

SUSTAINING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE SHIFTING MORAL BASE OF THE CONCEPT, 1972-2002

ODRŽAVANJE ODRŽIVOG RAZVOJA: PREMJEŠTANJE MORALNOG TEMELJA KONCEPTA, U PERIODU IZMEĐU 1972.-2002. GODINE

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Summary

This article traces the shift in the moral arguments in the sustainable development discourse, which occurred between 1972 and 2002. In the early 1970s ecological considerations were dominant and the zero-growth option had strong support. By the end of the 1980s the influential report of the Brundtland Commission recommended that the balance between the ecological, economic and social aspects of sustainable development ought to be maintained. From the 1990s there was a shift to poverty alleviation as the main focus of the sustainable development discourse. Representatives of the developing countries started making contributions to the evolution of the concept of sustainable development and succeeded in merging the sustainable development discourse into the wider North-South debates. A decrease in wealth rather than a decrease in poverty would be the correct approach to the achievement of sustainable development. However, such a radical change of direction would only be possible once considerable progress has been made towards redressing the imbalances in the global distribution of wealth.

Key words: sustainable development, environmental conservation, poverty alleviation, African perspective

Ključne riječi: održivi razvoj, očuvanje okoliša, ublažavanje siromaštva, afričke perspektive

1. INTRODUCTION

Moral considerations featured prominently in the evolution of the concept of sustainable development since the 1970s and revolved around:

- Humankind's moral responsibilities towards the physical environment (especially the biosphere's ecosystems), and
- Affluent societies' moral responsibilities towards poor societies.

Thus there was both an ecological and a socio-economic component in the moral discourses associated with sustainable development. My argument in this article is that in the thirty years from 1972 to 2002 the ecological motivation for sustainable development lost ground to the socio-economic motivation. In the context of North-South debates the voice of Africa made a contribution to this shift. However, I also contend that, despite this change, it would be incorrect to deduce that the moral justification for the necessity of sustainable development simultaneously shifted from a mainly ecocentric base to a mainly anthropocentric base. The evolution of the concept of sustainable development is much more complex. It involved the interaction of many considerations with regard to the interrelationship of ecological, eco-

conomic and social factors in the moral discourse concerning sustainable development. Seminal texts and pronouncements in the different phases of the evolution of the concept of sustainable development, ranging from the zero-growth option of *Limits to Growth* to the poverty alleviation focus of the Millennium Development Goals, are analysed here to indicate shifts in emphasis and approach.

2. NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN: THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

To gain a better understanding of the moral content of the concept of sustainable development it is necessary to go back to its historical roots. I made a detailed analysis of these roots in another article (Du Pisani, 2006).

The idea of progress

Thinking about the economic development aspect of sustainable development has its roots in earlier conceptions of progress, growth and development. Ideas about human progress, which has come to mean forward movement in a desired direction in terms of scientific and technological knowledge, material wealth and moral improvement, were already articulated in the Greco-Roman civilisation. More attention was given to it in Judeo-Christian thinking. Augustine made path-breaking contributions in this regard. Eventually progress became almost synonymous with Western modernity. Fontenelle, Turgot, Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Comte, Hegel, Marx, Kant and Spencer all made significant inputs into the evolution of the Great Idea of Progress, the positivistic view that a »law of progress« exists, which makes an unstoppable and irreversible step by step upward trend towards a golden age on earth inevitable. The idea of progress was secularised, it moved away from the Christian notion of progression in a divinely ordained direction to a promised land beyond the grave to the ideal of a better life on earth made possible by scientific and technological advancement. This process of evolution of the idea of progress has been thoroughly analysed by many authors (Bury, 1932; Edelstein, 1967; Dodds, 1973; Nisbet, 1980; Burgen, McLaughlin & Mittelstrass, 1997).

It has been argued for centuries, as far as the human-environment relationship is concerned, that science has provided humankind with mastery over nature and that humankind is entitled to use this mastery to tame the planet and exploit its resources for human benefit. Since the Industrial Revolution the idea of human progress has been linked to economic growth and material enrichment. The notion gained ground that it is acceptable and necessary for humans to exploit natural resources to the utmost in the pursuit of increased economic production (Worster, 1993: 178-180). The negative consequence of the exploitation of natural resources on an unprecedented scale was massive damage to the physical environment while, at the same time, the gap between rich and poor societies widened.

