Sustainable Development in the African Context: Revisiting Some Theoretical and Methodological Issues

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Résumé: *L'accent de plus en plus mis sur 'le développement durable' permettra-t-il d'éviter les échecs auxquels ont abouti les paradigmes de développement classiques? Ces paradigmes avaient tendance à reproduire et à intensifier les rapports inégaux de dépendance entre les nations. Ils renforcaient voire maximisaient les structures de contrôle, d'exploitation, d'injustice et d'inégalité entre et dans les sociétés. Les différences hiérarchiques de pouvoir entre les experts et les spécialistes locaux ainsi que la légitimation et la prioritarisation d'une forme de connaissance sur une autre qui en découle en sont des exemples patents. Le développement durable, pourra-t-il générer un processus de renforcement de l'expertise locale en mettant en place un programme de développement qui part d'une définition par les locaux de leurs besoins et aspirations et qui s'efforce de satisfaire ces besoins par une auto-suffisance et une autonomie des ressources locales? Ou est-il un nouveau programme destiné à écarter notre attention des débats sur les inégalités criardes qui existent entre le Sud et le Nord du fait principalement des relations économiques mondiales d'exploitation? Par ces temps d'environnements naturels et d'économies locales, nationales et mondiales qui évoluent rapidement, le développement durable peut-il tenir compte du contexte changeant de ce problème?*

Introduction

The importance of searching for alternative approaches and solutions to Africa's development problems also calls for a critical examination of what 'sustainable development' means in the African context and what the pursuance of this approach to development can hopefully achieve in terms of improving the lives of local peoples. It is our conviction that any new and alternative approaches to 'development' must speak to the social, spiritual, cultural, economic, political and cosmological aspects of African peoples. If a new wave of theorizing 'sustainable development' issues in Africa is to be helpful in addressing human problems, it must be situated in an appropriate social context that provides practical and social meaning to the African actors as subjects of a development discourse.

It is immoral and incomprehensible from the standpoint of the rural peoples of Africa for anyone to define and articulate a 'sustainable development' agenda in terms relevant to the world capitalist economy and the associated globalization processes at the same time that the daily needs

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of these peoples are not being met. It could also be argued that local perceptions, views and ideas on the problems on social development today are essential for a re-theorization and a reconceptualization of the issues, particularly, in the contemporary setting of rapid social change and transformation of indigenous societies.

Definition and Conceptualization

The Brundtland report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defined 'sustainable development' as: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987: 43). WCED's theoretical stance or framework on what constitutes 'sustainable development' has relevance and implications in the incessant discourse on Africa's development 'crisis'. To begin with, it is important to pose some pertinent questions: what is the political project that informs the debates over 'sustainable development'? What way of life does the theoretical discourse on 'sustainable development' speak to? 'Sustainable development' for whom and for what purposes? How does the conceptualization of 'sustainable development' correspond to, or reflect on the reality of the contemporary African development situation? How do these ideas help illuminate our understanding of the lived experiences and social realities of rural peoples (men, women and children) as they struggle to satisfy their basic livelihoods? The impulse for 'development' in Africa is informed by Western hegemonic understandings of what developing societies lack and what they are expected to do or become. In this context then how can it be ensured that the wealth of indigenous alternatives and choices are sufficiently considered in the discourse on 'sustainable development' in Africa?

The above questions also pose additional challenges such as the importance of questioning the appropriateness and applicability of such concepts as 'development' and 'sustainability' framed within Western modes of thought for non-Western peoples. The term 'development', for example, has come to mean different things to different people over the years so much so that purported beneficiaries of the development process have not always seen eye to eye with the protagonists.

It is an understatement to say that the concepts of 'development' and 'sustainable development' are problematic. Arguably the focus on 'sustainable development' had served to direct attention away from debates over the gross inequities between the South and North resulting primarily from exploitative global economic relations. One must be excused for asking whether emerging concerns over the state of the global environment today in Western consciousness are not due in part to Western fears and anxieties over the consequences of global warming. There is also the concern that if the poverty issues relating to environmental abuse are not addressed there

would be no end to the influx of people to the North fleeing deteriorating politico-economic and ecological conditions in the South.

