**THE POLITICS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

**by**

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It is now widely accepted that the concept of sustainable development was popularised by the Brundtland Commission. It was not new concept. In a certain form it had been applied in forestry & fishery as sustained yield. A broader articulation from a conservation perspective was presented in the World Conservation Strategy put out by IUCN in 1980. But it was the report of the Brundtland Commission which gave a broader meaning to the term put it on the development policy agenda.

There was another strand of discourse linking environment concerns and development aspirations without crystallising these into a single concept. This is reflected in two seminal documents:

* Founex Report for Stockholm 1971
* Cocoyoc declaration at meeting convened by UNEP/UNCTAD, 1974

Both of these were an attempt at connecting environmental and development specialists particularly from the Third World. The Founex report preceded the Stockholm environment conference and the Cocoyac declaration came after that from a meeting organised by UNEP and UNCTAD, which could be described as the respective "trade bodies" of the two groups.

My narrative today is about how this clash of environment and development concerns has played out in the Brundtland Commission and the 1992 Rio Conference. I personally have been involved with this quite intimately as the Senior Economic Adviser to the Brundtland Commission, as the Deputy Secretary General of the Rio Summit of 1992, as the UN Under Secretary General in charge of the Commission on Sustainable Development and as the Secretary General of the World Summit on Sustainable Development of 2002.

I have received several requests that I should write about my experiences and some add that I should do this 'before it is too late''. Today I will skip the personal dimension except to the extent to which it is relevant for the broad theme of how environment and development got connected in global diplomacy. This is a personal memoir and a narrative rather than an analytical piece. I hope it helps you to place what is happening here in context.

I will limit myself here to the Brundtland Commission and the 1992 Rio meeting leaving the later history for another occasion. I do so in the belief that the both the Brundtland report and the outcome of the Rio Conference have had a longer a deeper impact than almost any other exercise of a similar nature.

One measure of the value of Agenda 21 is the opposition that it still provokes in certain circles. As recently as January 2012 the Republican National Committee passed a resolution denouncing Agenda 21 and describing it as "a comprehensive plan of extreme environmentalism, social engineering, and global political control" that considers " the American way of life of private property ownership, single family homes, private car ownership and individual travel choices, and privately owned farms; all as destructive to the environment" and that seeks to accomplish social justice by " socialist/communist redistribution of wealth".

Brundtland Commission

I joined the Brundtland Commissionin mid 1985 at a time when there was an impasse because the Commissioners who came from an environmental policy background wanted to focus on pollution and resource conservation issues and those who came from the development set wanted to focus on poverty alleviation. The issue got framed as a North South conflict with the North arguing for greater priority for environmental protection and the South for giving primacy to development. Each side worried about the other's "hidden agenda".

There was also a personality issue. The resident economist, Vicente Sanchez, came from dependency theory background. The Secretary General of the Commission, Jim McNeill had been head of the Environment Directorate in OECD. A wider cultural gulf is difficult to imagine.

The Commission looked for a development economist from the Third World who was sensitive to environmental concerns. At that time I headed the Project Appraisal Division of the Planning Commission and as part of the cost benefit analysis introduced some elements of environmental impact assessment even before it became mandatory. The Commission decided to hire me as the Senior Adviser who would provide a developmental overview for their report.

My main contribution was in the drafting of the first two chapters titled "A Threatened Future" and "Towards Sustainable Development" that provided the conceptual scaffolding for the report. In the endgame I was part of a three member team that included Linda Starke and Lloyd Timberlake charged with finalising the report on the basis of the Commission's instructions.

When I joined, the central problem was that there was no shared framework of discourse, concepts and language that would allow a conversation. Soon after I joined there was a meeting that involved three of the commissioners, Sridath Ramphal, then Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Maurice Strong, formerly SG of the UN Conference on the Human Environment, 1972 and Janos Stanovnik of Slovenia, former Executive Director of the Economic Commission for Europe. I heard the conversation between them carefully to find some common ground and found enough to work with. This was the context in which I injected a note on sustainable development, basically to get the two warring groups talking to one another.

The concept was not new. The World Conservation Strategy had talked about it, but mainly to emphasise the importance of conservation for development. The note for the Brundtland Commission tried to come at it from the perspective of a development planner, which is what I was.

A copy of that first note, which includes the famous definition and the substance of the final text of the concept in the report, along with my marginal notes on the modifications that the Commissioners wanted, is available and can be sent by email to anyone who wants what some have called the **"**birth certificate**"** of sustainable development as a mainstream concept.