Emergence of the concept of sustainability

Between the idea of progress and its antithesis, the threat of decline, a new concept emerged, as people became increasingly aware of the vulnerability of natural resources. This was sustainability, which rejected both the progressive (growth) paradigm and the declension paradigm and posited the steady state model. Throughout human history the impact of the demand for raw materials on the environment has been at issue. Ancient civilisations wrestled with this challenge. In the writings of Plato, Strabo, Columella, Pliny the Elder and Varro we see evidence of this. From the 18th century concern about possible shortages of the primary resources in energy supply - wood, coal and oil - mounted. As scientific knowledge increased more attention has been given to the sustainable use of resources. A scientific approach to »sustainable yield« was being developed in German forestry from the 18th century. In the course of the 19th century W. Stanley Jevons, Rudolf Clausius, John Stuart Mill, George Perkins Marsh,

Alfred Russell Wallace and others wrote about what would, a century later, be called sustainable development. In the 20th century their work was supplemented by that of scientists such as Gifford Pinchot, G.A. Brender à Brandis, F.M. Jaeger, Thorstein Veblen, A.C. Pigou, Egbert de Vries, William Vogt, Henry Fairfield Osborn and K.W. Kapp (see Van Zon, 2002).

Expectations of unlimited economic growth

Between 1800 and 1970 the longest period of continuous economic growth in the world's history occurred, with the highest growth rates in the period after World War II. This caused optimism that unlimited economic growth and ever-increasing affluence might be possible. At the same time the growing gap between rich and poor in the colonial and postcolonial period became a burning economic and moral issue. In the economic sphere the high global growth rates could be sustained only if world markets continued expanding. This in turn could be achieved only if wealth could be distributed more evenly across the globe to stimulate the demand for products in the developing regions. On a moral level philanthropically-minded persons and groups were asking the question how people in the developed world, with its ever-increasing living standards, could be at peace with their conscience when growing numbers of poor people in the developing world endured miserable living conditions.

Development theories

In an attempt to understand the dynamics of the world system in the second half of the 20th century different theories of development emerged to try and explain the sharp division between the rich »North« and the poor »South«.

Modernisation theory held forth the argument that the developing countries would develop by emulating the developed countries in following the route of free enterprise and a market economy. By opening up markets, privatising economies as much as possible and allowing the unfettered growth of international capital the less developed regions of the world would eventually also share in increasing prosperity and poverty would be reduced (See Peet, 1999; So, 1990).

Contrary to this line of thinking dependency theory held that the continued dominance of the developed »core« was built on control over and exploitation of the less developed »periphery«. Western development depended on the deliberate underdevelopment of the non-Western world and maintaining the inequalities between North and South. For this reason developing countries could escape from the spiral of poverty only by breaking free from capitalist bonds and moving in the direction of socialist autonomy (Frank, 1966 and 1978; Wallerstein, 1974, 1980, 1989 and 2011. See also Peet, 1999; So, 1990).

These opposing development theories shaped the context in which sustainable development as an alternative paradigm of development was born.

3. SAVE THE PLANET: THE ECOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

Progress exposed as a myth

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the crucible of ideas around progress, sustainability, growth and development, which through the centuries had moved through many permutations, started pointing towards a new paradigm, which would become known as sustainable development. At that stage the Great Idea of Progress was reinterpreted as the Myth of Progress. Many scholars argued that the high hopes of a possible linear and continued improvement of the human condition were misguided, because they had not taken human or environmental limitations into consideration. Progress in science and technology still seemed to be unstoppable, but in terms of material and moral welfare human societies everywhere continually experienced a mix of progress and decline. The destruction caused by two world wars, the

colonial exploitation of non-Western people and the plundering of the earth's biosphere painfully demonstrated that a lasting golden age of humanity was a mere pipedream.

Awareness of the ecological crisis

An acute awareness of the enormous damage caused by scientific, technological and economic progress to the physical environment of the planet necessitated a new approach to development. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is regarded as the book which triggered, especially in the USA, the emergence of the green movement. Many other publications, including Paul Ehrlich's *The population bomb* (1968), Edward Goldsmith's *A blueprint for survival* (1972) and E.F. Schumacher's *Small is beautiful* (1973), sounded the alarm about an imminent ecological crisis, which could even result in the destruction by humans of the earth's capacity to sustain life and which endangered their own survival. One of the best books in this genre was William Catton's *Overshoot: The ecological basis of revolutionary change* (1980).

