



Conference Report

Workshop on Reassessment of the Sustainability Paradigm for the Water Sector

Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt, 7-8 August 2002

The workshop on Reassessment of the Sustainability Paradigm for the Water Sector was organized at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt, by the Third World Centre for Water Management and Bibliotheca Alexandrina, with the support of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. Participation to this workshop was by invitation only, and included international experts from the areas of water, environment, economics and very senior decision makers from the five continents.

The workshop was organised due to the fact that many people have expressed their dissatisfaction with the present paradigm of sustainable development, primarily because it has not produced enough tangible results in nearly four decades in terms of economic, social or environmental development. It was thus considered necessary to reassess the concept of sustainable development in terms of its applicability in the water sector.

It was noted during the workshop that the issue of development is, by definition, not limited exclusively to economic growth. It must expand to the scope of freedom, as well as political and social equity. Economic growth is only a means to an end, and not an end in itself. It is a necessary condition, but not sufficient for accelerated poverty reduction. Poverty being a multidimensional concept, the aim of development should be good governance based on participation, education, empowerment of minorities, cleaner environment and even urgency to emphasize what would be the economic, social and environmental costs of the lack of necessary action.

One proposal made during the workshop was 'sustainability as an opportunity', in which a balance is established among economic (man-made), natural, human and social capitals. It is not realistic to think that the same amount and composition of natural capital can be left to the next generations compared with the present one. Hence, instead of trying to reach a non-achievable objective, that of *de facto* conservation of the natural resources, one alternative could be to achieve a more feasible goal which considers sustainable development as an opportunity, or economically speaking, expansion of the capital stock, where the next generations can find the same or more opportunities than the present one in the form of stocks of capital (man-made, natural, human and social capitals), and where one form of capital partially complements or substitutes the other. The needs can be changed for opportunities since the aggregate amount of the four capitals increases with time, or at least it does not decrease. This way, the social and environmental aspects could be considered within the context of the overall population growth.

An important constraint for the applicability of this idea is the short-term vision of politicians, or businesses. For this proposal to be implementable, it would have to be applied over the

long term, which would go beyond the terms of the politicians in office, and their possibilities for election, as well as the obsession of increased quarterly profits of businesses. Institutional barriers, the roles of the public sector in policy development and the roles of the private sector as co-responsible for the development of the countries were also noted. Pressures from the general public could have serious potential impacts for developing alternatives to make the governments react both in the short and in the long terms. Stakeholders have to be understood through their interests, arguments, and alternatives, and solutions proposed.

The historical development of the concept of sustainable development from 1962 until present was reviewed. Non-successful 'experiments' with water management in developing countries and questionable leadership were some of the specific examples that were considered, and which indicated a lack of commitment from several administrations, many of whom have given strong lip service to sustainable development, but do not seem to be in any hurry in implementing it. International organizations are also responsible for this slow motion, since, in many cases, they pretend not to notice the lack of actions in many developed and developing countries. Regarding the non-governmental organizations, their performances, attitudes and impacts need more serious and objective scrutiny than has been given so far.

The issue of water policy in relation to paradigms, ideologies and institutions was extensively discussed. Sustainable development is based on ethical principles, precautionary principles and democracy. However, if governments do not see the rational of the paradigm of sustainable development, either the paradigm has to be modified, or the way the governments work has to be changed. The ambiguity of the concept of sustainable development was considered by some participants as an excuse for administrators not to act in concrete terms.

There are arguments in favour and against the heterogeneity of paradigms. It was considered that monism and paradigm shift can be replaced by pluralism and paradigm co-existence, since plurality of paradigms could result in richer arguments and, hopefully, plurality of strategies and actions. The fact, however, remains as to how to understand and develop a political process in which different actors can find mutual interests in the long-term future under one, or more than one, paradigm. It is well known that the agendas of businesses, governments and communities are sometimes different and even could be conflicting, and still march together to achieving a common goal. Very seldom do all these agendas coincide, which would have been the ideal case. Accordingly, an important issue is how best to harmonize the conflicting views, interests and agendas of different groups.

The issue of who has the ownership of the paradigm was also discussed. If the owners are the intellectuals at the universities, what type of incentives can be offered in order to convince the politicians of the importance and relevance of their actions? How can we develop a global agenda where goals are not diffused, and where the agendas of the individual countries are based on mutual self-interests? Are governmental think tanks necessary to bridge knowledge and power? In terms of democracy, while socially sensible decision making (alias democracy) is an important component of decision-making, it does not necessarily guarantee sustainability.

Science and technology were recognised as issues of utmost importance for the development of the countries and their people. It was noted that science needs to negotiate a new contract with the society, and that economic, social and environmental impacts of technology changes have to be objectively and realistically assessed in order to predict their applicability over the long term.

Finally, in order to develop a theoretical framework for development, it is necessary first to assess why the concept of sustainable development became so popular so fast. It is essential to consider if a single concept can be applicable for different values, and if so, should paradigm shift evolve into paradigm co-existence? Furthermore, how can policies be developed in a world of rapid changes and transformation, where present and future needs are different, and where the starting points still seem to be to improve the quality of life of the populations? Finally the concept of sustainable development needs political and analytical reassessment, since it seems that there may have been an intentional ‘delusion’ in the theoretical framework which was supposed to guide the world.

Sustainable development needs to be reassessed, especially in terms of its implementation. Hence, even though the idea that environmental considerations are of equal merit with the social and economic issues should not be abandoned, the concept could be considered for replacement. The nebulous term of ‘sustainable development’ can perhaps be replaced with something more measurable (long-term considerations?), where the market forces, governments and civil society, which define the evolution of this concept, can clearly be represented. Rather than trying to fit a single framework to different values, it might be more appropriate to develop paradigm co-existence. Over the last four decades, the lack of application of the sustainable development concept in the real world has become apparent, due to the lack of measurable indicators and the necessity of taking practical action has dramatically increased.

Following the tradition of Socratic ‘rat catching’ of those who professed to know more than they actually did, it may be necessary for those who are not satisfied with the present paradigm situation, to consider other realistic and implementable alternatives.

The papers specially commissioned for this work will be published as a book by Oxford University Press, so that the ideas generated and discussed at the workshop can be extensively discussed and debated.

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