





SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

4

INTRODUCTION

The Institute's concern with a unified approach to development extends beyond economic and social dimensions to include environmental aspects. Between the 1970s and late 1990s, 15 research projects examined the interconnections between environment and society. Integrating environmental aspects into the analysis of social problems was one aspect of UNRISD work in the 1980s on Food Systems and Society. This programme sought to apply insights from systems theory and to understand situations of food insecurity by examining the way social, economic and environmental systems interact (García 1984; Tudela 1989). This approach differed from that often used in research on food problems, which was fragmented into different disciplines and policy areas. It also revealed the important trade-offs and contradictions that characterize different government policies (Barraclough 1991; Savané 1992).

Research on environmental issues expanded considerably in the early 1990s, against the backdrop of growing international concern with the question of sustainable development. This term, which was popularized by the World Commission on Environment and Development (or Brundtland Commission) in 1987 and globalized by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, was meant to encapsulate a new—more integrated—approach to development. In practice, however, much of the attention

of policy makers and activists focused narrowly on environmental issues and interventions. Often marginalized were the social, political and structural dimensions of sustainable development—which are crucial for understanding the causes and perceptions of environmental degradation, appropriate policy and project-level interventions, and people's responses to both environmental and social change (UNRISD 2002a).

UNRISD research looked, in particular, at how processes of environmental degradation and protection affect different social groups; the relationship between environmental degradation and development policies and processes; how people's livelihood systems and local institutions can adapt in order to improve natural resource management; and the politics of change associated with sustainable development.



SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONNECTIONS

In order to understand the causes of environmental degradation, as well as why policies and projects succeed or fail, it is crucial to examine a broad range of environment-society linkages (Ghai 1994). In particular, it is important to go beyond simplistic uni-causal explanations. Environmental decline usually results from a network of factors, often linked to certain processes of modernization; patterns of economic growth, production, consumption and market integration; and the marginalization or disempowerment of certain social groups (Utting 1993; see also box 4.1). Explanations blaming, for example, population growth, peasant farmers practising slash-and-burn agriculture, or nomadic pastoralists are likely to result in narrow, ineffective policy prescriptions (Ghimire 1993; Barraclough and Ghimire 2001).

Deforestation and other forms of environmental degradation frequently arise when local groups lose control over resource use and decision making associated with the management of natural resources. Many systems of resource management—including swidden agriculture and common property regimes, which historically provided a degree of social and environmental security—have broken down, often in contexts of privatization, colonization of agrarian frontier areas and land concentration.

In parts of Africa, pastoralism is under threat, particularly in contexts where there is declining rainfall, grazing lands are being privatized or used to grow crops, and attempts are being made to settle nomadic populations (Lane 1998). UNRISD research debunked the claim that pastoralism is obsolete, inefficient and environmentally damaging. On the contrary, in many areas it generates important economic and social benefits and constitutes a production system that manages and protects dryland resources more effectively than do alternatives.

Institutions, processes and policies operating at different levels all have a bearing on environmental outcomes on the ground. Local events and actions affect and are affected by regional, national and international dynamics. Much can be done at the local level to improve natural resource management systems, but supportive institutions and policy coherence at higher levels are also important. World commodity prices, interest rates, subsidies and other fiscal policies, and agricultural expansion strategies, for example, significantly affect the capacity of local resource users to adopt sustainable resource management practices (Diegues 1992; Barraclough et al. 1997).

A study on population-environment linkages in Pakistan revealed how market forces and government policies have contributed to the breakdown of collective local decision making (Amalric and Banuri 1995). As a result of this

Box 4.1—Understanding environmental decline

The complexities of environmental degradation emerged clearly in an UNRISD study of deforestation in the Guatemalan highland area of Totonicapán. In this relatively densely populated area, a system of communal institutions had historically been effective in protecting forests. This system, however, came under considerable strain as a result of new pressure on the natural resource base and institutional change. Customary arrangements were gradually replaced by state regulations that went largely unenforced. Community structures and traditional regulatory measures proved to be ineffective when confronted with the growth of clandestine economic activities centred on the exploitation of forest products. Their weakness was reinforced by the fact that the state failed to guarantee community and customary rights, discriminated against Indian populations in the application of the rule of law, and aided and abetted illegal forest activities.

Complementing and fuelling these institutional changes were rising demands on the natural resource base caused by population growth and, more importantly, the crisis situation affecting traditional livelihood systems and the local economy. It became more difficult for families to derive income, food and fuelwood from diversified livelihood activities. Furthermore, incomes and profits were increasingly leaving the area rather than stimulating the local economy.

Source: Utting 1993, based on a case study by Ileana Valenzuela.