These authors identified population explosion, pollution and the depletion of non-renewable natural resources as the major environmental challenges. Environmental concerns appeared more prominently in the media and popular culture. In various guises, including anti-nuclear activists, environmental non-governmental organisations and green political parties, the green movement attracted public attention. Ecologism was recognised as an ideology in its own right. The greens, within the networks of leftist movements, made their presence felt in Western societies. Fears with regard to an imminent ecological catastrophe paved the way for sustainable development as an alternative for economic growth.

Coining the term »sustainable development«

In the early 1970s the term »sustainable development« started surfacing in texts (Goldsmith, 1972: 23; Meadows et al., 1972: 24, 158. See Coomer, 1979; Allen, 1980). Barbara Ward (Lady Jackson), founder of the International Institute for Environment and Development, allegedly coined the term. Several publications laid the conceptual foundation of sustainable development in that period. In essence sustainable development amounted to the creation in the world of a dispensation where provision would be made for the basic material needs of all people on a level of development that could be sustained into the distant future without depleting the earth's natural resources to a level where irreparable damage would be done. Previously development, the use of resources, and conservation, the protection of resources, had been regarded as conflicting and irreconcilable processes. Now sustainable development tried to facilitate a compromise, by focusing on the interdependence of development and environmental conservation.

Acknowledging the limits to growth

The oil crisis of 1973 dramatically demonstrated the potential consequences of shortages of resources. Shortly thereafter a worldwide economic recession set in. Analysis of the causes of the recession brought an awareness of the limits to growth. Idealistic economists continued advocating steady growth. They argued that the human race was capable of overcoming the threatening environmental challenges, that inhibited further development, through new scientific discoveries and the development of improved technologies. A more realistic economic point of view emerged, which started from the assumption that the overoptimistic expectations of rapid industrial development and high growth rates were no longer attainable. Experts of different disciplines realised that it was impossible for all societies to reach the same level of development as in the developed countries, because sufficient resources did not exist to sustain such a level of consumption. Development objectives for the developing societies had to be limited to a level that would provide for the basic needs of people, but that would be sensitive to the vulnerability of the environment. Many economists argued for qualitative development rather than quantitative growth (see Rostow, 1978: 580-1; Paxton, 1993: 2; Viedermann, 1993: 181).

This awareness linked up with a seminal text from that period, *The limits to growth*. This publication was the product of a research project commissioned by the Club of Rome, a group of prominent economists and scientists. Computer simulations were used to investigate the environmental impact of resource use in the world. The authors of the research report warned that the earth possessed a limited store of natural resources. Their almost apocalyptic conclusion was that, should the growth in population, industrialisation, pollution, food production and the depletion of resources be maintained at the same levels, the limits to growth on the planet would be reached in less than a century, which would cause a sudden uncontrollable decrease in population and industrial capacity (Meadows et al., 1972: 23).

Because *Limits to growth* started an intense debate concerning the impossibility and infeasibility of unlimited economic growth and the necessity to find an alternative, it is regarded as a key trigger in the birth of the concept of sustainable development (Kenny, 1994: 229; Rostow, 1978: 571).

At that stage, when policy makers still lacked a comprehensive understanding of the full extent of the postcolonial socio-economic dilemmas of the Third World, the ecological discourse was dominant in debates about sustainable development. Some of the core issues in this debate were: Can the insistence on humankind's mastery of nature be justified? Up to what point can people be allowed to exploit natural resources? At what point does use become unsustainable overexploitation and abuse?

Debate on the role of Christianity in the ecological crisis

From a Christian perspective significant inputs were made in the sustainable development discourse in response to criticism dealing with the Christian religion's alleged role in plundering nature. Early in the 20th century Max Weber made an association between Calvin's doctrine of predestination and the Western capitalistic spirit, suggesting that Christianity played a leading part in environmental degradation (Weber, 1990).

Lynn White, in a controversial article that appeared in the late 1960s, blamed Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism, associated with the doctrine of human exceptionalism, for plundering the earth's natural resources. He argued that the destructive powers of science, capitalism, technology and democracy all stemmed from the same religious root, Medieval Christianity. White contended that Christianity's triumph over heathen animism overturned the respect for nature as something sacred. By doing so the restrictions that stopped people from abusing nature were removed. The idea that humans, in line with Genesis 1:28 in the Bible, had to subjugate and control nature sanctioned an attitude of arrogance underlying the plundering of nature. White's opinion was that a religious solution had to be found. He suggested that the Franciscan acknowledgement of the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature, which was rejected as a heresy in some Christian circles, needed to be taken as the point of departure for a new direction (White, 1967. See also Young, 1994: 10).

