I do want to highlight is the *moral underpinnings of the goal of sustainable development in securing the common good*.

I think that writers such as Prakash (1995) and Orr (1992) confuse these two notions into a romanticised picture of 'pre-modern' societies with their knowledge of the environment and their commitment to a common ecological good. They attribute a kind of 'ecological literacy' to them which means that these societies (and traditional communities) have "theoretical and practical understanding, moral imagination and aesthetic sensibility" and they "clearly appreciate the natural resources they use because they live sufficiently close to them" (Prakash, 1995:10). This approach assumes that these kinds of communities know what is (morally) best. It assumes that 'small is beautiful' or, put differently, 'local is good'. By obfuscating the distinction between these two concepts of sustainable development, two different kinds of questions are confused with each other: i.e.

- a) the question of what is? (or what is realistically attainable?), and
- b) the question of what is good? (or what is morally desirable?).

In the rest of the paper I shall focus on the *link* between local community participation and the securing of the common good, hopefully without obfuscating the distinction between questions of what is and what is good. I shall argue that we cannot

assume that local communities, or those most directly affected by the problem, will necessarily base their decisions on the need or wish to care for the environment.

In a controversial paper, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, published first in 1968, Hardin, influenced by Hobbes, looks at the management of communally owned property. He takes as his example the early practice of people grazing their cattle on communally owned grazing land, the 'commons'. The practice was beneficial to all those who participated until more and more people began to graze more and more cattle on the land. The implication of the increase in cattle and the limited natural resource of grazing was that people *for the sake of their mutual interests* would curtail their number of cattle. If not, it was reasoned, all grazing would soon be destroyed and no one would then benefit. It was thus assumed that participants would decide to curtail their number of cattle voluntarily and so sustain their own individual benefit. Hardin shows that, instead of securing their own long-term good, individuals stand to *gain more direct economic benefits by increasing their number of grazing cattle than by sharing the cost of overgrazing with all*. The rational herder will thus conclude that it is more beneficial to him directly to increase his use of the natural resources. Moreover, if he does not do so, the chances are that his neighbour will, and this noble sacrifice only creates scope for others to enrich themselves. And so, instead of securing the common good through individual sacrifice (or curtailment of growth), individual sacrifice encourages exploitation by other less scrupulous participants.

Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit, in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons (Hardin, 1993:136).

The tragedy of the commons example holds significant implications for the idea of sustainable development. Our modern commons are commonly owned resources like the sea and the air. In order to secure the sustainability of these resources, economic units (countries) need to curtail the use of these common resources (or at least ensure their long-term re-use) and so ensure their sustainability for future generations. But the example of the tragedy of the commons shows that this is unlikely to happen. It throws doubt on a number of commonly held assumptions.

First, it casts doubt on the idea that participants will base their decisions on considerations of the common good. Just because something is morally desirable does not mean that people will necessarily act in accordance. In order to highlight this, it is important to distinguish between the two kinds of questions I outlined above. It means that individuals (be they individual persons, communities or countries) will not necessarily regulate their access to the commons for the general good. More likely, individuals will consider their 'best bet', i.e. the one that holds maximum benefits for them.

A possible response to this would be to promote education. It could be claimed that people do not make the right decisions because they are unenlightened or even irrational. On this assumption, education for sustainability would make people aware of how their decisions would affect the common good and once they had this knowledge, their decisions would be based on securing the common good.

But this is naive, I would argue. The tragedy of the commons illustrates that even *rational* considerations would rather secure short-term benefits for the individual than long-term benefits for the group. So, the example also casts doubt on the faith in rationality of securing the common good. It is not only nasty, brutish and uninformed individuals that will make such selfish decisions; as

Hardin's example demonstrates, even *rational* individuals will deliberate that it will be to their greater advantage to exploit the commons. A further illustration of this is presented by the 'prisoner's dilemma' in which two prisoners are given the option to tell on the other (which will result either in their going free or being given a life sentence) or to remain silent and being guaranteed a light sentence. Both prisoners independently opt for the first option, on the basis of their not being sure that the other will also remain silent. The example illustrates that if two (or more) competing users of a common resource have the choice of either conserving or of depleting they will each opt to secure their own maximum advantage, for fear that if they do not, their competitor will. For a society (or international ecological body) to appeal to individuals (or countries) to restrain exploitation of the commons for the sake of the common good on the basis of an appeal to their conscience or moral considerations, is to set up a selective system whereby the unscrupulous and immoral will thrive!

