Abstracts

Environment and development: reflections on the concept of “sustainable development”

1 Audrey AKNIN, Géraldine FROGER, Vincent GÉRONIMI, Philippe MÉRAL and Patrick SCHEMBRI

2 There is a striking contrast between the political and media consensus on the need for sustainable development and the heated controversy about the concept itself. It is a polysemic term that is extensively and exhaustively employed. To keep the debate open, we should avoid presenting this concept as a new universal principle of good – otherwise there can be no discussion of how it is to be exercised, what it can contribute and what its limitations are. It seems important to deconstruct the concept or re-examine how it emerged historically, to see how the sustainable development discourse arose and how the idea acquired political legitimacy. From an examination of the origin and development of the “sustainable development” concept we can analyse the discourse of the dominant economic discourse and examine some aspects of how the notion is applied in developing countries. In our view, any discussion of sustainable development must address questions of conflicting values, failure to distinguish between different spatial and temporal scales, and the actors and/or social groups taking part in its implementation or excluded from it.

The social dimension of sustainable development: poverty reduction or social sustainability?

3 Jean-Luc DUBOIS and François-Régis MAHIEU

4 The social dimension of sustainable development is mostly underestimated. The persistence of poverty and social exclusion during growth, the increase in inequality and vulnerability everywhere, brings back this issue on the scene. Three criteria contribute to social sustainability: access to goods and services, reinforcement of capabilities, and equity within and between generations. If any of these is not respected, social
sustainability becomes unrealistic. Current policies do not always consider these criteria and may be the cause of serious social trouble and irreversible situations. Precautionary principles are, therefore, required to ensure social sustainability. They would constrain the design of innovative policies aiming at justice and sharing. Presently, development policies focus mainly on poverty reduction, which is only one side of sustainability. Avoiding the issue of inequality, especially of capabilities, increases the risk of non-sustainable development. However, it is to be hoped that the introduction of participation as a governance tool for the design of public policies would reduce such a risk.

Avatars of biodiversity from Rio to Johannesburg

Catherine AUBERTIN

The Convention on Biological Diversity agreed at the Rio Summit was meant to define the terms for an international system of regulation to protect biodiversity. Although in practice it has endorsed the proliferation of property rights over live forms and left it to private law contracts to optimise the use of local biodiversity knowledge, it has also provided a new cognitive context for addressing general issues concerning relations between humans and their environment (and hence human relations as a whole).

This chapter outlines this history, showing how the concept of biodiversity has changed at each stage in the development of the global environmental problem and highlighting the accompanying changes in the relations between science, power structure and society. Biodiversity was originally a scientific concept, a synthesis of biology and evolution studies encompassing all aspects of the relationship between humans and their environment. With the Convention on Biological Diversity, genetic resources were then turned into tradable commodities and local nature knowledge into sociodiversity. Now, on the eve of the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, the biodiversity erosion issue tends to be subsumed in the consensus slogan of eradicating poverty and in the anti-globalisation discourse. The various avatars of biodiversity, which reveal so many visions of the world, allow to trace the changes in the issues at stake in the biodiversity Convention, from the preparations for the Rio summit to the eve of the Johannesburg summit.

Natural heritage and traditional knowledge

Marie-Christine CORMIER-SALEM and Bernard ROUSSEL

There is growing interest in traditional knowledge for its potential value in biodiversity conservation and sustainable management of the environment. Official science was long dismissive of such knowledge; the prevailing technicist approach denigrated local resource management practices and often regarded them as the main cause of environmental degradation. Now, traditional knowledge and practices have been rehabilitated and are sometimes overvalued. Scientists – particularly naturalists, ecologists and agricultural scientists – regard them as a body of new, relevant and precise information on natural environments and biodiversity. Developers and planners see them as a potential source of remedies for current environmental trends, which they consider negative, and of prudent management and sustainable development of resources. The main focus of the current interest in traditional knowledge is on cataloguing, protecting
and promoting it: it has become an object to be conserved rather than a management tool.

While this enthusiasm for farmers’ knowledge is a recent development, there is in fact an abundant body of earlier studies in this field, with a wide range of objectives and approaches. This chapter reviews those studies that help to explain the origin of the links between local knowledge, sustainable development, environmental management and natural heritage. The authors also consider the issues and strategies that are now tending to raise traditional knowledge to the status of heritage, and describe the consequences.