We all have to seriously question how much improvements we can honestly expect in the lives and living conditions of African rural peoples if the approach to 'sustainable development' is pursued within existing conventional development paradigm. We are referring to development paradigms that continually create dependency, strengthen unequal dependency relations between nations, and also further reinforce and maximize the system of control, exploitation, injustice and inequality within and among societies. We should also be wary of an overemphasis on the efficacy of promoting 'sustainable development' in Africa that may contribute to creating a false sense of security and hope for people, not to mention the erroneous sense of accomplishment for many 'development' protagonists.

By being critical of the way the discourse on 'sustainable development' has been carried out we could be doing less harm to many local peoples in Africa. Many development 'experts' and agencies are yet to attain a full understanding of what it takes to have in place an effective developmental agenda that African rural peoples can identify with irrespective of ethnic, class, age and gender differences. In order to reach this understanding a genuinely reciprocal dialogue between the 'experts' and the 'ordinary' peoples is required. However such dialogue would only be fruitful if a recognition of the unequal power relations between the 'experts' and local peoples is matched by a sustained attempt to do away with the hierarchical power distinctions that exist in society between the intellectual 'experts' and the local peoples.

We need to rethink seriously the social harm of legitimizing and prioritizing certain knowledges over and above others in the development process. An example of this is the tendency to privilege men's knowledge about the environment over that possessed by women farmers. Popular culture can play a significant role in local development just as much as the knowledge of local ecology, social economy, and appropriate technology that may be shared by the scientific 'experts'. Development experts must recognize and acknowledge the presence of knowledges and experiences that are challenging and may be inaccessible to the 'experts' own social positions. They must encourage local peoples to assert the legitimacy of their own definitions of 'sustainable development' and the meaning and implications of their actions in their own terms.

'Sustainable development' as defined from the Western perspective has not helped local peoples in Africa in articulating their daily experiences to the outside world. Many views of development have failed to recognize that local peoples do theorize in their communities as part of community life not just to articulate, but also, to interpret their experiences. For the most part, views on 'sustainable development' have not given due recognition to the

fact that local peoples have culturally constructed ways of reflecting on their daily lives and the surrounding natural environment. Local peoples can give their own accounts of what is happening to them and what they are doing, can do, and intend to do about it. Why has it taken so long for development 'experts' to tap this rich source of local knowledges?

We must view the issue of 'sustainability' from a peoples' culture, history, local skills, ethnoecology, local ecosystem and human's role in nature (Sachs, 1987; Matowanyika, 1989:10). 'Sustainable development' entails local peoples identifying their own needs and then development experts assisting them to plan and implement viable programmes and projects to meet the defined needs. The viability of these projects and programmes could be assessed in terms of how they sustainably enhance both the habitat and the socioeconomic status of the majority of the population. This approach requires having to integrate and articulate ecological and environmental issues and problems of social, economic and political development.

An important aspect of the concept of 'sustainable development' is the understanding that environmental degradation is not a problem of the relationships between people and their habitat, but of relationships among peoples competing for access to productive resources (Horowitz, 1988:3). The concept also requires an understanding that 'sustainability' cannot be achieved independent of, or in opposition to the interests of the rural poor majority. Furthermore, the means of achieving 'sustainable development' have to acknowledge the contextual variability of the problem (Matowanyika, 1989:5). Most development experts and analysts agree that any development agenda that contributes to an intensification of rural poverty and a degradation of environmental resources is not sustainable development. However, not many share the conviction that 'development' that neither leads to local empowerment nor comprehensively address the fundamental issues of social justice and social development is not 'sustainable development'.