What this means is that the appeal for sustainable development cannot be based on an appeal to conscience, on an assumption that just because one uses the resources, one is committed to conserving them on a long-term basis. Put differently, sustainable development cannot rest on the premise that community participation will secure the common good.

But what does this mean? Does it mean that the notion of 'sustainable development' is a counterfeit, a massive scam perpetrated by 'free riders' who secretly aim to exploit the common resources to advantage themselves? Perhaps we need not be so pessimistic about humans and human life as short, nasty and brutish, as Hobbes would lead us to believe. Winpenny and Blaikie (1992) express the belief that despite the tragedy of the commons, not all decisions, even rational ones, are motivated by self-interest. They appeal to the idea that 'bumble-bees *can* fly', despite all

aeronautical principles to the contrary. Their assertion is that despite convincing arguments to the contrary, people *do* act unselfishly. Individuals do cooperate to solve common problems. Appeals to conscience can help overcome resistance to collective action and individuals do act on long-term considerations rather than on immediate wants. This resurrection of our faith in humanity is comforting, but it remains a shaky premise on which to base the immense project of sustainable development.

I have questioned the assumed link between the two key notions of sustainable development and have argued that just because communities are affected, this is no guarantee that they will work towards securing the common good, and even if they knew what this common good is, this is no guarantee that they are committed to it. I shall now focus more specifically on each key concept separately. I shall first of all look at what the concept of 'community' might entail in a South African context, and secondly, at whether we can talk about a *common* good in our inherited fragmented society.

If participation by the local community is essential when deciding about local environmental issues, the question naturally arises of what would constitute such a local community. In debates about sustainable development, local community usually refers to people located within a specific geographical area, an area with particular natural resources, a bio-region. Because of their physical proximity, it is assumed, inhabitants will need to share resources and this physical sharing fosters a sense of communality and an interest in securing the common good (although as I have shown, this is a very tenuous link). In other words, inhabitants in a common natural region will develop a sense of social belonging, a community. But this is simply not true in South Africa. In KwaZulu Natal, for example, political differences have created antagonistic factions within the same

geographical region. Political supremacy has far outweighed considerations about sharing natural resources. Also, in most towns in South Africa, town planning was along lines of racial segregations, divisions among inhabitants of the same geographical region. We just cannot talk glibly about a geographical region (bio-region) as constituting a 'local community'.

Moreover, the concept of 'community' entails some notion of homogeneity. I can be a member of different communities, for example, a member of the Catholic community, a member of the ANC, a member of the local tennis club, a member of the academic community. However, all these different communities are bonded by a degree of sameness in their members, or put differently, by a shared discourse. But can we talk about a fairly homogeneous community in, for example, South African urban townships? People with different interests and different languages and different practices do of course live together, but as I have shown, sheer physical proximity does not necessarily constitute a sense of *community*. There are active environmental groups operating in townships, e.g. the Soweto based NEAC (National Environmental Awareness Campaign), but one cannot equate these to the local community.

Another feature of 'community' is a sense of rootedness or permanence, a sense of 'belonging'. Communities are shaped by the development of their distinct patterns of interaction, but these can only develop over a period of time. I find it very difficult to conceive of 'instant communities'. With the abolition of Influx Control and the Group Areas Act, there has been a massive shift in demographic concentrations - rapid urbanisation sees thousands of newcomers streaming to urban centres. Coupled with this vast migration, are refugees from beyond the South African borders. With inhabitants of a specific area in a state of migratory flux, it is difficult for a sense of community to take root.

And finally, apartheid has distorted development of local communities. On the one hand, it has destroyed many rural communities through a system of migrant labour in which families were separated and economically active members (usually men) were removed from rural areas to industrial or mining centres. On the other hand, apartheid tried to force the development of 'communities' along lines of language and ethnicity by designating specific residential areas, institutions of learning and political homelands to specific linguistic/ethnic groups. In both cases, political coercion forced existing communities apart and tried to create new 'communities' by forcing people together.

