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Rendering Sustainable Development: A Failed Attempt to Re-balance an Unequal World

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Abstract

This paper shows that, whereas the idea of development, for instance in the form of modernization theory chooses growth and modern industrial society as objective, sustainable development challenges it on environmental and resource grounds. However, behind its attractive discourses, sustainable development proves to be an intentional will to produce change and its practices tend to reproduce the old power relations. This being said, to what paradigm sustainable development came to be an alternative? Has sustainable development posed a serious challenge to the idea of the development consistent up to the 1980s? Asking these questions allow for a query of elements of change and elements of continuity in the very concept of development in contemporary international cooperation. In this paper qualitative data was collected from articles, journals, books, etc and I will analyze all the accessible publications which are done by the other researcher. On the other hand, the subject of this paper is possible to analyze using the secondary data.

1- Introduction

Desertec is an ambitious European initiative for producing "reliable sustainable" energy for the world out of the sun-rich Sahara desert. It purports to capture a small amount of solar power that pours daily in the area. This 'clean' energy would supply for a 'cleaner' development for the common good. The Desertec Foundation advocates for sustainable development by replacing the limited and polluting fossil energy (nuclear, fuel, coal, and gas) with 'clean' solar energy. The 2009-initiative is depicted as a solution to a common development, for the people and the environment.

Before engaging in rendering it sustainable, it is necessary to wonder what development is. This question is subject to unending debates within the social sciences. Each discipline and within them, each current seem to have a more or less clear notion of development but all seem to converge to the basic definition of development as social change in time and space. Two main schools of thought regarding the history of development, the majority seem to situate it in the post-World War II period with the Truman declaration of 1949 as a reference point whereas other scholars, for example, Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton (1996) date it back to the 19th century Europe. The perspective on the nature of social change is important but most important in the development debate is inequality or divide between countries, classes, genders, between humans and non-humans, etc.

Sustainable development consists of meeting the growing demands (energy, food, health) sustainably, meaning without jeopardizing the conditions of life on Earth. The jeopardy notably consists of resource scarcity such as clean water, and runaway climate change, which can be deadly (directly and/or indirectly) through natural disasters or conflicts; entry point to a vicious cycle. It is a fear being legitimized by the recurring extreme natural disasters up to this autumn in South East Asia and northern Europe. The main premises of the concept of sustainable development became official in the Bruntland report Our Common Future released in 1987 in the framework of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987). The concern for the environment became significant in the development debate following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit where the public embraced this new idea, weary of decades of very limited success in the various attempts to 'bridge the gap' between 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries. Sustainability sciences soon emerged taking from ecology to economy including sociology. In doing so, sustainable development became a leading paradigm that is mainstreamed in various strategies operationalized in different parts of the world say 'Third World'.

This critical analysis of the idea of sustainable development mainly draws on the Bruntland report (1987) and Cowen and Shenton's Doctrines of development (1996), bringing along other authors such as Escobar (2012), Hettne (1995), Murray-Li (2007) and Rist (2008).

2- Development Theory: Economic growth at any Costs

The idea of development consistent with development theory in its modernization form values economic growth as means and absolute end of social change. But this exported model of growth proved unsustainable in terms of natural resource use.

2.1- Exporting Modern Growth through Industrialization

Deemed 'undeveloped' in comparison to industrialized Europe and the USA, the latter was actively encouraged to 'catch up' (Potter et al. 2008). They were incidentally being welcomed into the "the modern age of capitalism and liberal democracy" (Elliott, 2006:15). The theory accordingly to which the 'Third World' was to be modernized rooted in the Western conception of modernity, scientific knowledge, and rationality became the main paradigm in the 1950-1960s (Potter et al. 2008; Cowen & Shenton, 1996). From the perspective of modernization theoreticians such as Walt Rostow (1960), the gap between 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' was to be bridged through modernization of the economy and society entailing the development of capitalism. Modernization intended to give a social purpose to the productive force through "gigantic means of production and exchange" (Cowen & Shenton, 1996:438).