Poverty and Environmental Degradation

Among the factors that continually hinder effective and sustained development in contemporary Africa, one can point to the interrelated problems of intensified appropriation of wealth from the rural poor majority by the state and its domestic and external accomplices, (i.e., the powerful local elites and transnational corporations) and the resulting effect that the poor are unable to make the kinds of investment in land labour, and capital that will help reverse the rapid deterioration of environmental conditions. Such conditions include deforestation, desertification, soil depletion, poor water quality and quantity, natural resource depletion, loss of biological diversity, and energy shortages.

But the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation has to be understood. Let us illustrate this with the debate over the causes of

deforestation. A major theoretical position in trying to understand the problem of deforestation is to relate poverty to environmental degradation. As argued elsewhere (Redclift, 1987; Dei, 1992a) this approach unduly blames the poor for the problem as if poverty is an independent variable. It does not take into account the fact that for long, rural peoples have been capitalizing on their traditions of sustainable forestry (Richards, 1985; Brokensha, Waren and Warner, 1980). Poverty and resource abuse, it can be argued, are caused largely by policies of the state and its 'external' accomplices. There are interrelated socioeconomic, ecological, political, and historical factors with both internal and external dimensions that account for the environmental degradation in most communities today.

Environmental degradation and human poverty have resulted not only from distributive and exploitive mechanisms, but perhaps more importantly from structural processes. Rural communities have been drastically transformed as a result of the expansion and contraction of the world economic system. Many rural peoples today cannot change the way they utilize natural resources without a fundamental restructuring of rural production relations. As McKenna (1990) points out, this relationship between ecological-economic factors and social structures are yet to be fully understood. We need to study those institutions that represent maximum concentrations of power in African societies if we are to come up with long lasting solutions to 'sustainable development'.

Although human poverty has serious implications for environmental degradation and, consequently, social and economic development, the specificity of the relationship between structural factors (including the functioning of national political economies) and those of the natural environment has not been fully comprehended. No doubt poverty reduces a people's capacity to use local resources in any sustainable manner. But so does the pursuit of development strategy that denies the poor rural majority access to and control over the fundamental productive resources of societies.

Achieving 'sustainable development' in contemporary society will require both local and national political leadership to redress the problems of social injustice by reallocating societal goods and services so as to benefit the large segment of their populations. Unfortunately, it appears the African state today is unwilling to embark upon this course of action because of the entrenched power of minority interest groups. Rural peoples, particularly women and the poor have to retain their access to and control over their productive resource.

The Issue of the 'Commons' and 'Sustainable Development'

In a discussion on 'sustainable development' one cannot overemphasized the importance of local peoples having access to and control over their own productive resources. It used to be conventional wisdom that resources held in common are vulnerable to overexploitation (Hardin, 1968; Hardin and

Baden, 1977). In the last decade such assumptions have been challenged by research (Berkes, 1989; Berkes, et al., 1989). The examination of the human forces contributing to contemporary resource abuse in many societies have led to a questioning of the view that resource degradation is inevitable unless common property is converted into private property or subjected to government regulations (Peters, 1987). As Berkes, et al. (1989) have argued, communities dependent on common property resources historically have put in place some institutional mechanisms and arrangements to effectively manage their resources and to achieve sustainable use. For example, there are myth and traditions attributing quasi-human qualities to the forces of nature and the physical environment that have been upheld by many indigenous peoples over the years as a means of achieving sustainable use of environmental resources.

These traditions and local myths include safeguards protecting the indiscriminate felling of trees on communal forest lands and the belief in the sacredness of the forest. In many rural societies, communal resource users are compelled by social pressures to conform to carefully prescribed and enforced rules of conduct. Local users have to co-operate to achieve common interests and objectives. There are also long established institutional arrangements regarding who has access to and control over group property, and on what grounds someone is to be excluded within the community.