White's apportioning of blame started a lively debate. On the one hand it was conceded that there was indeed a tradition in Christianity that supported the notion that God had given humankind an absolute mandate to assume mastery over nature. This tradition saw humans as the crown of God's creation and nature as being made for the benefit of humans. The naturalism of »heathen« societies was resisted as idolatry. Christian thinkers, including Anselm, Augustine and Thomas of Aquinas, did not regard nature as sacred and viewed the use of technology for the sake of production as legitimate. This anthropocentric approach caused Western thinking, in contrast to Eastern views, to develop in the direction of positivist ideas about progress (as discussed above) and laid the ideological, educational and administrative foundation for a society geared towards economic growth. The scientific revolution and the emergence of capitalism heightened human awareness of power and resulted in »a breathtaking anthropocentrism, based on his power over nature, unmatched by anything in the past« (Glacken, 1967: 494). Participants in the debate who supported White's criticism of Christian attitudes and behaviour argued that Christianity paved the way for the rise of modern science and technology, which resulted in the unrestricted subjugation of nature. They pointed out that eschatological expectations of the destruction of the earth blunted

concern for the state of the planet. They also accused Christian churches of not collaborating fully in regulating population growth by birth control (Young, 1994: 12-17).

Defenders of Christian ethical thinking conceded that there were anomalies in the way that churches interpreted teachings in the Bible on the human-nature relationship. They responded by emphasising that next to the tradition that regarded humans as the masters of nature there existed another growing Christian tradition, based on Genesis 2:15. This tradition regards nature as God's property and humans as stewards that have to account to God for their stewardship. Christians who endorse this tradition are not arrogant towards nature, but support the ethics of care for the earth. Many Christians feel that religion should play its role in dealing with the ecological crisis and actively participate in environmental conservation (see Worster, 1993: 187-9; Pepper, 1986: 44-46; Young, 1990: 54ff).

This debate in Christian circles since the 1970s has spawned a comprehensive literature on Christian stewardship of nature (see Wilkinson, 1980 and 1991; Vorster, 1987; Vos & Muller, 1991; Basney, 1994; Young, 1994; Northcott, 1996; Van Dyke, 1996; Goussmett & Chimuyka, 1997). »Earthkeeping« is identified by Wilkinson et al. (1991: 2, 254, 306, 325, 350-359) as an important task of Christianity on which Christians should focus individually and collectively. Reconciliation is regarded by these authors as not limited to the relationships between God and humankind and between humans, but also between humans and the rest of God's creation. Scriptural visions of heaven include the idea of harmony between humans and nature. They distinguish a number of principles of Christian stewardship and supply guidelines for action in implementing stewardship.

The first international environmental conference

Many recommendations were made in the 1970s to counter the approaching ecological crisis. *Limits to growth* suggested a state of equilibrium, basically a zero-growth option in terms of population and capital (Meadows et al., 1972: 170-184). *Small is beautiful* reasoned that escape from the pressures of modern industrial society was possible by living in smaller-scale communities and practising a self-sufficient lifestyle in harmony with other people and nature. The author formulated plans to restructure the ownership of big enterprises in the public interest (Schumacher, 1973: 68, 264-273).

The idea that a structural transformation of the world's economic system was needed to save the planet, also surfaced at the first international environmental conference organised by the UN. It was the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) that was held in 1972 in Stockholm. The declaration formulated at the conference foregrounded environmental conservation in the following introductory statement:

- To defend and improve the human environment for present and future generations has become an imperative goal for mankind.
- The declaration mentioned the enormous capability of humans to transform the environment and the damage already done to nature. It emphasised the imperative to protect natural resources for present and future generations through careful planning and management. Individuals, communities and governments had to share the responsibility for this. Much in the declaration dealt with specific environmental challenges (UNEP, 2007a).
- The emergence of the green movement and radical recommendations for saving the planet from ecological disaster typified the *Zeitgeist* of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was a time when radical left-wing thinking and political movements (such as the »New Left« in the USA) gained ground in Western societies. More conventional viewpoints soon eclipsed this left-wing tendency, which was quite dominant in many of the moral discourses of the time, specifically also on the human-environment relationship.

4. SAVE THE POOR: THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISCOURSE

Scepticism over sustainable development in the developing world

It is clear, when studying the text of the UNCHE declaration in 1972, that intense North-South debates behind the scenes influenced its formulation. Developing countries prioritised other issues than developed countries. For the developing countries economic growth was imperative, because it was essential for the generation of wealth, the improvement of living standards and catching up with the developed countries. Consequently some leaders of developing countries were sceptical about the concept of sustainable development, especially the notion that growth needed to be limited, because they suspected that it might be employed by the North as a strategy to stem growth in the South. At that stage, with the political process of decolonisation almost at an end, the Third World was prone to challenging any sign of continuing economic and ecological colonialism.