In Rostow's (1960) Western liberal (as opposed to the socialist USSR) conception of linear growth, emphasis is made on technology, industries (manufacturing, extensive agriculture), and trade. A crucial element allowing moving from one stage to another is investment. This conviction legitimized foreign intervention in the development of 'Third World' economies where Western capital poured to support the transfer of modernity from the 'developed' to the 'undeveloped' areas. The transfer of productive capacity was also applicable at the country level from urban-industrialized to rural areas. This 'trickle-down' movement (Rostow, 1960) was believed to lead to the type of social change the West experienced in the 50s under the financial provision of the US Marshall Plan (Potter et al, 2008). Investment in technology and the industrialization of productive sectors (agriculture and consumer goods) were the conditions for increasing productivity central to mass production and mass consumption. Investment harnesses a productive system, the efficiency of which is measured by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), basis for international comparison. GDP consequently became the favorite indicator, if not exclusively, of a country's development: the higher the GDP, the better.

2.2- Pinpointing Unsustainable Models of Growth

The idea of modern development was blind to the threats to the environment and how they could backlash on development. The cases of Tanzania, Singapore, Mexico illustrate this point: once considered models of development in the late 60s judging by the development of strong urban-industrial nodes, they now face highly polluted overpopulated cities (Potter et al. 2008:86-90): the smog produced by industries and traffic in these cities affect human capital by deteriorating not only people's health. Another corollary to pollution is global

warming, accompanied by uncountable adverse effects on development (Potter et al. 2008: 259; Jonsson et al., 2012): these include water shortages, degradation of agricultural land, production and reproduction of climate refugees.

Being the very forms of modern development, mass production and consumption were proved highly destructive of very limited energetic resources as coal, gas, and oil for example (Potter et al., 2008). Eco-development uncovered the other facet of industrial growth: its ability to cause 'anthropogenic' (Diamond, 2005) through "unselfconscious destruction" (Marxist critique in Cowen & Shenton, 1996:350) or so-called "Faustian development" (ibid). The latter originates in the eponym Goethe's novel, Faust who engages in building a whole new world without ties to the past but in the process, learns that he cannot do so without destroying the existent, including himself.

The concern for the environment was inspired by its context of emergence: in 1987, the publication year of the Bruntland report, Europe experienced the remarkable Chernobyl, USSR nuclear disaster. If this was a shock to Europeans, other phenomena arising in the previous decades contributed to the growing concern worldwide e.g. the African famines especially in Somalia and Ethiopia, and the leak of pesticides factory at Bhopal, India (WCED, 1987: xiii). These events publically showcased the limits of modern industrial growth and progressively drove people unsatisfied and weary of the ongoing development paradigm.

In sum, being centered on the production of material life, the economistic paradigm of the late 1950s pursued prosperity as a way to achieve well-being, happiness, and individual fulfillment. However, this development was not achieved at zero costs. From there came the main critique against these practices of development in the late 1980s along with other critical theories such as dependency, post-colonialism, and feminist theories (Potter et al., 2008). Advocates of environmental sustainability emphasized the ecological blindness of modern growth and the exploitation of natural resources and the mastering of nature through its technological assertion (Cowen & Shenton, 1996; Hettne, 1995).

3- Centralizing Resource Management for a Global Sustainable Development

The ecological critique challenges development theory on environmental and resource grounds (Jonsson et al., 2012). And the commonality of the concern for resource scarcity legitimizes a global management strategy (WCED, 1987).

3.1- A Post-Modern Critique of Development Theory

Sustainable development shows a primary interest in ecological systems and the conservation

of natural resources. It was defined in the original WCED document as a development "that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). Consequently, ecological sustainability not only values a model of growth that preserves the environment, but it is also concerned with intergenerational equity. Provided the concern for the unborn, present-day human communities shall develop while sparing biodiversity. Following this logic and given that these valuable resources are non-substitutable; they are constituted in a natural capital, preferably managed globally.

