

# Pondering the Challenges of Sustainable Development

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## The Argument

This article seeks to put into proper policy perspectives the current discussion on the attraction of "sustainable development". It is attempted by forcing an application of the often rhetorical nature of the argument and thus exposing the difficulties, particularly those of a political and socio-cultural nature, which impinge on the theme. These may inhibit what looks like a universally desirable policy option, from coming into action. Reference is made to the peculiar circumstance of Malta, suggesting that implications of the concept are of even greater relevance to our own country. Yet, such a local realisation is socially still far from visible in this present day and age.

## Defining the Jargon

Already for a decade, green is definitely the world's political colour<sup>1</sup>; and in this context, a new jargon phrase is being tossed about in the mass media and various policy documents: "Sustainable Development". It stems from a concern that many activities undertaken in the name of development have actually squandered the (often finite) resources upon which development is based. In industrialised countries, the rapid consumption of natural minerals such as fossil fuels and metals, is a major concern. In the least developed countries, over exploitation of natural biological assets is usually the major threat to sustainability.

Definitions of "sustainable development" usually portray the improvement in people's material well-being through the utilisation of the Earth's resources but at a rate that can be sustained, at least over many decades; but preferably indefinitely.

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A definition which has achieved wide currency speaks of a "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".<sup>2</sup> Sustainable development is a situation in which the development vector (which may include some elements as real income per capita, health and nutritional status, educational achievement, access to resources, basic freedoms...) does not decrease over time.<sup>3</sup>

The basic idea could not be simpler: to live off nature's interest rather than depleting its capital.

### **Documenting the Ills**

The problems associated with irresponsible resources consumption have been documented *ad nauseam* by various concerned organisations and individuals, so much so that some of the key arguments appear to have successfully filtered down to the mindframe of the public at large. In the advanced industrialised economies of the North, chemical pollutants and high levels of combustion lead to acid deposition, air and water pollution and lead poisoning, with military expenditures becoming the major culprits of resource misallocation. In the still developing South, the main environmental costs are associated with the degradation of the natural resource base - deforestation, soil erosion and the dumping of toxic wastes are occurring at alarming rates. Undoubtedly, when rural livelihoods are undermined, people migrate to the cities, where inadequate water and sewage services, and the degraded sites on which the poor are forced to live, pose other environmental problems. Not to mention, the global consequences of global warming and ozone depletion, which do not discriminate between first world and third world candidates.

### **Identifying the Debate**

The adherents of sustainable development challenge the very foundation of the mainstream interpretation of the development problem. They question the fundamental assumptions of both neo-classical "modernisation" approaches to development<sup>4</sup> as well as more radical neo-marxist structuralist critiques of underdevelopment.<sup>5</sup> In spite of their glaring differences, both of these perspectives take for granted the production of more and more consumer products as synonymous with development. This approach is claimed to be not only wasteful but also reduces the long-term prospects and the very life-chances of future generations, especially among the poor.

The policy implications are starkly crude and shattering: there is the possibility to consume and produce less and differently, moving from a consumer to a

conservation economy, where production growth and conservation are not mutually exclusive.<sup>6</sup> Critics, nevertheless, argue that this kind of approach is unacceptable because it constitutes in effect a pre-industrial 'back-to-nature' condition which is equivalent to a rescinding not a reformulation, of development.

### **Between Rhetoric and Practice: The Great Divide**

Few would contend that sustainable development is now a pervasive buzzword, even in the circuits of policy rhetoric. The term, however, is not so readily operationalised and enshrined into real life projects. A significant issue here is the question of interest promotion and preservation. The process of rapid industrial development which has triggered the reactive outcry for sustainability, has also served to consolidate the economic significance and (in consequence?) the political power of a number of interest groups in society. Indeed, the rationale behind rapid industrialisation is often couched in terms of the vastly improved benefits which accrue to large sections of the community - lucrative and steady profits to investors, taxes to the state, mass jobs to the workers, cheap and plentiful products to consumers... the beneficiaries of industrialisation will not be easily dislodged from the privilege of enjoying what has now become more than simply a way of life, but, in many respects, the only feasible one.

In the North, many are unwilling, or perhaps even unable, to envisage a life without so many presumed necessities; concern for sustainable development is tantamount, in their eyes, to a radical and therefore unacceptable reduction in one's standard of living. Paradoxically, in the South, there is mounting suspicion that sustainable development is nothing but a respectable facade for the thwarting of third world development. The First World has had its industrial field day. Now, with signs that its competitive edge is being eroded, the sustainable development argument being put forward may yet help to preserve Western ascendancy. The South appears just as determined as the North to reap the benefits of industrial development, regardless of the associated environment costs. It seems that the environmentally harmful side effects of industrialisation pale into insignificance in contrast to the resulting growth and prosperity; and the prophets of gloom and doom would no doubt be silenced once again as industry itself matures and conjures up new techniques and technologies with which to postpone the fateful appointment with eco-catastrophe.<sup>7</sup> Far better, therefore, to taunt the distant spectre of maldevelopment than to stem the clamour by growing proportions of populations for the consumer goods produced by the technology of the industrial society.