The modifications suggested by the Commissioners are mainly matters of tone and voice rather than any fundamental shift of stance. The Commissioners wanted the idea of absolute limits to growth toned down and if one compares the note with what finally went into the report one finds a more explicit endorsement of the view that growth is not necessarily bad for the environment and some toning down of the language on sustainable consumption. The rather stark reference to fertility control in my original note is replaced by more politically correct language. The net result was that there was perhaps a sharper emphasis on meeting current needs and orienting technology and social development as a way of relieving environmental constraints than what some prophets of impending doom would have liked. This is well reflected in the definition of sustainable development in the report:

*Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:*

* *the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and*
* *the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.*

In the Brundtland Commission sustainable development was put forward as a bridge concept to connect two universes of discourse. This requirement, that it should not be seen as a threat to either the environment or the development agenda, influenced the language. Another factor was the need to address a non-specialist audience. This can be seen in the now famous and much quoted definition about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs, a definition that studiously avoids using either the word "environment" or the word "development". But if you go past the initial definition the paper does spell out the elements of the concept in greater detail and the resource management side receives some attention.

The note got the two sides talking. As the conversation progressed, the green warriors started talking about how protecting the environment requires that development concerns are addressed and the growth men about the need to protect and conserve the resource base for development.

Th Commission's report is a fairly sophisticated articulation of the resource conservation and ecological limits dimension of sustainable development. But its political impact came from the more explicit recognition of the distributive dimensionwell reflected in the following:

*Hence, our inability to promote the common interest in sustainable development is often a product of the relative neglect of economic and social justice within and amongst nations.*

It is also noteworthy for the explicit attempt at defining a sustainable development oriented growth policy in the seven strategic imperatives it outlined in its elaboration of the concept:

* reviving growth;
* changing the quality of growth;
* meeting essential needs for jobs, food, energy, water, and sanitation;
* ensuring a sustainable level of population;
* conserving and enhancing the resource base:
* reorienting technology and managing risk; and
* merging environment and economics in decision making.

From a more specialist perspective I accept that the note and the report could have dealt more clearly with the thorny issue of discounting the future**.** If it had, it would have required a more systematic treatment of growth options.  The qualification ‘sustainable’ can be viewed as a constraint on the growth process specifying that the choices made should conserve some quantity, say, the natural resource base or the quality of environment or the level of consumption. However ‘sustainability’ could also be viewed as a quality of the choices that emerge from an optimisation exercise when it stretches over many generations and a long period of time and which treat current and future needs in an integrated framework.  Depending of course on the weights attached to current and future needs such a multigenerational optimum meets current needs and conserves the capacity to meet needs in the future.

Another issue that could have received more attention is uncertainty and how sustainability can be pursued when outcomes are unknown. In the case of climate change, which is the mother of all externalities, the costs of a downside deviation from expected values is far greater than the gains from an upside deviation. This has led to the formulation of the precautionary principle, which now is quite central to any operational application of the concept of sustainable development.

The Rio Earth Summit, 1992

The next step in the process was the convening of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, popularly known as the Earth Summit. But the run up to it was far from smooth. The General Assembly quickly endorsed the WCED Report and shortly thereafter asked the Secretary-General to consider organising a conference to take stock of the global environment twenty years after Stockholm. But, reflecting the changed view of the problem as articulated in the Brundtland report the proposed meet was titled the UN Conference on Environment and Development in contrast from the Stockholm Conference, which focused only "on the Human Environment."

When the General Assembly initially discussed the UNCED, the G-77 nations announced that they would refuse to participate unless financial assistance and specific commitments on technology transfers were forthcoming from the industrialised countries. The U.S. opposed this linkage, but with Japan's support the developing countries won the argument. These **"**cross-sectoral" issues relating to financial assistance and technology transfer were to remain a major point of difference between the North and South throughout the entire UNCED process.

There were also differences concerning the location of the UNCED Preparatory Committee (PrepCom). This was an important issue as the Prepcom is where the real negotiations take place. In the instance of the UNCED, the North wanted the UNEP Governing Council to function as PrepCom, while the G-77 wanted the PrepCom to be part of the General Assembly itself, where they felt their representation was stronger and where the control over the process would not rest with the environmental bureaucracies in national governments and international organisations. In the end the G77 had their way and Resolution 44/228 of the UN General Assembly convening the Conference to elaborate "strategies and measures to halt and reverse the effects of environmental degradation in the context of increased national and international efforts to promote sustainable and environmentally sound development".

Resolution 44/228 setting up the conference was couched essentially in environmental terms if one reads the listing of issues and expected outcomes. However there were some references to the international economic environment and to growth and poverty, which was the handle that led to a broadening of the agenda.

