

Orchestrating Competing Goals-The Challenge of Sustainable Development

¹A. Buang, ¹A. Habibah, ¹J. Hamzah and ²Kaseh Abu Bakar

¹School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Selangor, Malaysia

²Institute of West Asian Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: A fundamental challenge to sustainable development is to harmonise diverse and often competing and conflicting objectives. There is no disagreement about this statement but what is scrutinised in this paper is the contemporary notion that the way to harmonise those competing and conflicting goals is by further clarifying the very concept of sustainable development itself. This paper brings this notion to a historical analysis whereby the experience of the postwar European Union in ‘discovering’ sustainable development was analysed using materials obtained from the Commission of the European Communities reports for the years 1993 to 2000 and selected case studies from Germany, Ireland, Netherlands and Sweden. It was found from this historical analysis that the challenge of harmonising competing goals was met by practically gearing towards each set of the sustainability goals according to the priority of the time. In conclusion, it is not so much a task of infusing intellectual clarity and rigour to the concept of sustainable development that really matters. Rather it is the act-the ability to manage the tensions of competing economic, social and ecological goals as they happen at a given time or stage of development, even as the exact meaning of sustainable development at that time was less clear and less complete. This insight should further our understanding of the challenges faced by developing countries currently undergoing different stages of development and finding difficulty at realising the ultimate goals of sustainability all at once.

Key words: Sustainable development • Economic growth • Ecological integrity • Social vitality

INTRODUCTION

The laudable intentions of sustainable development are not only recognised nowadays but also reinforced. For instance, contemporary tertiary education has been urged to ensure that it does not reinforce the principles and values of an unsustainable lifestyle and economy [1]. As such university curriculum must be changed to facilitate real education for sustainable development [2][3][4] although there were more optimistic perspectives that did not see the urgency of such measures [5].

To be sure, while the intentions of sustainable development are laudable, many have contested its concept [6][7][8]. A main contention was that the current mainstream formulation contains significant weaknesses ranging from an incomplete perception of poverty-linked environmental degradation, to confusions about the role of economic growth and social participation in fostering sustainable development. All these made for inadequacies

and contradictions in policy making as demonstrated in the context of international trade, agriculture and forestry [9].

There are competing discourses on sustainability [10]. There are those who had examined mainstream and critical perspectives of sustainable development only to find that neither of these critical approaches could be deemed adequate and came out with the conclusion that an adequate approach to sustainable development requires combining insights from various critical approaches and perspectives [11]. Some had gone even further for innovative discourses of sorts, at least at the local level of sustainable development [12].

Be that as it may, sustainable development is not something that was stumbled upon by chance. It is a kind of experiential lesson that a human society learns to imbibe in the course of its on-going development. Postwar European Union was a case in point. Here, regional development did not start from the goal of sustainability

Corresponding Author: A. Buang, School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies,
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,
Bangi 43600, Selangor, Malaysia. Tel: +603-89215683, E-mail: amriah@ukm.my.

right away but proceeded from phase to phase until it was driven to embrace sustainable development. This article analyses the process undergone by selected countries of postwar European Union in harmonising competing goals of regional development until the complete goals of sustainability were within reach.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Materials for this analysis were obtained from three CEC (Commission of the European Communities) publications, namely, (i) the DG XI (1993) *Toward sustainability*; (ii) the *Agenda 2000-For a Stronger and Wider Union* (1997); and (iii) *Research on the Socio-Economic Aspects of Environmental Change: Summary Results 1992-1996*. These three CEC documentations provided the basis for identifying salient phases in the path to sustainability that EU countries commonly went through.

To decipher the main elements and forces that distinguished the phases identified, the paper resorted to the findings of regional case studies representing the experiences of Netherlands [13], Sweden [14], Germany [15] and Ireland [16]. These countries were chosen for the different scales and nature of economic, social and ecological challenges encountered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four Phases of Development: In the five decades since the end of World War II four phases of development may be distinguished in the European Union countries:

Economic Growth (1945-1960s): The first development phase in Western Europe after the Second World War was economic growth, the goals of which were postwar reconstruction and regional development. During the early postwar years, planners emphasized the alleged economies of larger scale, i.e. increased the size and volume of enterprises as the national route toward functional efficiency in the production, consumption and circulation of goods and services. It was assumed that 'trickle-down' effect of increased economic prosperity would guarantee improved living standards throughout society.

