

Chapter 3

NATURE, SOCIETY AND SUSTAINABILITY

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3.1 Introduction

The concepts of 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' are widely used today as an integral part of policy and management by governments, non-governmental organisations and planning agencies amongst others. It has become almost *de rigeur* to use the words 'sustainable' and 'sustainable development' when formulating policy on economic development or environmental management. The goal of attaining a sustainable countryside is often set out in national policy statements, for example in the United Kingdom (UK) in Department of Employment (DoE)/Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) (1995), Scottish Office (1995), Welsh Office (1996), and similar aims in government documents in many developed countries, including the Agenda 2000 plans for agricultural policy in the European Union. Within rural policy, many governments recognise the achievement of sustainable forms of agricultural production as a long-term policy objective, with 'sustainable agricultural strategies' being developed as part of national environmental, rural development and agricultural plans.

References to sustainability and sustainable development give policy a legitimacy, though often without any real commitment to change existing environmentally-damaging practices. In part this is because the idea of sustainability can be used in a relatively general fashion. It can embrace desirable but conflicting goals, such as continued productivity, balanced development and rational decision-making, and compatibility between development of resources and conservation of nature. Thus sustainability is a concept with a highly variable meaning and it has often been adopted by policy-makers in controversial fashion. In general it has been used in policy statements that have involved the combination or juxtaposition of different conceptions of nature and society to yield development that is claimed to be 'sustainable'. In particular, sustainable development has become an all-embracing goal for environmental management, but applied in a multiplicity of situations and with vague and conflicting meanings attached to sustainability. Policy statements generally ignore the inherent tension contained within notions of sustainable development, that is between maintenance of biological processes and development, which by its existence, at the very least, will alter the environment and thereby affect biological processes.

The variability in the usage of 'sustainable development', and the extent of its appropriation by governments for multifarious ends, contribute to the view that it is a slippery concept, and difficult to define with any degree of specificity. Moreover, there has been no agreed position as to the relative weight that should be placed on its social, economic or environmental objectives, thereby contributing to its manipulation for diverse purposes. Hence it has been deemed at different times to support both maintenance of the status quo and radical change. This reflects the way that its meaning has changed and developed over time, but also that the term itself contains a major paradox, as it combines the contradictory ideas of limits to growth and active promotion of growth.

This paradox is itself a product of the long process in the evolution of ideas about society, nature and their interaction. In order to understand this evolution, and the varied use of sustainable development, it is necessary to examine ideas about nature and its role in the evolution of human development. This chapter provides an introduction to this examination of ideas, through a brief summary of the inception of the term 'sustainable development', linking this to the evolution of thought on society and nature, and then utilising some examples of key issues relating to the implementation of sustainable development policies in a rural context.

3.2 Defining sustainable development

From the 1930s it is possible to find references to the concept of sustainable use in an economic sense, as in the case of the sustainable use of Australian forests, which meant "to manage forests to ensure a constant or increased level of wood production in perpetuity" (Young 1996: 202). A more biological basis to productivity and human welfare was developed in the 1964 United Nations (UN) International Biological Programme, and the term 'sustainable' was then applied to project management objectives in less-developed countries (LDCs) (Paddock and Paddock 1973). In 1972 the UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment dealt with issues that further developed this biological and ecological context. A statement was formulated that recommended balancing conservation of natural resources and development of those resources, and recognising special needs of LDCs. These ideas evolved initially into the concept of ecodevelopment, which was used by some LDCs in challenges to social injustice and imperialism. Ecodevelopment was part of the UN's Man and the Biosphere Programme in the 1970s, aimed at identifying, monitoring and assessing changes in the biosphere due to human activities, and the effects of these changes on humankind.

In the 1980s the World Conservation Strategy was seen as an alternative to ecodevelopment and gained wider support, with 40 countries adopting the Strategy. However, the widespread use of the term 'ecologically sustainable development' post-dates the Strategy, appearing in 1987 as a central part of *Our Common Future*, produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (known as the Brundtland Report), in which sustainable development was defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of

future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development - WCED 1987:43). Some of these ideas were carried forward into the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, where 178 nations were represented and 107 heads of state, compared with 113 nations and just two heads of state twenty years earlier in Stockholm. The Summit set up conventions that would bind nations to take specific action, especially on climate change and biodiversity. Non-binding action plans were brought together in Agenda 21, dealing with consumption patterns and trade, a wide range of resource management issues, the role of groups such as women and indigenous peoples, measures to combat poverty, introduction of socio-culturally sensitive and environmentally-sound programmes, empowerment of groups and communities to engender economic benefits, and provision of means of implementation (such as technology transfer and through establishment of local Agenda 21 groups).

Table 3.1 Stated aims of sustainable development in the Brundtland Report

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- To integrate economic and environmental goals in policies and activities
 - To ensure that environmental assets are appropriately valued
 - To provide for equity within and between generations
 - To deal cautiously with risk and irreversibility
 - To recognize the global dimension
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Source: adapted from World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)(1987)

Munton (1997) argues that the 27 principles agreed within the Rio declaration mark a significant shift in position from the debates of the 1960s and 1970s, which questioned the competence of industrial progress and made environmental limits the focus of attention. The Rio principles extended the WCED’s view that both economic growth and environmental protection could be achieved through technological advance and managerialist solutions enacted within existing institutional structures.

Table 3.2 Conditions to be satisfied if agricultural systems are to be sustainable

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- Soil resources must not be degraded in quality through loss of soil structure or the build-up of toxic elements, nor must the depth of topsoil be reduced significantly through erosion, thereby reducing water-holding capacity
 - Available water resources must be managed so that crop needs are satisfied, and excessive water must be removed through drainage or otherwise kept from inundating fields
 - Biological and ecological integrity of the system must be preserved through management of plant and animal genetic resources, crop pests, nutrient cycles and animal health. Development of resistance to pesticides must be avoided
 - The system must be economically viable, returning an acceptable profit to producers
 - Social expectations and cultural norms must be satisfied, as well as the needs of the population with respect to food and fibre production.
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Source: adapted from Benbrook (1990).

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