From the original concept emerged different disciplines: climatology, on one hand, concerned with adaptation and/or mitigation strategies for natural disasters, and developmental issues, on the other hand, focusing on the reduction of biodiversity, water management and energy issues, forest management, and the impact of tourism on environment (McGregor, 2008). Sustainable development opposes the modern optimistic belief of a unilinear unrestricted growth path (Hettne, 1995).

3.2- Mainstreaming sustainable development

Assuming that modernization is destructive to biodiversity and that development needs to be more ecologically sensitive, 'developed' countries are forced to review their models of development. They are therefore not a recommendable template for 'developing' countries. The latter should instead, focus more on their ecology and culture (Potter et al., 2008). More concretely, the far-reaching (176 signatories) Agenda 21 a 1992-guide provides a framework for reducing extreme poverty and efficient use of natural resources while fostering economic growth (Pelling, 2008): it is translated into local planning with key values and priorities; in this respect, it is comprehensive insofar it advocates for emancipation notably of women as in ecofeminism (Harcourt, 2013). This opportunity for ´underdeveloped' person to distance themselves from western modes was soon overshadowed by intentional actions.

As a consequence of its attractiveness, sustainable development became a major component of development practice (Redclift, 2008) and paved the way to global governance on the environment, eventually undermining indigenous rights. The original actors and arenas of debate in which the concept of ecological sustainability emerged in the 90s were duplicated in time and space, sustainable development mainstreamed by classic actors such as the IMF and the World Bank with its environmental strategy released in 2001 (Potter et al. 2008:297-8).

The 'brown' environmental agenda, combined with the Agenda 21, offers a framework for action: it addresses pollution problems, waste disposal, provision of safe housing and

drinking water in urban-industrialized areas whereas the Agenda 21 also called the 'green agenda' concerns preservation of vegetation and wildlife (Forsyth, 2008). These global prescriptions were set up in the frame of international bodies, mainly the UN; the first one being the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), then the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) were created in the 90s. In the wake of the 21st century, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) appear to be the result of the emerging world governance over poverty issues. Under the seventh MDG, States, NGOs at all levels of operation and also transnational corporations (TNCs) are invited to join efforts to "ensure environmental sustainability" development in providing access to clean drinking water and granting sanitation such as toilets or latrines (Elliott, 2006; Murray-Li, 2007; UN, 2014). This governance is being tested at a moment when the MGDs are evaluated and the post-2015 being sorted out. Besides the MDGs, the post-Kyoto Protocol talks stall by a lack of strong commitments from the most polluting countries.

Global objectives when applied to specific contexts usually result in what Murray-Li (2007) critically analyses in the context of Sulawesi in Indonesia on one hand, and what Hansen (2014) analyzed in the context of iSimangaliso Wetland Park, South Africa on the other hand. In both cases, the findings point to social discrimination and undermining of indigenous rights in the politics of rigorous forest conservation.

Finally, the official concept of sustainable development started as a powerful critique of capitalist social order (Chaudhry & Perelman, 2013) with an ambitious project to induce profound change. However, this hope faded away as sustainable development is translated into development strategies. From this point on, active intervention is it on ecological grounds reproduces the same power relations as modern development. This observation indicates the limit of the paradigmatic change introduced in the 1980s-1990s.

4- Another Intention to Development

As Hettne (1995) claims, paradigms in the social sciences accumulate rather than replace each other's. Emerged as a counterpoint to development theory; sustainable development created ecological modernization in turn. Added to its normative approach, sustainable development becomes 'another development' that leaves social inequities unresolved.

4.1- The commodification of nature, a perpetuation of the economistic order

If growth is not the objective of eco-development, it seems unclear what else it can be? Various strategies designed to foster sustainable development commoditize social relations

and nature (Rist, 2008), just as development theory did. Ecotourism and area conservation are good illustrations of this – monetary -valuing of nature. The environment is thus 'capitalized' and fallows the capitalistic logic.