“deresponsibilization”, local individuals, households and communities no longer feel obliged or able to respond to problems associated with environmental degradation. In such cases, there is a need to re-create social responsibility through local government, judicial systems and civic institutions.

Economic development processes often have debilitating effects on traditional resource management systems and indigenous knowledge. But in some settings, commercial and customary forms of production enjoy a more harmonious co-existence. An UNRISD study of the Solomon Islands, for example, showed that traditional institutions and resource management systems were under pressure, but some local communities had been able to accommodate commercial development in a customary framework. This involved their active participation in the negotiation of rules governing resource exploitation, and adjusting patterns of social organization and the division of labour (Hviding and Baines 1992). Similarly, UNRISD research on domestic and regional tourism in developing countries identified instances in Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and elsewhere in which local communities benefited from the growth of tourism in ways that strengthened the environment, local livelihoods and culture (Ghimire 2001b).

The social impacts of environmental degradation take many forms. Most importantly, people's

livelihoods and productive capacities suffer as a direct result of the depletion and misuse of the natural resources on which they depend. New demands are often made on people's labour as they adapt to changed circumstances. Economic and psychological stress arises from the displacement of individuals or communities from degraded areas. Social conflict may be generated by increasing pressures on the natural resource base, competing claims on scarce resources, and the upsurge in illicit activities centred on the exploitation of natural resources, especially forests and wildlife. Health consequences may be severe and nutritional status is likely to decline. UNRISD research in India, Kenya, Malaysia and

Mexico on the gender implications of environ-

mental destruction found that women are often particularly affected by certain forms of environmental degradation (see box 4.2). This is largely because they tend to be responsible for food preparation, water and fuel collection, and family health care (Ghai 1994; Heyzer 1996).

Box 4.2—Gender and environment

In Sarawak, Malaysia, deforestation is changing fundamental aspects of the lifestyles of the Penan and Kelabit, two communities depending on the river, jungle resources and land for their survival. The activities of logging companies have had severe consequences for all members of these communities—especially women who, more than men, have limited access to other economic opportunities and are highly dependent on the environment. They experience the immediate effects of environmental decline because of their household responsibilities. Increasing shortages of essential natural resources, and the degradation of those that remain, mean heavier workloads, a fall in nutritional status and income, and an increase in environmentally related health problems.

As the resource base weakens, indigenous communities are forced to become more dependent on the market economy for survival. It is men who have become the main points of interaction with the outside world. Ironically, some women are also suffering from community backlash against social change. Elderly community members, in particular, seek to suppress women's independence in an attempt to preserve the integrity of the community.

Source: Heyzer 1996.



TECHNICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FIXES

How can the environment be protected and processes of environmental degradation reversed? There is a tendency for mainstream development agencies to rely heavily on technological and institutional fixes, such as miracle seeds, genetically modified organisms, protected areas and various innovations associated with “eco-efficiency”.

At a conceptual level, the reliance on technical solutions has been bolstered by certain strands of modernization theory—the notion that progress can be achieved primarily on the basis of technology, economic growth, and rational planning and policy interventions, or that change from traditional to modern society is evolutionary and linear. More recently, ecological modernization theory has stressed the importance of technological innovation and win-win scenarios; the potential for collaboration and partnership between NGOs, business and government; and the capacity of the business sector to solve environmental problems without fundamentally transforming existing economic, political and social institutions (Utting 2002a).

UNRISD work on the Green Revolution questioned some of these assumptions. In the 1960s, high-yielding varieties of foodgrain and their associated technological packages of inputs were widely introduced in many developing countries. Throughout the 1970s, UNRISD examined the impacts of the

Green Revolution in seven countries in Asia, four in Africa and four in Latin America (Dumont 1971; Pearse 1980). The findings not only raised serious environmental concerns, but also challenged the then commonplace view that the new technology was “scale neutral” and potentially of benefit to all foodgrain producers. The impacts, in fact, varied considerably depending on the type of rural society and agrarian structure involved. Benefits were indeed forthcoming for some agricultural producers, who enjoyed increased yields and incomes. However, in situations of highly unequal access to agricultural resources, small commercial farmers and landless peasants were likely to be displaced or further disadvantaged. The policy implications of this research pointed to the need to replace a blind faith in technological solutions with an approach recognizing the importance of addressing rural inequality and promoting peasant-based development strategies. Where this was done—in China and Japan, for example—technological improvements could yield important productive, economic and social benefits for a wide range of rural producers.