Unfortunately, the transformation of traditional institutional mechanisms and arrangements in property rights (e.g., privatization of communal lands) are removing community safeguards protecting the forest and its trees, as well as other environmental resources. As already pointed out, when a small, wealthy and powerful minority maintain effective control over large portions of available communal resources, for example, land, the poor majority are forced to depend on and overexploit limited land acreages. With an emerging unequal and differential access to and control over productive resources, coupled with state intervention in the local economy to serve the needs of its allies, the poor find it extremely difficult to respect the customary checks, traditional beliefs and practices essential to the realization of 'sustainable development' (Dei, 1990a, 1992a; Horowitz, 1988.[1]

Resource Conservation and 'Sustainable Development'

An area of usually conflictual interests between local peoples and the state is the conservation of local resources for the benefit of the state. Contemporary economic development have led many rural peoples' to lose faith in the ability of the state to meet its obligations. As the state's loses its credibility

1 Similarly, we need to understand that it is not really possible to practice land management when individual families and farming households do not have easy access to and control over land.

and legitimacy in the eyes of the rural populace, the latter has questioned the morality of the state to appropriate communal resources. Rural peoples have long been skeptical of the motives behind the resource conservation measures of the state. They recognize the importance of enhancing and sustaining the Earth's natural resource base. They have done so in the past as revealed by most accounts (Brokensha, Warren and Werner, 1980; Richards, 1985, Watts, 1984.).

Unfortunately, contemporary export-led economic growth strategies are extracting huge environmental and social costs in Africa. The necessity to acquire exports earning to pay for manufactured goods from industrialized countries has encouraged the development of export-oriented, cash crop economies without achieving the necessary balance with food production for local consumption needs. Tied to this problem is the massive foreign debts which is literally forcing most governments to commit ecocide by mortgaging their environments to finance the interest on loans (McKenne, 1990; Ankomah, 1987).

Again, let us illustrate this with the appropriation of forest resources by the state. Sustainable forestry demands that we integrate conservation and resource development. But the national forestry development strategies have failed to strike an appropriate balance between competing forces: the need to sustain what is a vital sector of the national economy (production of timber for industrial use and export), an emerging environmental consciousness and agenda (protecting the forest so as to stabilize local ecosystems and preserve biological diversity) and the need to sustain basic livelihoods.

An understanding of local ideas and perceptions about resource conservation is significant in a discussion of 'sustainable development'. The problem is that conservation is rarely locally defined, that is, to take the basic needs of the local populations into consideration first. Local peoples have never received assurances from the state that the resource they help conserve today will be available tomorrow for their own benefit. In the absence of a guarantee that rural peoples can enjoy the benefits of their own restraint, national efforts to promote local conservation are met with skepticism. Normally it would be easier for conservation efforts to be successful depending on the extent to which alternative choices and solutions are readily available to people. For example, local peoples cannot be expected to minimize their dependence on fuelwood if alternative energy sources are not readily available to them.

But the major issue is that if local peoples understand the goal of conservation is to serve the parochial interests of the state, the urban elite, and their external allies then rural communities are not going to embrace the calls for resource conservation. A typical case is when rural peoples have been restrained from cutting forest trees only to realize the state has colluded with private logging companies to appropriate local timber in order to obtain

foreign exchange to import luxury items for the urban elites (Dei, 1990b; 1992b). Penny (1988, Berkes, et al., 1989:93) have argued that when local peoples have no control over their forests, lack autonomy over available resources, and have no alternative choices to using forest products, they have every incentive to cut down the trees before someone else does.

'Sustainable Development' and Democracy

If 'sustainable development' is to be a credible approach to development then there are other human rights issues that have to be considered as part of the national development process. The discourse on 'sustainable development' must encompass the domains of human rights, participatory democracy and local involvement and input in the decision making processes. 'Sustainable development' in Africa must extend beyond the narrow concerns over the natural environment in national economic development to include genuine and comprehensive democratic reforms as well as a redistribution of social wealth. The rights of women, children and the poor to the satisfaction of the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, education and health care must be treated as equal components of the struggle for political democracy in Africa.

One may want to laud current measures aimed at empowering the African rural poor through on-going democratization processes in some countries. However we must also be cautious that this becomes an 'African democracy', that is, democracy which is understood by African peoples and not something dictated to them by transnational corporations and foreign governments. For example, we should critique the inherent contradictions in the national policy measures inspired by the international financial community that cuts social services to the poor (e.g., water, electricity, education, health) and the initiatives towards political democracy in Africa as presently constituted. If democracy is narrowly defined to exclude food, water, shelter, clothing and employment then the talk about the importance of achieving 'sustainable development' for Africa's own good becomes a sham.

