Orchestrating Competing Goals: The Challenge of Sustainable Development

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Abstract: A fundamental challenge to sustainable development is to harmonise diverse and often competing and conflicting objectives. There is no disagreement about this statement but what is scrutinised in this paper is the contemporary notion that the way to harmonise those competing and conflicting goals is by further clarifying the very concept of sustainable development itself. This paper brings this notion to a historical analysis whereby the experience of the postwar European Union in ‘discovering’ sustainable development was analysed using materials obtained from the Commission of the European Communities reports for the years 1993 to 2000 and selected case studies from Germany, Ireland, Netherlands and Sweden. It was found from this historical analysis that the challenge of harmonising competing goals was met by practically gearing towards each set of the sustainability goals according to the priority of the time. In conclusion, it is not so much a task of infusing intellectual clarity and rigour to the concept of sustainable development that really matters. Rather it is the act of the ability to manage the tensions of competing economic, social and ecological goals as they happen at a given time or stage of development, even as the exact meaning of sustainable development at that time was less clear and less complete. This insight should further our understanding of the challenges faced by developing countries currently undergoing different stages of development and finding difficulty at realising the ultimate goals of sustainability all at once.

Key words: Sustainable development · Economic growth · Ecological integrity · Social vitality

INTRODUCTION

The laudable intentions of sustainable development are not only recognised nowadays but also reinforced. For instance, contemporary tertiary education has been urged to ensure that it does not reinforce the principles and values of an unsustainable lifestyle and economy [1]. As such university curriculum must be changed to facilitate real education for sustainable development [2][3][4] although there were more optimistic perspectives that did not see the urgency of such measures [5].

To be sure, while the intentions of sustainable development are laudable, many have contested its concept [6][7][8]. A main contention was that the current mainstream formulation contains significant weaknesses ranging from an incomplete perception of poverty-linked environmental degradation, to confusions about the role of economic growth and social participation in fostering sustainable development. All these made for inadequacies and contradictions in policy making as demonstrated in the context of international trade, agriculture and forestry [9].

There are competing discourses on sustainability [10]. There are those who had examined mainstream and critical perspectives of sustainable development only to find that neither of these critical approaches could be deemed adequate and came out with the conclusion that an adequate approach to sustainable development requires combining insights from various critical approaches and perspectives [11]. Some had gone even further for innovative discourses of sorts, at least at the local level of sustainable development [12].

Be that as it may, sustainable development is not something that was stumbled upon by chance. It is a kind of experiential lesson that a human society learns to imbibe in the course of its on-going development. Postwar European Union was a case in point. Here, regional development did not start from the goal of sustainability
right away but proceeded from phase to phase until it was
driven to embrace sustainable development. This article
analyses the process undergone by selected countries of
postwar European Union in harmonising competing goals
of regional development until the complete goals of
sustainability were within reach.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Materials for this analysis were obtained from three
CEC (Commission of the European Communities)
publications, namely, (i) the DG XI (1993) Toward
sustainability, (ii) the Agenda 2000-For a Stronger and
Wider Union (1997); and (iii) Research on the Socio-
Economic Aspects of Environmental Change: Summary
Results 1992-1996. These three CEC documentations
provided the basis for identifying salient phases in the
path to sustainability that EU countries commonly went
through.

To decipher the main elements and forces that
distinguished the phases identified, the paper resorted to
the findings of regional case studies representing the
experiences of Netherlands [13], Sweden [14], Germany
[15] and Ireland [16]. These countries were chosen for the
different scales and nature of economic, social and
ecological challenges encountered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four Phases of Development: In the five decades since
the end of World War II four phases of development may
be distinguished in the European Union countries:

Economic Growth (1945-1960s): The first development
phase in Western Europe after the Second World War
was economic growth, the goals of which were postwar
reconstruction and regional development. During the
early postwar years, planners emphasized the alleged
economies of larger scale, i.e. increased the size and
volume of enterprises as the national route toward
functional efficiency in the production, consumption and
circulation of goods and services. It was assumed that
‘trickle-down’ effect of increased economic prosperity
would guarantee improved living standards throughout
society.