Another fairly standard intervention, actively promoted by governments and international agencies in the 1980s and early 1990s, involved the creation of national parks and reserves for protecting forests and endangered species, and biodiversity more generally. This approach often disregarded the needs and rights of local resource users and communities. In the 1990s, UNRISD carried out extensive

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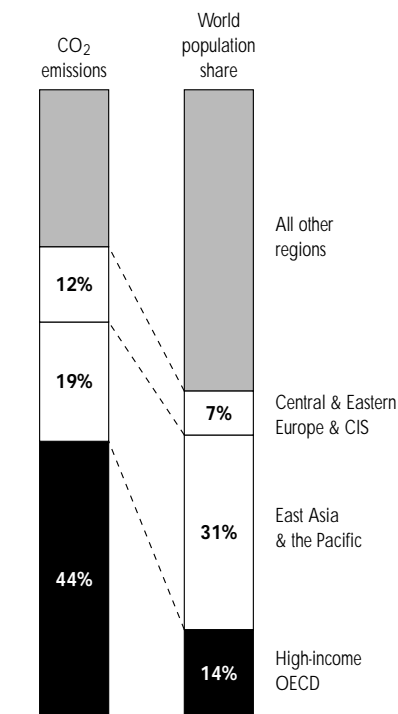
INGRID EIDE,
FORMER SPECIAL ADVISOR
ON UNESCO AFFAIRS,
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research on protected area schemes in developing countries. This work highlighted the social and environmental tensions of attempts to manage and protect natural resources in this way. Many national parks and reserves have contributed to the conservation of forests and ecosystems—but they have often ignored local livelihoods, culture and natural resource management systems, and excluded local people from decision-making processes (Ghimire and Pimbert 1997). The costs and benefits of conservation schemes have often been distributed unequally, even regressively. And when affected negatively, people are likely to react in ways that seriously undermine the implementation of conservation policies and projects (Utting 1993). Their responses may involve apathy or non-co-operation with project personnel, the undertaking of illicit activities, and even violent forms of conflict. If these types of problems are to be minimized, conservation programmes must address the following questions: how will the benefits of such measures be distributed among individuals and groups; who will bear the costs; how will costs be compensated; what alternatives exist for people whose livelihoods are affected; and how will local people be actively involved in the relevant decision-making processes (Barracough and Ghimire 1995).

In contrast to mainstream approaches that emphasized large-scale external interventions, much UNRISD work stressed the role of “grass-roots environmental action”—that is, the efforts

and struggles of people at the local level to control, manage and protect the natural resources upon which they depend materially and culturally (Ghai and Vivian 1992; Friedmann and Rangan 1993; Gadgil and Guha 1995). Not only do poor people and communities have a right to defend their livelihoods and natural resource base, but such forms of defence often constitute a pragmatic approach to sustainable development. This work, however, warned against romanticizing initiatives and action at the local level, recognizing the resource and institutional constraints, interests, values, conflicts and structures that may undermine success (Blaikie and Jeanrenaud 1996). In fact, much of the Institute’s research agenda on environment and sustainable development implicitly or explicitly addressed the relationship between “structure” and “agency”. This work suggested that there was significant room for manoeuvre through various forms of local-level action but that structural aspects, such as social relations, national development strategies and international production and consumption patterns, were crucial in determining the possibilities and outcomes of local-level initiatives (Barracough and Ghimire 1995).

FIGURE 4.1
CARBON DIOXIDE EMISSIONS
BY REGION



Source: UNDP 2002:28.

APPLYING NEW APPROACHES AND CONCEPTS

A powerful combination of factors—including civil society mobilization, failed projects, ideological shifts and scientific inquiry—forced many national and international development agencies to rethink their approach to natural resource management in the 1990s. There was increasing recognition of the limits of fragmented, top-down and authoritarian approaches to conservation. As a result, many environment, development and finance agencies took on board such terms and concepts as community-based natural resource management, participation, empowerment, decentralization and, of course, sustainable development.

How effectively have these terms and concepts been applied? Have mainstream agencies really changed their approach? UNRISD has examined these questions in the context of a broader assessment of what has been achieved as a result of the 1992 Earth Summit and the 1995 Social Summit. Research findings indicate that there is often a wide gap between the rhetoric and practice of international agencies, governments and transnational corporations. Some are more adept at adopting the discourse of social and environmental activists than at fundamentally changing their approach.

Development agencies the world over now talk about sustainable development. This serves as a

useful reminder to the international community that development involves far more than economic growth; that certain patterns of growth and modernization generate unacceptable social and environmental costs; and that development interventions and macroeconomic policies need to be far more sensitive to their social and environmental effects (UNRISD 2000e).

The meanings attached to the term, however, vary widely. Sometimes it is still associated primarily with environmental protection. Often it implies little more than a vague sense of improvement in economic, social and environmental domains. Agency efforts to promote sustainable development are, in practice, mixed and contradictory. This partly reflects the fact that any meaningful application of terms such as sustainable development or people-centred development is often impeded by the organizational profile of aid agencies—that is, their method of decision making; the class, cultural and professional background of staff; and how resources are mobilized. Many international development and finance organizations are accountable to governments, and their principal support groups rarely include the rural and urban poor. The emphasis on bankable projects may stifle innovation and risk-taking, which new or different approaches to development entail (Barraclough 2001).