Balancing Economic Growth and Social Equality (1970s): In this phase, living standards did improve but not equally throughout countries and societies in Western Europe. Certain places like the core and urban areas prospered more than the rural peripheries. Within national

societies, classes with better access and command of capital, technologies and other resources and effective political influences, fared much better than the proletariat and the under-class. To avert further erosion of national solidarity and manage existing social disparities, the second phase of postwar regional development in the European Union saw the harmonization of economic and social goals becoming a central challenge for regional development, particularly in Nordic countries where elaborate mechanisms were developed for the redistribution of income. This set a kind of informal model for west European governments to assure minimum levels of welfare benefits for all their citizens. The welfare state which Western Europe is famous for took root.

Conservation of Resources (1980s): The success of securing and maintaining growth-with-equity which welfare state entailed put a lot of pressure on economic growth: the economic cake had to become bigger and bigger so more would be able to share it. This relentless pursuit of growth had begun to exact its toll on the physical environment in Western Europe. Thus by the late 1970s the third phase of national development set in with concerns about the depletion of natural resources. This had caused another set of development scale criteria to emerge, i.e. that of ecosystem dynamics and bio-reproduction in the course of regional development in the European countries.

Potential conflicts between economic and ecological rationality dominated environmental discourse throughout the 1980s. Successive 'oil crises' led some in the continent to question the very lifestyles that western Europeans have come to take for granted. It was also becoming clear during this decade that while impressive gains in productivity levels and living standards had been achieved there was still evidence of gross anomalies in regional life. Enduring disparities existed between core and peripheral regions and concern was mounting over the environmental consequences of enlarged scales of production, consumption and circulation of products.

Sustainable Development (1990s): Everyday patterns of consumption persisted and expectations of living standards continued to rise in Western Europe even as, by the late 1980s, industry and government sought to accommodate increasing regulation and environmental restrictions. At the same time, however, grassroots' pressures from industrially advanced regions and from NGOs played an ever increasing role in shaping those regulations and restrictions to the extent that they were able to force certain policy directives on energy use by