At the UNCHE poorer nations blamed the rich countries for the destruction of the environment and the impoverishment of the peoples in the developing countries. They argued that it would be extremely unfair to punish the poor countries for the planet's environmental problems, which had been caused by the developed countries. Should economic growth be restricted, it would make it impossible for the developing world to improve the living conditions of its inhabitants. The delegates from the developing countries raised concern that the conference was paying so much attention to the physical environment and so little to the social environment, while the most urgent tasks were to lessen poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy among two thirds of the world's population. Third World representatives endorsed the idea that action for the sake of environmental conservation should not be used as an excuse to reduce development. On the contrary, development aid needed to be drastically stepped up. There was consensus among them that a zero-growth philosophy, as proposed in *Limits to growth*, was absolutely unacceptable. They called upon developed countries to change their attitude by scrapping protective trade tariffs (UNEP, 2007b).

World leaders needed to seek compromises to try and reconcile the opposing views of the developed and developing countries. This is evident in several elements of the text of the UNCHE declaration, which confirmed the right of all people, especially those in the developing world, to development and the improvement of their quality of life, and emphasised the importance of human needs and aspirations. Several of the 26 principles of the declaration refer specifically to the developing countries. The document propagated matters such as increased technical and financial assistance to developing societies to empower them to protect the environment and stable prices for raw materials exported from the developing to the developed countries (see UNEP, 2007a).

The subtext of the outcomes of the UNCHE was that in principle the participants acknowledged the needs of the developing world, but made no solemn commitment to implement concrete measures to satisfy those needs.

It is clear that as early as at the 1972 conference in Stockholm another discourse appeared on the agenda, parallel to the existing ecocentric discourse which dominated the *Limits to growth* debates. In forums where the developing countries had the opportunity to make inputs, e.g. meetings organised by the UN, this parallel discourse, aimed at seeking solutions to the socio-economic challenges facing the Third World, started becoming more influential in international agenda-setting and policy-making. The central moral issue in this context was: To what extent do the rich societies have an obligation to help poor societies to improve the living conditions of their people?

Role of the Brundtland Commission

During the 1980s publicity in the media to environmental disasters and threats kept the spectre of imminent ecological doom alive. Disturbing scientific data about the potentially negative consequences of issues such as the greenhouse effect and the hole in the ozone layer were released and kept the public aware of environmental challenges. At the same time the full scope of the humanitarian crisis associ-

ated with the poverty spiral in Africa, as a result of the continent's dramatic economic decline from the 1970s, started unfolding. In this context new permutations around the concept of sustainable development evolved, flowing from the interactions between economic, social and ecological discourses.

Again the UN, through the Brundtland process, gave direction. By a resolution of the General Assembly in 1983 the UN established the World Commission on the Environment and Development, the so-called Brundtland Commission, to develop an environmental perspective for the period to the year 2000 and beyond. From the outset the commission sought compromises to try to reconcile the interests of the developed and developing countries and facilitate collaboration in the sphere of environmental challenges, seeking to formulate common objectives in dealing with these challenges. The UN resolution hoped that shared perspectives on environmental issues and consensus regarding suitable actions would resolve environmental and development conflicts (UN General Assembly, 1983). The Brundtland Commission was structured and its activities planned in such a way that both developed and developing societies would have the opportunity to give input (UN General Assembly, 1987).

Our common future, the report of the Brundtland Commission, completed in 1987, juxtaposed the unsustainable consumer patterns in the North to the enormous poverty in the South. It concluded that economic growth was imperative, especially in the developing world, but that it needed to be achieved in a sustainable way without further destroying the physical environment. The report emphasised that the ecological, social and economic components of sustainable development should always be kept in mind (UN General Assembly, 1987: 19-25).

Our common future sent a clear signal that the zero-growth option was not acceptable and that ecological considerations did not override social and economic development goals.

Poverty alleviation foregrounded

Leading studies from this period, including the *World Conservation Strategy* (IUCN, 1980) and *Caring for the Earth* (IUCN, 1991), linked sustainable development to poverty alleviation. The underlying assumption was that local people were often forced to destroy their environment because they had no other choice in their struggle for survival. Poverty had to be reduced both for social and ecological reasons. This sentiment was expressed in the *World Conservation Strategy*:

- Hundreds of millions of rural people in developing countries, including 500 million malnourished and 800 million destitute, are compelled to destroy the resources necessary to free them from starvation and poverty (IUCN, 1980: 6).

