



Review Paper

The conundrum of equitable, sustainable and environmentally sound development

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development continues to be hard to define and difficult to attain. The word 'Conundrum' provides an accurate idea of the difficulties facing those wanting to combine the terms. So far, one of the hallmarks of our species has been the increasing amounts of waste that we have been able to create, what makes any form of economic development unsustainable in the long term. Using an example from Costa Rica, this article presents some of the main issues that make the meaning of the term "Sustainable development" so controversial.

Key words: Environment, economics, health, developing countries.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the Eco-92 (Rio-92), in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, I have been involved with the environmental movement, and for all these years I have had an itch every time anyone tries to put together the words "Equitable, Sustainable and Development" in a single sentence. Considering the results of the Rio+20 Conference, I finally found a combination that sounds more convincing. Adding the word "Conundrum", as in the title of this text, gives the exact dimension of the challenge facing those wanting to combine the terms, as they continue to be under intense debate (Angulo et al., 2009; Gallopín, 2010; Stahel and James, 2011).

While participating in a Fulbright Ecology Seminar on Leadership for Sustainable Development at INCAE, Costa Rica, in 2005, I learnt many things. I was made to understand from the seminar that economics can explain a lot of things, but that it definitely cannot account for everything and on the other hand, that equitable economic growth is possible, albeit difficult to attain, and that the environment is becoming more valued in our modern society. However, aside from this, it seems that without the word "Conundrum" it continues to be a great challenge to harness the full meaning of Sustainable and Environmentally Sound Development, starting with the

difficulty to define each term.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Walley and Whitehead (1994) on the title of their article in the Harvard Business Review stated: "It is not easy being green", humans are a wasteful species. It seems that despite what some anthropologists say it is not our ability to create art or to reason about the world we live in that make us different from all the other monkeys in the beautiful cloud forests of Costa Rica, or the Brazilian Amazon, or anywhere else. It seems that the hallmark of our species is the large amounts and the different types of waste that we have been able to create.

Enormous amounts of food are wasted daily in our plates, kitchens, restaurants and supermarkets, while about half of the human population is starving. We waste our lives and future when thousands of youth all over the world are killed every year in our wars, declared or undeclared, and hundreds of thousands are born, only to die before age one of diarrhea and respiratory diseases. We waste the planet's resources and wildlife, when we dump atomic waste all over it and cut down and burn our forests, without even knowing their contents. And recently we seem to have

wasted a lot of energy dealing with a major contradiction of our existence: that we are the only creature on the planet that can waste absolutely everything in it, including ourselves.

In the hurry to solve the issue of what to do with our existence, we have come up with some very interesting ways of dealing with our conscience. We have been trying to convince ourselves that waste is not waste, that environment is anything that we want it to be, and that sustainability is the ideal way of managing our wasteful pattern of life so that it does not come back to haunt us. In Costa Rica, there are some wonderful examples of very hard, original and meaningful ways of attempting to deal with the issue of management of natural resources. The Monteverde Cheese Factory seems to be one of them (Morgan, 2004). In this factory, there is a strong social commitment to equity and a strong concern for the environment. The local residents, the workers and the milk producers are co-owners of the factory, and the Monteverde human community has improved its life with better income and more access to consumer goods. Unfortunately, in this case things seem to be nice and sound only until one starts looking closely at the structure of it all.

In my perspective, something sustainable is expected to be so for the whole of the environment, unless our Cartesian minds say that: sustainability is only an equation, and we can take it apart and look only at the pieces that peace our minds and forget about the rest. In addition, it seems that something that is environmentally sound has to be so for everyone on the planet, or any smaller part of it and not only for humans. When the aforementioned assumptions are taken into consideration, then the Monteverde Cheese Factory (and likely hundreds, if not thousands, of “green” initiatives around the globe) is put “between the fire and the hot plate”.

Here is the problem as I see it: The millions of liters of whey generated by the cheese factory are used to feed about two thousand pigs. By feeding the pigs with the whey the factory prevents this pollutant from running into the beautiful streams of the Monteverde cloud forest and killing the wildlife in existence. The pigs eat whey and produce feces. To prevent this biological waste from going into the streams, the solid part of the feces are fed to fifty bulls raised in a closed stable. The manure of the bulls is cleaner than that of the pigs and it can go into the fields to fertilize the feed for the cows to produce milk. The remaining waters of all these operations are further cleaned in ponds, before being returned with very low levels of Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD) to the Monteverde streams (Morgan, 2004). The bulls and pigs end up in the slaughter house, as expected. By most standards, especially the technical and economic, this is all very environmentally sound and sustainable. However, after visiting this system I was left with some hard questions to answer. For example: How? at what cost? and for whom this is environmentally sound and sustainable?