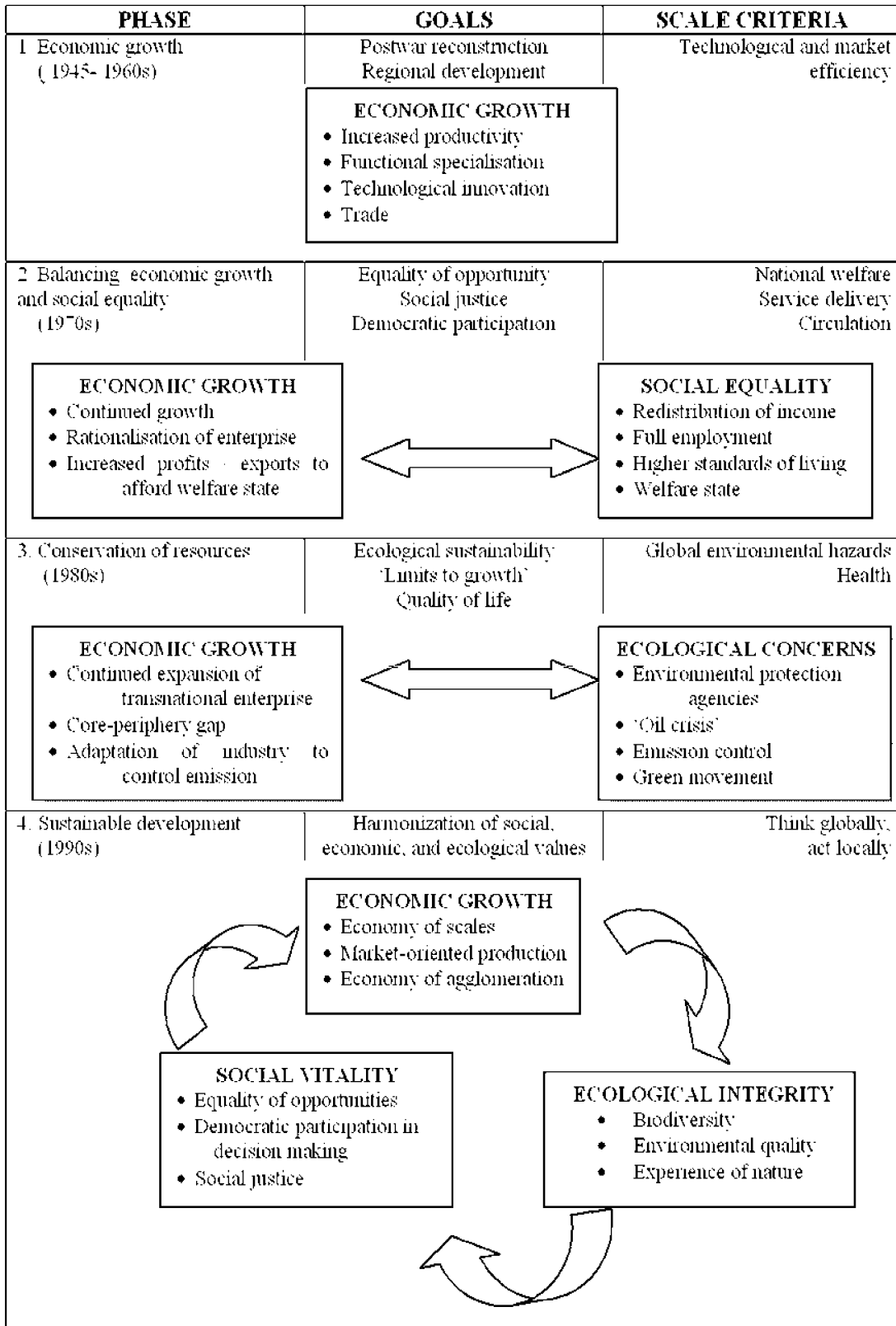


Fig. 1: The path to sustainable regional development in postwar Europe (Source: Adapted from Buttimer [17])

the 1990s. This marks the era of sustainable development in Western Europe.

Figure 1 summarises the four phases of postwar development in European Union and the distinct development values and goals that need to be harmonised respectively.

The Challenge of Sustainable Development: In a nutshell the challenge of sustainable development in Western Europe is characterised by fundamental policy changes to harmonise competing economic, ecological and social values, at global as well as at national scales [18], [19], [20]. For instance, economic growth which used to be simply premised on increased productivity (through functional specialization, technological innovation and trade) not only would have to be balanced with social equality (through rationalisation of enterprise and increased profits and exports in order to afford welfare state), but also must be harmonised with conservation of resources (by adapting industry to emission control) while minding the social goal of reducing the core-periphery gap.

Similarly, the orchestrating of social goals had to be modulated between social equality (of opportunity, social justice and democratic participation through redistribution of income, full employment, higher standards of living and welfare state) and social vitality (through equal opportunities of expression, democratic participation in decision making and environmental justice).

Finally, articulating ecological values vibrated from the normal conservation of resources and ecological sustainability (through 'Limits to growth' and Quality of life ideologies) to ecological concerns (through the role of environmental protection agencies, emission control and Green movement) and to ecological integrity (through safeguarding biodiversity, environmental quality and the experience of nature).

What is most important to note about the European experience of managing the unavoidable tensions between these competing economic, social and ecological goals and values is that it was a process enacted in different and distinct phases in accordance with the urgencies of the time.

CONCLUSION

This historical analysis of the Western European experience shows that the challenge of harmonising competing goals was met not so much by deliberating on the complete meaning and values of sustainable

development as by practically gearing towards each set of the sustainability goals according to the priority of the time. It was not so much a task of infusing intellectual clarity and rigour to the concept of sustainable development that really mattered. Rather it was the act-the ability to manage the tensions of competing economic, social and ecological goals as they happened at a given time or stage of development, even as the exact meaning of sustainable development at that time was less clear and less complete.

Going by the European experience, we learn that countries might evolve from focusing on continuous economic growth at the earliest stage of development and proceeded consecutively to balancing economic growth with social equality, then to balancing economic growth with ecological concerns and finally to harmonising economic growth with ecological integrity and social vitality. This insight should further our understanding of the challenges faced by developing countries currently undergoing different stages of development and finding difficulty at realising the ultimate goals of sustainability all at once.

REFERENCES

1. Gadotti, M., 2008. What We Need to Learn to Save the Planet, *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 2: 21-30.
2. de la Harpe, B. and I. Thomas, 2009. Curriculum Change in Universities: Conditions that Facilitate Education for Sustainable Development, *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 3: 75-85.
3. Vare, P. and W. Scott, 2007. Learning for a Change: Exploring the Relationship Between Education and Sustainable Development, *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 1: 191-198.
4. Tilbury, D., 2007. Monitoring and Evaluation during the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable, *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 1: 239-254.
5. Goklany, I.M., 2009. Have Increases In Population, Affluence And Technology Worsened Human And Environmental Well-Being? *Electronic Journal of Sustainable Development*, 1: 3.
6. Springett, D., 2005. Critical perspectives on sustainable development. *Sustainable Development* 13: 209-211, Issue 4.
7. Jacob, M., 1997. Critical Theory in Political Practice: Sustainable Development and Development Theory, *Sci. Technol. Society*, 2: 99-129 No. 1.

