

THE ETHICAL DIMENSION IN THE NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Many countries have drawn up a strategy for sustainable development in the aftermath of the 1992 United National Conference on Economic and Development the governments of almost all nations committed themselves to adopt such a strategy so as to "build upon and harmonise the various sectoral, economic, social and environmental policies and plans that are operating in the country". The basic goals of this strategy were "to ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations. It should be developed through the widest possible participation. It should be based on a thorough assessment of the current situation and initiatives." (Agenda 21, Chapter 8, paragraph 8.7).

In September 2000, some 150 Heads of States signed the Millennium Declaration and reaffirmed their support for the principles of sustainable development and Agenda 21. They also agreed on the Millennium Development Goals, including the need to "integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources." (Millennium Development Goal 7).¹

These commitments, amongst others, have imposed an obligation and a mandate for all countries to adopt a sustainable development strategy.

The Advantage of drawing up an SD Strategy

¹ See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

The main advantage of drawing up a National Sustainable Development Strategy is that this would inform policy making agents across different sectors and provide a framework for a systematic approach within an institutionalized process of consultation and consensus building.

A related advantage is that such a strategy addresses social, economic and environmental concerns in a coherent manner and permits policy makers to set relative priorities to these three pillars of sustainable development. In addition, the drawing up of such a strategy affords an opportunity for the identification of specific initiatives for which there could be a commitment towards their implementation within certain time frames.

The process of drawing and implementing the strategy itself should be conducive towards the creation of participatory schemes and educational experiences.

What should be the criteria underpinning an SD Strategy

The criteria on which the strategy should be drawn were set out by the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs.² According to these criteria, an SD strategy should:

- seek to integrate economic, social and environmental considerations;
- be inter-sectoral and multilayered;
- have a long run perspective and an ethical dimension with regard to future generations;
- be developed on the basis of broad participation and generate a feeling of ownership by stakeholders;
- be backed by strong political commitment;
- serve to develop capacity and itself generate an enabling environment;
- promote the development of monitoring and assessments procedures;

² UN DESA (2002). "Guidance in Preparing National Sustainable Development Strategies," In *Report of the International Forum on National Sustainable Development Strategies. Accra, Ghana, 7-9 November 2001*. New York: United Nations. <http://www.environment.gov.mt/legislation/ftp/epa01.pdf>.

- foster an educative process and a sustainable development culture.
- be coherent, in that there should be a balance between funding potential and strategy priorities, and anchored in sound technical and economic analysis.

The Ethical Dimension

Although the ethical dimension is one of many that should underlie an SD strategy, it is the view of the present author that this dimension should be considered as the fundamental one, in the context of sustainable development. The reason for this is that it is associated with a set of values that should be upheld to promote the welfare of current and future generations.

In this regard, the issue of responsibility towards future generations takes centre stage – and this aspect of sustainable development was an important component of the most widely used definition of sustainable development, namely that proposed by Bruntland (1987).

There are also ethical considerations relating to science and technology, since these have major impacts on sustainability. It is important that scientific and technological developments have, as their central aim, improvement in the quality of life of current generations, without compromising that of future ones.

Ethics also have an important role in the promotion and sharing of knowledge and in the participation of stakeholders in the process of sustainable development. The association between sustainable development and matters such as information, transparency and participation is ethically based, and relates to the need for all stakeholders to make informed choices.

The ethical dimension of sustainable development is also associated with its political dimension. There is the need for strong political commitment to sustainable development values, from all layers of authority, including the government and local authorities. A related aspect of major importance in a sustainable development strategy

relates to the need for consensus-building regarding the ways in which natural and economic resources are to be utilized.

Ethics and Public Participation

Public participation in decision-making is an essential feature of sustainable development. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration states that sustainable development issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, and these should have the information and opportunity to be able to participate in decision-making processes, including judicial redress.

Agenda 21 emphasises the need for enabling the participation of major groups.³ More recently, the WSSD Johannesburg Declaration recognised the importance of a broad-based commitment to public participation in policy-formulation, decision-making and implementation at all levels.

The UN/ECE Aarhus Convention, to which many countries have agreed to adhere, deals with access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters – justice, having of course strong ethical overtones.

Public participation is important for two principal reasons: first, publics have the democratic right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, locally, nationally and internationally. Second, decisions taken through participatory processes are sounder because they are based on a broader spectrum of knowledge, and are often easier to implement.

This process involves subsidiarity – a principle associated with decentralization of power and the provision of an enabling environment, including material assistance to the decentralized units, to achieve sustainable development objectives. The requirement to provide such enabling environment also has ethical connotations.

³ Major groups relate to women, local authorities, children and youth, non-governmental organizations, workers, farmers, indigenous peoples, business and the scientific and technological community.

It can be argued that sustainable development is primarily an ethico-political process, since it is based on recognition of values to be upheld and constant negotiation as to how these are to be upheld, given that different individuals and groups have different views with regard to the use of resources.

In general, sustainable development requires a good foundation of ethics and law, to ensure protection of the environment, macroeconomic stability, and safeguarding the welfare of vulnerable groups.

Conclusion

The key-word with regard to sustainable development is "responsibility" and this applies to environmental quality, political matters, use of economic resources, education, cultural, international affairs and most of all intergenerational concerns. Responsibility is of course embedded in ethics, leading to the conclusion that ethics are a fundamental dimension of sustainable development.