SUSTAINABLE AND ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND DEVELOPMENT

What is environmentally sound about using the digestive systems of 2,050 creatures to peace our minds about the waste we throw in our rivers? What is environmentally sound about raising more than two thousand lives eating each others wastes, living their entire lives inside cages and stables where they cannot even turn around and in facilities where the dead and the living can hardly be distinguished from one another? What is after all something environmentally sound? what is the environment if not life? all life. What is sound if not something that does not do harm? What is the purpose of looking for alternatives to our wasteful ways of life and consumption only to find that besides being wasteful, we are also being cruel to the other animals? I am no puritan green, and I do enjoy beef and ham, so I am really not authorized to point a finger at anyone. But I can and I do, feel unease if I try to lie to myself into accepting as definitive concepts that are not at all well defined. In a New York Times article on April 13th, McWilliams (2012) argued that “the industrial production of animal products is a nasty business” and that “how humans produce animal products is one of the most important environmental questions we face”. With growing worldwide demand for these products, the challenges for anyone, big or small, involved with the issues of animal consumption are enormous. Monteverde abides by all the existing laws and regulations of Costa Rica, and by current standards it is considered an excellent and environmentally sound enterprise.

Development is another one of those unclear concepts. While it is true that we can measure wealth in terms of how much savings a country has, how many TVs there are in each house, and how much one can buy with his credit card; it is not likely that we will ever be able to measure what I and many others felt when we visited the Monteverde pigsty project. We were told that that it is close to ‘state of the art’ facilities. That did not help at all. We were also told that it is successful, because the water going into the streams is cleaner and there is little solid waste left in the process, but that only left me with more questions. What are we trying to do after all? What is the point of preserving the forest and all the beautiful wildlife in it and not caring at all for the quality of life of anything beyond ourselves, not even the creatures we raised from the beginning of civilization and that have fed us ever since? can we consider anything or anywhere developed while at the same time accepting the simple torture of any living creature for any purpose?

Naturally, the economic end of all private enterprises in our society has always had the leading role in decision making. Profits are the *raison d'être* of any private industry and it is hard for anyone to argue that, currently, caring for the environment is really profitable for most companies (Walley and Whitehead, 1994). Even though there are

initiatives trying to show that it is possible to have “win-win” situations, where big polluters have managed to deal better with environmental issues and still make a few extra bucks. Most economists would argue that, on the long run environmentally sound business decisions are very costly to companies (Porter and Van der Linde, 1995). Walley and Whitehead (1994: 47) opined that “Talk is cheap; environmental efforts are not”. So, when a company, or a community decides to favor the environment, it must know that it is going “against the grain” of the usual business mentality and investing in what can be called non-tangible assets, that is, there might not be financial profit as a return of the investment (McWilliams, 2012). But it must be also very clear about it and not misleading or misled by “systems” that provide all the answers. Right now in Brazil, one of the world’s biggest players in meat exports, some government agencies are saying, for example, that the country is potentially losing several hundred million dollars per year due to tougher environmental regulations imposed on certain industries. For those agencies, developing countries cannot afford the luxury of not generating profits simply because a few ecosystems might become polluted in the process. For them, since no one can really put a cost on the environment, the profits of the industries should offset the costs of environmental risk as they will generate immediate jobs and wealth. Those officers are very objective about what kind of relationship they want with the environment. This view and the Pigsty Project are economics at its best.

On the other hand, in Costa Rica, Peru and other countries, and without blaming the Monteverde Cheese Factory initiative, as they are doing what is currently acceptable, there have been clear-cut environmentally oriented initiatives, such as Valle Monteverde (Candia, 2004), Posada Amazonas (Perez, 2003), and the flower industry (Porter and Van der Linde, 1995) which have shown that, within certain parameters and in certain areas, it is possible to have more sustainable, clean and still profitable businesses.

However, it is not likely that all industries will be able to adapt to this mode of production. Even though no one can ignore the power of economics today, we cannot simply fall in the trap of accepting the economist’s definitions for all our concepts. We ought to be able to clearly develop our concepts of “Environment, Sustainability, and Development” based on sound science, but also on moral and ethical principles. If not, what are we trying to protect after all? If life is not the driving force for all our efforts, then, what is the point of preserving anything?

I do not have the answers to these questions, but it seems to me that it is time we learn that, even if not everything can be put into the equation or the spreadsheet (externalities, if I have learned correctly), there is always a price to be paid for our actions, this is the price of the responsibility, or lack of it, of being born human.

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