Land, environment and development. Making good use of refugees: The settlement of Sudanese refugees in Uganda

Luc CAMBRÉZY

Since the Rio Conference, environmental protection has been incorporated in the programme of many international organisations – including the High Commission for Refugees. But surveys in parts of Africa that are receiving refugees show that deforestation by refugee settlers is essentially a political problem, involving asylum conditions, poverty, lack of infrastructure and the weakness of the State in Southern countries.

Since it cannot address the root of these problems and lacks the means for preventive action, humanitarian action is increasingly engaging in costly efforts to rehabilitate vegetation cover after the event, with uncertain and debatable results. At the same time host countries tend to put forward environmental degradation as an argument to justify making more humanitarian aid a condition for fulfilling their duty, under international law, to protect refugees. The political and financial stakes are high and analyses of the real impact of refugees on the environment are biased; this leads these countries to make the environment a bargaining point that has more to do with the market economy than any real awareness of shared responsibilities. In this way environmental problems become dissociated from the political and territorial issues that actually determine the control of, and access to, resources.

The sustainable city in the South: between Utopia and practice

Pascal METZGER, Dominique COURET and URBI

One of the declared objectives of the Rio Summit was to promote “a viable model for human settlements”. What has become of this “viable model” ten years later, with more than half the Earth’s population now living in cities? Is there a model of the “sustainable city” taking shape in discourse or in practice? What are the social and economic realities of sustainable development in cities and towns?

The scientific research situation is disappointing in that the environmental problem is still the preserve of the earth and life sciences, for which the city is not an object of study, although there are studies that approach the question of urban environments from various angles. At the practical level, however, the sustainable development concept has
generated some real initiatives, with new urban management policies based on formalisation of ideas, procedures and tools. This formalisation is taking place at the international level, with a marked influence from Northern countries. However, the new urban policies and practices in Southern cities are bound both by free-market economic development and by protection of the global environment. On analysis, actions worth promoting for sustainable development prove to be incompatible with a free market economy. Thus it is fair to ask how far the sustainable development concept changes anything on the development front.

From global discourse to local practice, or how environmental conventions affect tropical forest management

Geneviève MICHON

The question of the relationship between global discourse and local environmental practice is an essential one. Ten years on from Rio, it is time to consider what the conventions and declarations of good intent that resulted from that conference have really changed in the field. This chapter examines how the main ideas on conservation and participative management that developed from Rio have been perceived and reappropriated at the local level, where resources are managed on a day to day basis.

The author addresses the question by reviewing the various standards and management instruments directly derived from the concept of “indigenous community”. She focuses on forest environments, which combine numerous natural resource management issues. She analyses several examples of how local practices and discourse have been reorganised around such fashionable concepts as the “tradition” (particularly the “environmental wisdom”) of forest people, “participation”, “governance” and “communitarianism”. She compares the discourse and practice of two kinds of local actors: villagers living from the forest (the practitioners) and forest administrators (those who make local decisions about forest management). Her aim is to show that Rio has served above all as window-dressing for the continued pursuit of power games (power to exclude or include and to decide on access to resources, types of use, sharing of authority over resources and distribution of the benefits of such resource use) in which each interest group reshapes its discourse to try to maintain its position while winning the support of new external actors such as donors and national and international NGOs.

Evolving ideas on the impact of population growth on development

Michel PICOUËT and Frédéric SANDRON

Most studies of the relationship between population growth and environment start from a more or less subtle Malthusian position based on two hypotheses: that population growth is bad for the environment, and that it is an exogenous factor unaffected by the environmental situation of the population concerned. Few demographers have examined this issue, yet the problem of future generations’ prospects is explicit in the most widespread definition of sustainable development. The authors’ observations about the
connection between population growth and environment are equally valid for the relationship between population growth and living standards, which is also important since sustainable development has both socio-economic and environmental implications.

This chapter surveys current views of the linkages between population, population growth and sustainable development. It presents a synthesis of a current of social science research, more subtle than the Malthusian and Boserupian theories, which emerged in the 1980s and spread in the 1990s. It addresses the question of demographic transition and the linkages between population growth, economic development and environment, presents a case study from rural Tunisia and comments on demographic projections. The author argues that between demography, economy and environment, population growth is not necessarily to be stigmatised.