Certain Third World radicals denounce the tenor of the current eco-debate, accusing it as being mainly ethnocentrist and elitist by virtue of having depoliticised the character of the conflict in the world between the *haves* and the *have-nots* by

magnifying the contest between man and nature.<sup>8</sup>

The remedy for the growing international conflict and tensions, they claim, lies in tackling its root cause, namely, the global inequality and oppressive and exploitative institutions which impose and perpetuate the ugly malaise.

### **A Local Perspective**

It appears only a question of time before Malta finds itself locked in the throes of this debate. Some of the reasons behind this personal prognostication are obvious, others not so. Malta is first of all a developing country with a still young history of political sovereignty. It has therefore, all the raw ingredients for adopting a rampant industrialisation strategy as a development option. This, Malta has done over the last thirty odd years with a certain commendable momentum; achieved and maintained thanks to a repertoire of adequate incentive provisions to foreign investment accompanied by a convenient and attractive geographical position close to the largest market in the world. Its traditional role as a strategic fortress economy in the Mediterranean, with the inculcation of various industrial skills which that implied, provided the country with a flexible workforce trained in basic technical expertise and routines, thus implied a useful advantage in trying to entice foreigners to set up shop locally.

The second reason behind Malta's imminent engulfment in the sustainable development debate is related to its social-economic status as a microstate. The country is one of around three dozen sovereign states in the world today which have a relatively small territorial size. In spite of having low population levels in absolute terms, the territorial limitations of these very small - hence, micro - developing states, creates an even stronger pressure on already scarce resources. The population densities are thus typically higher than would be expected, and these can be exacerbated by the relatively high proportion of unexploited land area; due, for example, to desert, dumping of toxic waste, flooding or high tide.

Malta shares with these countries an intensification of the problem of the management of space - which is a most precious resource. Such microstates can be thus considered as laboratory test-cases which allow us to examine the effects of rampant industrialisation and of the policy decisions and outcomes of the powers that exist, in trying to come to terms with the tensions of development and environmental preservation. These countries could serve as advance warnings of undesirable scenarios: already the archipelagic reef microstate of Tuvalu in the Pacific Ocean is an unwilling prime candidate for the catastrophic effects of global warming. It will disappear quietly beneath the waves due to sea level rise unless the causes behind global warming are halted and preferably reversed<sup>9</sup>

## A Necessary Sacrifice

Is this the shape of things to come? Will the errors of microstates serve to illuminate and educate wiser, larger neighbours whose size and scale can afford them to experiment without experiencing shattering, devastating side-effects? Will the microstates suffer the consequences of non-sustainability and would their noble sacrifice be a necessary demonstration effect to stave off similar disasters elsewhere? One may dread to think in these terms but the questions are not altogether fictitious and fanciful ones. The Tuvaluan case may seem farfetched and remote, but consider our own unfolding stories of "development" and its costs; the dedication of so much land area to industrial sites, the burgeoning volume of traffic, the debate on the building of the new power station at Delimara, the problem of waste disposal and sewage treatment, the contraction of fertile agricultural land...

The problem is not simply one of finite and scarce resources available for exploitation; it is compound by the wide distribution of near continental consumption values. Our cultural identification with the Western world leads so many of us to strive for luxury goods and behaviour patterns the country can ill afford to bear. Subsequently, policy makers locked in the democratic framework appear powerless and cannot but ventilate and provide still wider opportunities for conspicuous consumption to try and ensure political survival. There are few viable and not politically suicidal devices at hand to restrain such a rampant cultural phenomenon. As the Premier of another micro-territory aptly put it: "We are a bicycle society with Cadillac tastes".<sup>10</sup>

## The Hidden Salvation of Tourism?

Perhaps we have all too readily embraced the advantages of industrial development without assessing its negative side effects. In a way, our option for tourism - an option which most microstates have taken up successfully but initially on a "second best" basis may be a blessing in disguise since this tertiary sector activity, unlike mass manufacture, has a stake and a much more active interest in preserving the environment. Tourism, for all its limitations, may be more attuned to the principles of sustainability.<sup>11</sup> It is also mercifully exempt from the iron logic of economies of scale.

Malta has taken such commendable initiatives on the world stage in favour of environmental preservation.<sup>12</sup> It would be bitterly ironic, apart from tragic, were it to end up as an exponent of how **not** to develop....

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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8. Lal, S. (1973) *Third World Attitudes and Atmospheric Environment*, Oxford, Pergamon.
9. Lewis, J. (1990) 'Sea-level Rise: Some Implications for Tuvalu', paper presented at the Conference on Small Island Development, Valletta, Malta, Foundation for International Studies, March 24-28.
10. The statement was made in the 1960's by the Premier of Montserrat, a Caribbean island with a population of about 14,000 and still a British Colony.
11. For example, Connell, J. (1988) 'Sovereignty and Survival: Island Microstates in the Third World', *Research Monograph No.3*, Sydney, Department of Geography, Australian National University.
12. These include such commendable initiatives as the Concept of the Climate as Common Heritage of Mankind and the United Nations Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).