Indigenous Knowledge, Skills and Appropriate Technology

The promotion of 'sustainable development' also calls for an understanding of what constitutes 'appropriate technology' in the African context. Talking about technology that is least destructive of the natural environment is insufficient. We have to emphasize the importance of retrieving and interrogating the indigenous knowledges and skills that have served most of these communities over the years for their contribution to the transformation of contemporary society. It is interesting that modern society has now begun to realize the importance of building sustainable and supportive societies that are in harmony with nature. Indigenous communities worldwide have long shared this belief and contemporary society has much to learn from them.

There is a call today for a renewal and a revitalization of local indigenous knowledges and traditions for social development.

Indigenous knowledge may be defined as the common sense knowledge and ideas of local peoples about the everyday realities of living which form part of their cultural heritage (Fals Borda, 1980). It includes the cultural traditions, values, belief systems and worldviews of local peoples as distinguished from Western scientific knowledge. Such local knowledge is the product of indigenous peoples' direct experience of the workings of nature and its relationship with the social world. It is also a holistic and inclusive form of knowledge in the sense of encompassing the mental, intellectual, spiritual and physical development of the individual self and the interconnections of the self and society with the earth in the spirit of reciprocity and partnership.

Among the major themes emphasized in the African ways of knowing about the world are ideas of community membership, social responsibility, social cohesiveness and the commonalty of all peoples (Dei, 1992c). The knowledge systems of African peoples are expressed in their traditional songs, fables, proverbs, legends, myths, mythologies and traditions of rural peoples. It is no secret that local indigenous knowledges and the cultural resource base of African peoples have been the least analyzed for their contributions to national development processes. Yet it is important to understand how such knowledge forms are utilized by rural peoples to address some of the fundamental problems of daily survival for the insights they do provide for achieving 'sustainable development'.

Discussion

A recommendation in developing alternatives to current development perspectives is for researchers to complement the search for general solutions to human problems with some local specificities (Taylor and Mackenzie, 1992). The integration of localized, empirical research with theoretical, generalized studies demands that researchers accord some importance not only to country-specific research, but also, to research studies that explore grassroot level understanding, discourses on human problems and local strategies to problem solving. While community or locality studies by themselves are insufficient to offer a comprehensive understanding of society, they nevertheless do provide relevant data needed to ground our theoretical discussions in the everyday lived experiences of people. Such studies provide opportunities for willing researchers to hear what people on the ground and at the grassroots have to say, what their everyday thoughts are, and how they make meaning of their social world.

In this light one can hope that perhaps a more appropriate theory and practice on sustained 'endogenous' development could emerge from micro-level studies of the contemporary African crises and how rural communities

are responding to them.[2] This new theory of sustained 'endogenous' development is predicated on the fact that the development agenda is being defined, motivated and controlled by the rural population itself when faced with stressful conditions. Dei (1986, 1992b) and Posnansky (1980, 1984) show that the rural coping strategies involve ecological, economic, social and political response that have always been present in rural Africa. But, in the current situation of economic hardships, they are emerging or re-emerging in new forms that stress the importance of utilizing local creativity and resourcefulness in the development agenda. The coping strategies are not only dynamic and innovative, but are also raising questions regarding the appropriate role of the modern state and local leadership in African development process (Barker, 1984, 1989).

Rural coping strategies also inform us about the relationship between local production systems, social structures and the ecological base (Rahmato, 1992). It would be useful if we also understood the implications of some of these strategies for 'sustainable development'. For example, the contraction of national economies and the ensuing hardships from the imposition of World Bank/IMF inspired structural adjustment policies since the mid-1980s are encouraging some rural peoples to demand that the local polity reallocates and/or redistributes some of the valued goods and services in their communities (Dei, 1988a). Village action groups under responsible leadership (e.g., women's groups, church groups) can assist in empowering the hitherto silent majority and to articulate their views.[3] Many are realizing the importance of pursuing a genuine approach to development that begins with locally defined needs and aspirations and strives to meet these needs through self reliance and local resource autonomy. Hopefully, this approach can be strengthened if the issues of social justice and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms are simultaneously addressed (Daugherty et al., 1979).