In addition to the commodification of nature, inherent contradictions are to be acknowledged. These contradictions mainly result from the undermining of 'human capital' over 'natural capital' implying an original distinction between human society and the natural environment (Rist, 2008). Eco-development does not give satisfactory answers to the necessity to improve the material conditions of poor people or to the question of how to avoid the threat of environmental disaster (Desai and Potter, 2008: 277; Murray-Li, 2007). How can income growth be achieved without affecting environmental degradation? Chaudhry and Perelman (2013) observe these limits in the Human Development Report 2011 identifying a lack of political courage to tackle the real problem say economic growth. Instead, both designers and policymakers rely on "technological fixes" such as solar stoves, solar panels, biogas, and taxes on transactions (Harcourt, 2013), which do not induce structural change. As a result, it appears impossible to combine true sustainability and economic growth because they are negatively correlated: we cannot continue to "use the GDP per capita as fundamental metric for economic progress and meet the challenges of sustainability" (Chaudhry & Perelman 2013:820). Technology is not the solution to inequality; not only because green technology is not granted to all but also because the North creates 'pollution havens' in the South by 'dumping' its old technology – dirty and toxic – into poorer countries (Redclift, 2008).

Finally, sustainable development contributes to the legitimation of one form of 'value' within capitalist industrial societies. And in that respect, this alternative inherits from early development theory (Redclift, 2008): "the Bruntland report took a highly normative and view of both environment and development" (Redclift, 2008:281).

4.2- Inescapable normatively

The context of emergence and the production of a technocratic undemocratic conception of development line up ecologic sustainability among the "doctrines of development" (Cowen & Shenton, 1996).

Indeed, advocators of sustainable development show active intent to change others' lives for the sake of a harmonious society basing their legitimacy on their 'knowledge of Theory'. Actors such as the UN, NGOs, states, take on the responsibility towards others. These technicians overlook other people's lives according to their standards and feel entitled to intervene (Cowen & Shenton, 1996:425-6). Development cannot avoid being entrusting; because it enunciates a general theory on development, in other words, trusteeship is inherent

to the very concept of development (ibid). It is identifiable in sustainable development, a theory introduced to the ('Third') world by a Geneva-based commission of 21 experts appointed by the UN (not uncontested itself). In the Indonesian Sulawesi context, Murray-Li expresses the power relations inherent with the intent to develop ecologically: "trustees use a particular population's failure to improve (to turn nature's bounty to a profit), or to conserve (to protect nature for the common good) as rationales for their dispossession, as the justification to assign resources to people who will make better use of them" (Murray-Li, 2007:21).

In addition to trusteeship, the theory of eco-development does not escape Eurocentrism as all theories (Hettne, 1995) or doctrines (Cowen & Shenton, 1996) of development: being a product of the 'First World', sustainable development exercises 'academic imperialism' on the 'Third World' with the idea of development, reducible to an imperative change. Departed from Europe, this normative conception of development is disseminated in the 'Third World' where it is more or less rejected (Desai & Potter, 2008). For instance, the idea of development first emerged as a redress to progress in 19th century-Europe (Cowen & Shenton, 1996) and is still embedded in European thought.

5- Conclusion

The trusteeship in sustainable development undermines situated definitions of nature and development as Rist (2008) and Escobar (2012) argue. The question is to what extent these definitions can be localized. The concept of 'global sustainable development' fails to acknowledge the agencies of human communities in different contexts to choose their way of addressing issues they identify. As a concluding remark, it seems that conceived as a harmonious point towards which all can converge, 'development' is more of a Western belief however now widely shared (Rist, 2008) across borders - geographic or intellectual.

All in all, sustainable development raises interesting questions but leads to extreme commodification of nature. It emerged as a potentially strong critique of the destructiveness of development theory. However, the analysis shows that it reproduces old power relations, hence is not a credible alternative development theory. Some of these 'alternative' theories, however critical they are of the social order, emerge and expand without strongly challenging the power relations inherent in this very social order characterized by the expansion of capitalism.

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