Balancing Economic Growth and Social Equality (1970s):
In this phase, living standards did improve but not
equally throughout countries and societies in Western
Europe. Certain places like the core and urban areas
prospered more than the rural peripheries. Within national
societies, classes with better access and command of
capital, technologies and other resources and effective
political influences, fared much better than the proletariat
and the under-class. To avert further erosion of national
solidarity and manage existing social disparities, the
second phase of postwar regional development in the
European Union saw the harmonization of economic and
social goals becoming a central challenge for regional
development, particularly in Nordic countries where
elaborate mechanisms were developed for the
redistribution of income. This set a kind of informal model
for west European governments to assure minimum levels
of welfare benefits for all their citizens. The welfare state
which Western Europe is famous for took root.

Conservation of Resources (1980s): The success of
securing and maintaining growth-with-equity which
welfare state entailed put a lot of pressure on economic
growth: the economic cake had to become bigger and
bigger so more would be able to share it. This relentless
pursuit of growth had begun to exact its toll on the
physical environment in Western Europe. Thus by the
late 1970s the third phase of national development set in
with concerns about the depletion of natural resources.
This had caused another set of development scale criteria
to emerge, i.e. that of ecosystem dynamics and bio-
reproduction in the course of regional development in the
European countries.

Potential conflicts between economic and ecological
rationality dominated environmental discourse
throughout the 1980s. Successive ‘oil crises’ led some in
the continent to question the very lifestyles that western
Europeans have come to take for granted. It was also
becoming clear during this decade that while impressive
gains in productivity levels and living standards had been
achieved there was still evidence of gross anomalies in
regional life. Enduring disparities existed between core
and peripheral regions and concern was mounting over the
environmental consequences of enlarged scales of
production, consumption and circulation of products.

Sustainable Development (1990s): Everyday patterns of
consumption persisted and expectations of living
standards continued to rise in Western Europe even as,
by the late 1980s, industry and government sought to
accommodate increasing regulation and environmental
restrictions. At the same time, however, grassroots’
pressures from industrially advanced regions and from
NGOs played an ever increasing role in shaping those
regulations and restrictions to the extent that they were
able to force certain policy directives on energy use by
Fig. 1: The path to sustainable regional development in postwar Europe (Source: Adapted from Buttimer [17])
the 1990s. This marks the era of sustainable development in Western Europe.

Figure 1 summarises the four phases of postwar development in European Union and the distinct development values and goals that need to be harmonised respectively.

**The Challenge of Sustainable Development:** In a nutshell the challenge of sustainable development in Western Europe is characterised by fundamental policy changes to harmonise competing economic, ecological and social values, at global as well as at national scales [18], [19], [20]. For instance, economic growth which used to be simply premised on increased productivity (through functional specialisation, technological innovation and trade) not only would have to be balanced with social equality (through rationalisation of enterprise and increased profits and exports in order to afford welfare state), but also must be harmonised with conservation of resources (by adapting industry to emission control) while mending the social goal of reducing the core-periphery gap.

Similarly, the orchestrating of social goals had to be modulated between social equality (of opportunity, social justice and democratic participation through redistribution of income, full employment, higher standards of living and welfare state) and social vitality (through equal opportunities of expression, democratic participation in decision making and environmental justice).

Finally, articulating ecological values vibrated from the normal conservation of resources and ecological sustainability (through ‘Limits to growth’ and Quality of life ideologies) to ecological concerns (through the role of environmental protection agencies, emission control and Green movement) and to ecological integrity (through safeguarding biodiversity, environmental quality and the experience of nature).

What is most important to note about the European experience of managing the unavoidable tensions between these competing economic, social and ecological goals and values is that it was a process enacted in different and distinct phases in accordance with the urgencies of the time.

**CONCLUSION**

This historical analysis of the Western European experience shows that the challenge of harmonising competing goals was met not so much by deliberating on the complete meaning and values of sustainable development as by practically gearing towards each set of the sustainability goals according to the priority of the time. It was not so much a task of infusing intellectual clarity and rigour to the concept of sustainable development that really mattered. Rather it was the act-the ability to manage the tensions of competing economic, social and ecological goals as they happened at a given time or stage of development, even as the exact meaning of sustainable development at that time was less clear and less complete.

Going by the European experience, we learn that countries might evolve from focusing on continuous economic growth at the earliest stage of development and proceeded consecutively to balancing economic growth with social equality, then to balancing economic growth with ecological concerns and finally to harmonising economic growth with ecological integrity and social vitality. This insight should further our understanding of the challenges faced by developing countries currently undergoing different stages of development and finding difficulty at realising the ultimate goals of sustainability all at once.

**REFERENCES**