'Sustainable development' in the African context implies finding appropriate answers to such fundamental questions as what to produce, how to

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2 A case can be made for the significance of studying the specific impact of national policy changes on these communities, and specifically, for various constituencies such as women, age and socioeconomic groups in the quest to build a self-sustaining base for African societies. Such micro-level studies may provide important requisite ground data for genuine theory building on 'sustainable development'.

3 Many rural communities today are making specific adjustments in both household and community labour force to improve the standard of living. There is also the recourse to hitherto little used food resources and other economic strategies (e.g., hunting and gathering) aimed at generating additional income and improve upon household food supply as a noted feature of rural economies (Weiss, 1980; Dei, 1988b; Posnansky, 1980; Scudder, 1971; Ajayi, 1971, Marks, 1976). While all these economic strategies have been useful as part of rural survival strategies we are yet to fully explore their implications for 'sustainable development'.

produce, for whom to produce and who should own and/or control the means of production? These questions must be addressed at the local, regional and national levels of African societies. The failure to address the problem of unequal and differential access to and control over productive resources among social groups in society means that rural poverty would continue to haunt all of us. The implementation of environmental projects such as tree planting and reforestation programmes,[4] the development of reclamation schemes to control land use through checks on overcultivation and overgrazing, and the implementation of soil and water conservation techniques (e.g., small scale irrigation projects, terracing) while important, only speak to the symptom of a bigger problem. 'Sustainable development' is not only about the environment and society. It is also about the interconnections between local and national political economies and global politics.

Let us conclude this discussion with some brief notes on methodological issues in 'sustainable development' research. How can we integrate ecological concerns and problems of development in studies of state-rural economies? The social and natural sciences can cooperate in fruitful research to identify the crucial variables in the development process, particularly, in evaluating the interrelated technical, social organizational, economic and ecological dimensions of the development problem. Interdisciplinary studies of the relationships between natural ecosystems, traditional agroforestry, food production techniques, and the structuralization of rural economic production are extremely important in this regard (Deshmuth, 1986; Heberlein, 1968: Warren, 1986).

The learning objective for those interested in such research should be to study and determine ways and means by which agricultural and other economic activities can become productive while at the same time promoting a self-sustaining ecological base for future generations and their needs. It is important that we obtain an understanding of local, social and natural variables impinging upon traditional food resource strategies. Specialists' assistance are required for collecting bio-climatic data on local climates, soils, soil use and management techniques, wild life and water resources, land clearing methods, choice of cropping techniques, species used, as well as habits and technologies associated with food production.[5]

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4 Elsewhere, Dei (1990b) has argued that while tree planting, for example, is a laudable proposal, the success in terms of fostering sustainable development would depend on the planting of the right tree species, by the right people in the communities, at the right period of time, and in the right places.

5 To illustrate this point a real issue for sustained development is that given the ecological stresses of drought, bush fires, and sometimes, uncontrolled human exploitation, how can some species be preserved for maximum yield? This I believe is an area the sciences can cooperate to find viable solutions.

Finally, sustained 'endogenous' development calls for local involvement, co-operation and regional integration. To secure local involvement in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of the development agenda, it is important that major research efforts are made to examine the capabilities and concerns of those people who may require and should also manage the elements and processes of change (Holland, 1987; Stohr and Taylor, 1981). Research should focus on identifying socially responsible local facilitators who can best articulate locally defined needs and aspirations. The ultimate learning objective in 'sustainable development' research is to study and assess the viability of an integrated approach to development emphasizing self-help, local creativity, and resource autonomy in contrast to the conventional sectorial approaches to development and international cooperation.

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