The South African version of *Caring for the Earth* stated:

- Poverty is one side of the coin of environmental destruction ... impoverished and over-crowded communities are battling to survive. In such circumstances, environmental ethics are often considered irrelevant and conservation concerns written off as an unnecessary luxury in the never-ending struggle for survival (Yeld, 1997: 17. See also Singhal and Shrivastava, 2004: 330, 334).

Ideas associated with poverty alleviation merged with a concept stemming from the sustainable development discourse, i.e. intra-generational equity. Its premise was that in both the local and global spheres resources had to be utilised in a way that was fair to all people of the current generation (see Center for International Environmental Law, 2007).

The Rio Earth Summit

During the 1990s the emphasis in sustainable development discourses shifted to poverty alleviation as priority number one. This was evident at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The two main documents approved at the summit, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1992b – particularly principle 5) and Agenda 21 (UN Department of

Economic and Social Affairs, 1992a – in particular chapter 3), emphasised that a strategy to fight poverty was a basic prerequisite for sustainable development.

The toughest negotiations at Rio dealt with financial resources and mechanisms as set out in chapter 33 of Agenda 21. The G77 states (the developing countries) insisted on assurances that they would receive additional funds to perform their responsibilities in terms of Agenda 21 and that the developed countries commit themselves to increase official development aid to 0.7 per cent of their GNP by the year 2000. On the very last day of the summit the developed countries agreed to expand their development assistance programmes (IISD, 1992).

The approved texts of the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 tried to balance the interests of the developed and developing worlds. These documents identified economic growth, social development and poverty reduction as priorities and held forth the promise of a more open international economic system. Commentators interpreted their content as the adoption of key principles to promote rather than stem economic development in the developing world (see Anon., 1995).

Africa, poverty and sustainable development

At that stage poverty increased in Africa and assumed crisis proportions. Two thirds of the world's poorest countries were in Sub-Sahara Africa. GDP per capita growth rates in Africa were very low and it appeared as if the continent was sinking away in an ocean of poverty. GDP statistics showed that the average African in 1992 was 20 to 25 per cent worse off than in 1979 (Seidman and Anang, 1992: 1; World Bank, 2004: 26-27).

For Africa poverty as a moral issue was a lever to get development aid in the international dispensation after the end of the Cold War. The continent had lost its strategic significance for the superpowers and its leaders feared that it would be marginalised. As the link between poverty alleviation and sustainable development became stronger African leaders abandoned their scepticism towards the motives behind sustainable development and started appropriating the concept as a bargaining chip in the North-South debates.

The leaders of the developing countries managed to occupy the moral high ground in North-South debates. They argued that the colonies had been plundered and exploited in colonial times by their European colonial masters and that the developed countries were partly responsible for the poverty in the developing countries. Therefore they had an obligation to compensate the developing countries, which they had not yet honoured in the postcolonial world while they even continued to exploit the former colonies through neocolonialism.

At one big UN conference after another in the 1990s the delegates made a strong moral commitment to the alleviation of the plight of the world's poor. Resolutions in international forums reflected the spirit of compromise between the conflicting development priorities of the developed and developing countries. In an effort to facilitate global progress in the direction of sustainable development these forums identified the need for shared values. The two Africans who in this period occupied the hot chair of the secretary general of the UN, Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1991-1996) and Kofi Annan (1997-2006), placed special emphasis on poverty alleviation as a global priority (UN Economic and Social Council, 1996; UN Economic and Social Council, 1997). It came as no surprise when the reduction of poverty was made priority number one in the list of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by 189 countries at the UN's Millennium Summit in September 2000 (UNDP, 2007).

The World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg 2002

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg from 26 August to 4 September 2002, the spotlight inevitably fell on the interests of the developing world and specifically poverty alleviation.

Before that time African leaders formulated a common statement about the summit. They reconfirmed their commitment to sustainable development. Furthermore they expressed concern about the slow progress with the implementation of Agenda 21, particularly as a result of the failure of the developed countries to make good their commitments agreed upon at Rio. They argued that the phasing out of poverty was an indispensable prerequisite for sustainable development and deserved the highest priority. The African leaders highlighted the inequalities in the relationship between the developed and developing states. They insisted on acknowledging the legitimate development priorities of the developing countries and the »differentiated responsibilities« of rich and poor nations with regard to sustainable development. They argued that it was the joint responsibility of North and South to transform the global relations underlying poverty in Africa (UNEP, 2001).