8. Brand, F., 2009. Critical natural capital revisited: Ecological resilience and sustainable development, *Ecological Economics*, 68: 605-612, Issue 3.
9. Lélé, S.M., 1991. Sustainable development: A critical review. *World Development*, 19: 607-621, Issue 6.
10. Welcomer, S.A., 2010. Reinventing vs. Restoring Sustainability in the Maine Woods: Narratives of Progress and Decline, *Organization Environment*, 23: 55-75 No. 1.
11. Castro, C.J., 2004. Sustainable Development Mainstream and Critical Perspectives, *Organization Environment*, 17: 195-225 No. 2.
12. Bristow, G. and P. Wells, 2005. Innovative discourse for sustainable local development: a critical analysis of eco-industrialism. *Intl. J. Innovation and Sustainable Development*, 1: 168-179, No.1/2.
13. Heinemeijer, W., R. van Englesdorp Gastelaars and W. Ligtendag, 2001. Changing agricultural lifeways in Waterland and Flevoland, the Netherlands. In: Buttimer, A (Ed.). *Sustainable Landscapes and Lifeways-Scale and Appropriateness*. Cork University Press, Cornwall, pp: 133-154.
14. Lewan, L. and N. Lewan, 2001. Landowing, landscape and life: large landed estates in Skane, southern Sweden, 1950-90. In: Buttimer, A (Ed.). *Sustainable Landscapes and Lifeways-Scale and Appropriateness*. Cork University Press, Cornwall, pp: 155-181.
15. Peter Dorrenbacher, P., 2001. Evolution of environmental conflicts: coal power plants in Saarland, Germany. In: Buttimer, A (Ed.) *Sustainable Landscapes and Lifeways-Scale and Appropriateness*. Cork University Press, Cornwall, pp: 199-216.
16. Buttimer, A. and W. Jenkins, 2001. Assessing sustainability in rural Ireland: case studies in Slieveardagh, 1950-90. In: A. Buttimer, (Ed.). *Sustainable Landscapes and Lifeways-Scale and Appropriateness*. Cork University Press, Cornwall, pp: 3250-272.
17. Buttimer, A., 2007. Concluding reflections. In: Buttimer, A (Ed.). *Sustainable Landscapes and Lifeways-Scale and Appropriateness*. Cork University Press, Cornwall, pp: 366-387.
18. CEC (Commission of the European Communities), 1998. *Research on the Socio-Economic Aspects of Environmental Change. Summary Results*, pp: 1992-1996. EU-RTD in Human Dimensions of Environmental Change Report Series. EUR 18453, Luxembourg.
19. CEC (Commission of the European Communities), 1997. *Agenda 2000. For a Stronger and Wider Union*. 15.07.1997 COM (97) 2000 Final, Brussels.
20. CEC (Commission of the European Communities), 1993. *Toward Sustainability*. Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg.
21. Banister, D. and H. Robin, 2009. Techno-optimism: progress towards CO₂ reduction targets in transport: a UK and London perspective, *Intl. J. Sustainable Development*, 12: 24-47, Issue 1.
22. Korsching, P.F., P. Lasley, G. Sapp, G.D. Titchner and T.G. Gruber, 2010. Farmer support of local organizations, causes and charities through philanthropy, *Community Development: Journal of the Community Development Society*, pp: 1-17.
23. Abdulla Al Mamun and Md. Asaduzzaman Khan, 2011. *Freshwater Mussels (Margaritifera margaritifera): Bio-filter Against Water Pollution*. *World Appl. Sci. J.*, 12: 580-585, Number 5.
24. Mohd Azlan Abdullah, Rosmiza Mohd Zainol, Rosniza Aznie Che Rose and Amriah Buang, 2009. The sustainability of Malay small-scale farmers in British Malaya, *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 5: 76-87, Issue 5.
25. Nemes, V., 2011. The role of renewable resources in community development-the cas of geothermal water energy exploitation in Oradea, Romania. *Geografia-Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 7: 11-17, Issue 2.