In many countries there has been a significant shift toward more people-centred approaches to conservation. In Senegal, for example, this produced

important results in consensual decision making and policy coherence, as well as a more prominent role for civil society and grassroots organizations in national and local development (Utting and Jaubert 1998). Yet further progress has been undermined by a range of factors. Of particular concern is the way national policy has shifted in response to frequent changes in international thinking on and approaches to environmental protection and development priorities. The weakening of state administrative capacity (associated with structural adjustment programmes) and the unintended consequences of decentralization have also impeded actual implementation of participatory approaches. In some areas, decentralization has created new sites of power and patronage, resulting in factionalism and the misappropriation of resources.

More wide-ranging research on African decentralization has shown that while governments and international agencies are encouraging this practice, local entities that have acquired additional responsibilities for natural resource management are not downwardly accountable or entrusted with sufficient power and revenue (Ribot 2002). The mismatch between the transfer of responsibility and the transfer of financial and other resources to the local level was also found to exist in several urban and rural settings in Southeast Asia (Atkinson 2000). In the Philippines, for example, decentralization has sometimes had the effect of reducing official concern for deforestation. Considerable advances in raising awareness of environmental

issues at the level of central government have yet to occur at the local level, where authorities tend to have other priorities (Severino 1998).

Any shift in approach toward people-centred conservation will, of course, require a change in the mindset of technical and professional staff involved in policy and project design and implementation. UNRISD research on protected area schemes and sustainable forest management, for example, has demonstrated that many agencies and personnel are now more aware of the relevance of issues of livelihood, indigenous rights and local knowledge. Development and conservation agencies increasingly recognize that participation and empowerment are important for the design and implementation of many types of environmental protection initiatives, given the role of the former in ensuring that environmental goals are balanced with human welfare considerations, and that policies and institutions are responsive to the priorities and needs of disadvantaged groups. In practice, however, participation is often reduced to consultation and dialogue with local people on terms largely determined by external agents, or to encouraging their involvement in natural resource management by offering them material resources (Pimbert and Pretty 1995). Such technocratic participation (Utting 2000b) ignores crucial aspects of empowerment that give disadvantaged groups increased influence and control in decision making that affects their lives (see chapter 5).

THE QUESTION OF POWER

Environmental degradation results largely from a complex interplay of actors, development processes, policies and institutions that go beyond simple ecological factors. As such it is strongly determined by political choices—and can thus be addressed through policy and institutional reforms, social mobilization and shifts in the balance of social forces (Redclift 1992; Barraclough and Ghimire 1995).

The recognition that environmental change is an inherently political process makes issues of conflict, resistance, bargaining, networking, alliance building and participation, as well as social organization and collective action, central to the success or failure of environmental interventions. As UNRISD work on forest policy in the Philippines showed, whether or not an agenda of participatory conservation actually takes off ultimately depends not simply on technocratic rationality, the goodwill of policy makers and agency personnel, and the availability of resources, but also on sufficient political backing to exert the necessary pressure for change and to counter opposition and resistance to change. This is likely to require the mobilization of a range of groups and the construction or strengthening of broad-based alliances (Utting 2000b).

Sustainable development requires efforts on the part of disadvantaged groups to form themselves into a constituency that can demand change and accountability from local, national and international leaders. UNRISD research on pastoralism in Africa recognized that while it was impossible to return to the traditional practices of the past, the defence of pastoralist systems—and their economic, social and environmental advantages—lay in the organization of pastoralists and their participation in shaping rangeland management, which is too complex an undertaking to be codified and controlled by outsiders (Lane 1998).

The creation and support of a network of informed people's organizations has been shown to be effective in increasing the awareness of and response to local social and environmental problems. However, research on environmental action and movements has shown that grassroots movements are sometimes caught in a culture of opposition that limits their ability to advance the cause of sustainable development. When institutions for consultation, downward accountability and negotiation do exist, it is important that these movements understand and utilize the mechanisms of political bargaining necessary for bringing their ideas to fruition (UNRISD 1992).

UNRISD work on the contribution of grassroots environmental action to sustainable development stressed the importance of a democratic space allowing the expression and defence of

community rights and claims (Ghai and Vivian, 1992; Westendorff 2003). In the final analysis, environmental protection projects and programmes that contribute to sustainable development are not only about protecting natural resources. They should also enhance people's livelihoods and respect their rights; strengthen democratic and accountable institutions; facilitate empowerment; and be part of a certain style of development that is concerned with equity and social justice.