The elimination of poverty, the protection of natural resources which served as basis for economic and social development, and changes in unsustainable patterns of production and consumption were the three overarching themes of the WSSD. In his opening speech President Thabo Mbeki said:

A global human society based on poverty for many and prosperity for a few, characterized by islands of wealth surrounded by a sea of poverty, is unsustainable.

He appealed to the rich countries to accept their responsibilities to help combat poverty and underdevelopment (cited in Anon., 2002a).

At the WSSD discussions the divergent priorities of the developed and developing countries were underlined. Representatives of the poor countries demanded the right to development and criticised the unsustainable consumption and production in the rich countries. On the other hand representatives of the developed countries emphasised the inability of developing countries to meet standards of good governance (Anon., 2002b).

Eventually the delegates considerably watered down the texts of the two official documents of the WSSD, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, to reach consensus. Both documents highlighted poverty alleviation as the world's biggest challenge. An appeal was made for a great effort at all levels to help the developing world to reach its poverty-related MDG targets (cited in Strachan et al., 2005: 177).

The Johannesburg summit continued the trend at international environmental forums to place equal emphasis on the welfare of humans and the environment. It elicited mixed reaction. Critics claimed that the summit failed the poor and vulnerable people of the world by its inability to reach solemn agreements about the drastic measures needed to effectively deal with the planet's environmental challenges. Supporters of the process expressed the opinion that the WSSD and the series of UN conferences that preceded it fulfilled the requirements of conference diplomacy by keeping the relevant issues on the agenda, making a broad public aware of the issues at stake, generating new data, working towards consensus and administrative reform, and promoting mass participation (Baker, 2006: 66, 73).

5. MORAL SHIFT: FROM ZERO-GROWTH TO POVERTY ALLEVIATION

In this article I have argued that between 1972 and 2002 a discernable shift occurred in the discourse of sustainable development. In the 1970s the main focus was on ecological considerations and there was strong support from some scientists for the zero-growth option. Late in the 1980s the influential Brundtland report called for the balancing of ecological, economic and social considerations. In the 1990s the sustainable development discourse within the UN's Agenda 21 framework was dominated by the challenge of poverty and how it should be addressed to achieve sustainable development on a global scale.

Initially the representatives of the developing countries were skeptical of the concept of sustainable development, because potentially it could thwart the desire for economic growth and social development in the poor societies. During and after the Brundtland process, however, they started embracing sustainable development. With the assistance of more radical civil society elements in the West they succeeded in merging the sustainable development discourse with the broader North-South debate on economic inequality. Undoubtedly the moral force of the arguments of those who spoke for the poor of the world,

supported by a growing knowledge-base of the realities of the Global South, made a significant contribution to the evolution of the concept of sustainable development.

At face value the focus on the needs of the poor seems altruistic and morally appropriate. But should the increasing emphasis on poverty alleviation be regarded in a positive or negative light from an ecological sustainability perspective?

The concept of sustainable development brought an awareness of the interdependence of social, economic and environmental factors and created a platform from where the existing global power relations could be challenged in international forums. It created a space for representatives of developing countries to make their views audible to an international audience. Because the consequences of poverty is such an emotional issue this space provided the opportunity to make a moral demand on the affluent societies of the North.

It would be naive to think that this moral impact would have sufficient weight to quickly redress global inequalities.

Observers should keep in mind that the priority that was given in international forums to poverty happened in a context where the developed world continued its efforts to maintain the global system with its unequal distribution of wealth. To give prominence to poverty alleviation suited the leaders of the developed world. The bickering over which percentage of the GNP of the rich countries ought to be earmarked for development aid amounted to a discussion on the size of the alms the wealthy were prepared to dish out to the poor on their own terms. It did not directly challenge the existing Bretton Woods regime, where the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation play the central role in the global economic order to maintain the *status quo* of inequality. It circumvented the demand for a radical restructuring of the economic power balance in the world.

Ironically, the poverty alleviation approach focuses on the symptoms rather than the real causes of the ecological dilemma. In the Brundtland report the unsustainable consumer culture in the rich North was identified as the main culprit responsible for the world's environmental problems. Other studies found that the ecological footprint of people in prosperous urban communities in the Western metropolises was much larger than that of poor people in rural areas in the developing world (see Wackernagel and Rees, 1996). Rich and powerful people contribute much more to the destruction of the environment than the poor and miserable. But often the poor, who are seldom in a position to defend themselves, are blamed for environmental degradation.