**Sanitary cordon for the North, food insecurity for the South: food dilemma today**

Georges COURADE and Francis DELPEUCH

Food issues are currently in the spotlight throughout the world. While recent events have made us acutely aware of the dangers of ever-increasing “artificialisation” in the food sector in the West, there are still many people in the world who do not have enough to eat and whose situation shows no immediate promise of improvement. This is the case not only in poor countries but also, to varying degrees, in rich countries. It applies in dry and rainy regions alike, in remote rural areas and major cities, in countries at war and at peace. Despite the remarkable increase in grain yields and availability for solvent consumers in a small number of food surplus countries, hunger is still the same scourge humanity has lived with for millennia. In the North, consumer confidence has been shaken and we are less certain that the food we buy is safe for our health. In the South, despite the advances of the genetic revolution, malnutrition and food insecurity are rife. In view of the complexity of today's food and nutrition problems – with roots in the political and social spheres in town and country – and the uncertainties born of globalisation, development needs to be reconsidered from a fully comprehensive standpoint. This means taking account of agricultural production, public health, social welfare, long-term environmental impacts and, no less important, cultural and culinary diversity.

**The emergence of microparasitism in the prevailing global macroparasitism: an obstacle to sustainable development?**

Pierre VIDAL and Jean-Paul GONZALEZ

In the 1960s and '70s, infectious diseases were believed to be nearing extinction thanks to major advances in medicine and public health, vaccination and biotherapy. Then, twenty to twenty-five years ago, they made a violent come-back, with unknown bacteria and viruses causing new serious or fatal diseases. The most striking of the new or spreading viral diseases are hemorrhagic Dengue fever, Ebola fever and AIDS.
Historians have taught us much about the vital impact of infectious diseases on the history and fate of human communities. The authors of this chapter present an outline of the major diseases that have disturbed economic and political development over the past two thousand years and give examples of the human factors that caused or influenced them. Then they review some recently-emerged infectious diseases, highlighting their anthropic causes. They assess the real or potential threat these diseases represent for sustainable development, stressing the close involvement of all life’s biodiversity and interwoven elements, including human activity, in the emergence of pathogens affecting humans, animals or plants, on land and in the oceans.

Their provisional conclusion shows that we have real means at our disposal for prevention and defence. But the fight against microparasites must be intensified, unified and conducted wide; pathogens know no frontiers. The issue of the infectious diseases that menace our societies is clearly a crucial one for sustainable development. After all, evolution teaches us that there were microparasites on Earth long before humans and that they will be here as long as our species lasts – and after, if there is an “after”. They are part of our history, and a determining factor in it.

The challenge of globalisation: knowledge sharing or marketisation?

Bernard SCHLEMMER, Jean-Yves MARTIN, Abdelkader SID AHMED, Roland WAAST

The only comparative advantage in international economic competition today is knowledge. The question of knowledge is therefore a central issue for development. For some countries the next few years will be decisive: either they will manage to play their part in scientific exchange or they will be eliminated, from trade as well as knowledge exchange. Maintaining scientific capacity depends on an efficient teaching system, and this implies striking a balance between basic education and cutting-edge training. At present this equilibrium has been broken, under pressure from the World Bank particularly, in favour of an increase in numbers of basic education teachers. There has been an identifiable reaction, with schools springing up on the fringe of the public education system; but even when it manages to educate individuals, this spontaneous movement has difficulty keeping them in their home country. Yet with non-scholastic knowledge and access to the scientific mainstream, the countries of the South still have a chance to stay in the race. Their knowledge heritage offers a real possibility of entry in the industrial market. In science, research conditions are changing rapidly and the Southern countries are adapting to varying degrees. But the nub of the problem depends on decisions taken in the North: they will opt either for security and the market-oriented solution or for co-development. It is a race against time.

Sustainable development as an instrument for global integration

Bernard HOURS
This chapter examines the concept of sustainable development from the perspective of historical North-South relations, and development as a Western ideology that has been through several phases of development.

The first part briefly reviews the twin evolutionist concepts of development and underdevelopment in the Rostovian, linear model of progress. In this view, development is regarded as economic first and foremost – the rest is supposed to follow automatically. The USA and USSR, the two great powers of the Cold War, both took this evolutionist view. The second part examines the emergence of struggles to gain local control over development, in the Third-World years of 1970-1990. With theories of domination and unfair trade came the concepts of community development and self-reliant development (the then fashionable Tanzanian model). In this phase, social development had an important place alongside or ahead of the economy. The third part makes an ideological analysis of sustainable development. The emergence of this concept reflected a certain failure of development. It is an instrument of global integration because it calls for regulation and responsibility in resource management and furthers the increasing power of multinational institutions. Humanitarian and “green” intervention, global public goods, the rights market and nature-oriented sustainable development are all part of the integration process. Although sustainable development is also a Utopian formulation that mobilises energies, in essence it is an ideological smokescreen and an instrument of global management.