All this complicates our talk of 'local community participation'. Of course, there are vibrant and flourishing local communities in South Africa, as evidenced by the strong bond in many communities during the 'struggle years', but the point I want to make is that we cannot assume that local community participation is a given when we have to formulate environmental policy of sustainable development. Much of the debate around sustainable development comes from contexts where certain political, economic and social infrastructure is taken for granted. However, in a context like South Africa where there are high levels of economic uncertainty, political instability and social insecurity, the appeal to 'local community' participation can blind us to the particular problems of division, incohesion and flux we face in South Africa.

The last part of the paper deals with the second key issue of sustainable development, viz the notion of a common good. Again, I want to note that the common good is not something given; its meaning is often obscure or contested. The common good is not something *outside* or independent of the community in which it is rooted - if it were, it would be an imposed set of ideas that would not necessarily be shared by the members of that community. After all, as the word implies, the good is

something intersubjective, something shared. Before drawing the conclusion that the concept of 'common good' presupposes a concept of 'community', I want to elaborate on the necessity of intersubjective meanings in the development of our understanding of what constitutes the common good.

Taylor's (1985) notion of intersubjective meanings points to a way in which we can make better sense of what we understand by the 'common good' and its rootedness in institutions and actual practices (patterns of do's and do not's).

We can think of the difference between our society and the simplified version of the traditional Japanese village as consisting in this, that the range of meaning open to the members of the two societies is very different. But what we are dealing with here is not subjective meaning which can fit into the categorial grid of behavioural political science, but rather intersubjective meanings. It is not just that the people in our society all or mostly have a given set of ideas in their heads and subscribe to a given set of goals. The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relation, of mutual action (Taylor, 1985:36).

In other words, for the meanings and norms of our practices to be intersubjective, they need to be rooted in our practices and social relations. These meanings constitute a certain set of common terms of reference, the very terms in which human beings live their lives, constitute their self-understandings and shape their institutions. These intersubjective meanings are what bind people's lives together into a common framework of meaning and so form the basis of community.

For Taylor (1985) there can be shared meanings when beliefs, norms and practices converge as, for example, where employees of a large corporation all have the shared interest to keep the company going, for in doing so they are likely to serve their own interests by having a job. But one would hesitate to call this corporation a 'community', or at the most a 'weak' community. What makes a community a community, for Taylor, are stronger intersubjective meanings that are part of the common reference world where the sharing is a collective act that is commonly sustained. The 'weaker' or convergent meanings do not form as powerful a net as common meanings. And for Taylor, the result of powerful common meanings is the development of a greater web of intersubjective meanings as people live in community (1985:39).

Taylor's emphasis on intersubjective meanings that constitute and sustain communities is an important one. People express their meanings in their practices, social relations and institutions which embody and, in turn, sustain *that which they deem worthwhile to embody and sustain*, in other words, their common good. For a common good to be sustained and supported by the practices, relations and institutions by which people live means that there must be some intersubjective sense of 'belonging', a sense of community.

The point of the above is to show that the common good presupposes intersubjective meanings (as manifested in the practices, social relations and institutions) of a community. But if this premise is true, and if the premise that the sense of community in South Africa is largely fragmented, divided and in flux, then it weakens the presence of a common good in South Africa. Even if we were to grant that there *are* communities in South Africa (in the Taylorian sense), we must be aware that these communities have developed largely in the context of

apartheid. What this means is that separate institutions, social relations and practices have developed over the years for differently classified population groups. Following Taylor's argument, this means that different intersubjective meanings have developed and so, different conceptions of the common good. (In a previous paper, Bak 1995, I elaborate on this point, showing that not every group in South Africa accept that the implementation of environmental education is a good thing; there are competing concepts of the common good based on notions of economic justice). So even if we were to accept that there are (Taylorian) communities, given the inheritance of divisions, these different communities will have different common goods. So talk of *the* common good in South Africa is loose talk.

Finally, the two premises that cast doubt on the existence of communities and of the common good in South Africa, also cast doubt on the chances of success of an environmental policy based on sustainable development. What this means is that we need to focus on the question of what is possible, i.e. the question of whether sustainable development *can* be pursued, rather than try and obfuscate the problems under a guise of what is morally desirable, i.e. to focus on the question whether sustainable development *ought* to be pursued. Unless we address the problems found in a South African context in trying to answer the first question, sustainable development is unsustainable.

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