The logical approach to dealing with the ecological crisis of the planet would be to focus on the reduction of wealth rather than the reduction of poverty. After the Rio Earth Summit *The Ecologist* stated that the regime of environmental conservation created at the summit rested on a flawed foundation, because Western-style wealth, rather than poverty, was the main cause of environmental decline (cited in Baker, 2006: 60).

There was an alternative, more radical, stance in the developed countries, that gave support to the position of the developing countries in the sustainable development discourse. It featured at the meetings of the WSF (World Social Forum). Supporters of this alternative stance blamed the obsession with markets and consumption in terms of »neo-liberal globalisation« for ecological unsustainability. They alleged that control and power over natural resources were centralised by states and multinational corporations. The natural democratic right of ordinary people to access to resources (the so-called »commons«) needed to be restored. Participants in the WSF made appeals to the wealthy societies to lower levels of production and consumption and by doing so creating an opportunity for the poorer societies to improve their quality of life. Pleas were made for a fundamental restructuring of the international political and economic order by replacing the dispensation of the World Bank, IMF en WTO with multilateral environmental agreements (Horton, 2002; Fisher and Ponniah, 2003: 126-8).

Idealists who believe that sustainable development will pave the way to a better future, can endorse the hopeful conclusion of the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development:

We commit ourselves to act together, united by a common determination to save our planet, promote human development and achieve universal prosperity and peace ... From the African continent, the cradle

of humankind, we solemnly pledge to the peoples of the world and the generations that will surely inherit this Earth that we are determined to ensure that our collective hope for sustainable development is realized (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2002).

Divergent opinions about sustainable development have existed ever since the term came into general use in the early 1970s. Although sustainable development has never succeeded in reconciling extreme viewpoints on development and sustainability and probably never will, the discourse around sustainable development has been successful in the sense that it has made people aware of the alternative perspectives and possibilities. Over decades this discourse has created a wealth of data that have made people worldwide aware of threats to the environment, the social and economic needs of developing societies, the interdependence of ecological, economic and social considerations, and the challenges facing leaders who try to balance these considerations. Awareness-raising has helped in changing people's perceptions, especially perceptions about the relationship between economic growth and the need to care for the environment.

Most inhabitants of the Global North will not easily accede to the demands for the reduction of wealth or the radical restructuring of the world economic system. Economists conventionally view it as not feasible and undesirable to try and persuade rich people to reduce their wealth. That which is regarded as the norm, in this case wealth, usually does not come under the spotlight, but rather that which is regarded as deviating from the norm, in this case poverty.

At the WSSD the unsustainable patterns of production and consumption were one of the main themes on the agenda. More than a decade down the line from there very little has been done to redress the structural inequality of the global system or to stop the depletion of natural resources. The world economic crisis since 2008 has made it even more difficult to put pressure on the most powerful to make a substantial contribution to environmental conservation and poverty alleviation.

Real sustainable development still seems to be a mirage on the horizon. However, hopes for a more sustainable future dispensation must never be abandoned. The dismantling of apartheid in South Africa demonstrated that continued moral pressure can in the long term have a decisive influence, even in the case of extremely unequal power relations. In the sphere of sustainable development a breakthrough may also lead to real progress for the planet and its people.

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SAŽETAK

Ovaj članak prati pomak u moralnim argumentima u diskursu održivog razvoja, koji se dogodio između 1972. i 2002. godine. U ranim sedamdesetima su bili dominantni ekološki razlozi, a nulta stopa razvoja imala je snažnu potporu. Do kraja osamdesetih, utjecajno izvješće UN komisije na čelu s Gro Harlem Brundtland preporučuje održavanje ravnoteže između ekoloških, ekonomskih i društvenih aspekata održivog razvoja. Od devedesetih, došlo je do promjene diskursa održivog razvoja u pravcu ublažavanja siromaštva. Predstavnici zemalja u razvoju počeli su doprinositi da koncept održivog razvoja evoluirao i uspjeti spajanjem diskursa održivog razvoja u širu raspravu odnosa Sjevera i Juga. Pravilan pristup održivom razvoju sada je rad na smanjenju bogaćenja, a ne pukom smanjenju siromaštva. Međutim, takva radikalna promjena smjera će biti moguća tek nakon što se postigne značajan napredak u preraspodjeli neravnoteže u globalnoj raspodjeli bogatstva.

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