The first organisational meeting of the prepcom in New York ( March 1990) organised the work in terms of the essentially environmentally defined issues in the resolution but added a paragraph or two which enjoined a development orientation for the work. No Working Group was setup for the cross-sectoral issues of finance and technology transfer. But a Working Group was set up for legal and institutional issues. At this stage the negotiating processes on climate and bio-diversity were not yet set up and perhaps the developed countries saw  in this third Working Group a negotiating forum for their areas of concern.

The Prepcom had four long and arduous preparatory meetings (Nairobi August 1990, Geneva March-April 1991, Geneva August-September 1991 and New York March-April 1992).

The transformation of UNCEDinto a conference that was as much about development as about environment took place in Nairobi. The agenda for the first substantive Prepcom in Nairobi was largely environmental in nature following the structure of issues laid out in the enabling resolution. Development issues came into he picture mainly through the efforts of developing countries to expand the few terse references to the matter in the resolution. The focal point for this debate was provided by a resolution on Environment and Development proposed by the G-77. This was a very broad based resolution which in fact provided the mandate for the subsequent extension of the negotiating agenda into developmental issues like poverty, international economy etc. The developed countries could not really resist the pressure to include these in the agenda and the negotiations were more on the inclusion of demographic issues and the usual obeisance to market forces insisted on by the US and the EC.

There were some difficulties about how the reference to the international economy in the resolution would be handled. In the end the Americans agreed to a surprisingly explicit statement that spoke of declining terms of trade, outward flow of resources and other terminology that they normally would not have agreed to had their negotiating team been led by one of their trade or international finance negotiators. One consequence of this development in the agenda was that the classical North-South issues of trade,finance & technology became a part of the negotiations and brought into the process controversies from other spheres of global negotiations like Uruguay Round of trade negotiations.

The Latin American/Caribbean group also expressed its concern about the neglect of human settlements related issues in the agenda. A specific reference to this was included in a portmanteau resolution which also flagged the need to consider health issues as also trade and environment related matters. As for the sectoral issues the Nairobi prepcom ended up with long resolutions which included all the issues which any country wished included - the consensus seeking process could not lead to any systematic discussion of priorities.

The Nairobi Prepcom also saw the isolation of the US on the finance issue. They would not accept the phrase "new and additional" even though it was there in the resolution 44/228 and even though the other OECD countries accepted it. But in the end they accepted it with the usual disclaimer dissociating themselves from any specific commitment in a clarificatory statement after the adoption of the programme or resolution.

The outcomes of the Rio process were the Rio principles on environment and development, a long and elaborate programme of action called Agenda21, Forest principles and the two conventions UNFCCC and the bio diversity convention which were negotiated separately. But in practice there was a great deal of interplay between the three negotiating processes with countries jockeying for some language in one process that would bolster their position in the other process.

The Rio principles, which now have acquired the status of holy writ came from a abrely democratic process. The group charged with negotiating these principles could not get anywhere and by the middle of the last prepcom in New York we were nowhere with nothing agreed on the principles. Tommy Koh, the chair of the negotiating process followed the negotiations closely and when the impasse came, he asked two young diplomats who had followed the process to put down a text based on his instructions. On the last day of the prepcom, late at night, he placed his chairman's text before the prepcom, made a long speech about how he had tried to reflect all concerns and stated that either the text was accepted as it is without any amendment or it was off the taBLE nd there would not be any Rio principles. A tired prepcom heard him and stayed silent and Tommy Koh quickly gavelled the proposal through. At this point the Israeli delegate stood up and protested that he had raised his flag asking for the floor and had not been recognised. he had wanted to protest at the inclusion of some language about people under occupation which was there in the declaration as part of a deal with the Arab group in return for keeping it put of the programme of action. Tommy Koh asked him to challenge the Chair's ruling and offered to put the challenge to a vote. The delegate knowing that this would be futile demurred and the Rio principles were passed. Later, in a characteristic gesture, Tommy Koh sat with the Israeli delegate to explain to him his compulsions and mollified him to some extent.

Agenda 21 was a massive programme of action that runs into some 800 pages and has over a hundred distinct programme areas. When I look at it now I wonder why we ever thought we could negotiate 800 pages of text in a process involving 180 or so countries. But it was done. At the start of the last New York prepcom the bulk of the text was in brackets i.e. had yet to be agreed. There were pressures to start thinking of a short alternative text with very broad formulations as a substitute. I was loath to do this as this would have amounted to junking many person years of diligent work by the secretariat and its collaborators in the UN agencies and elsewhere and the valuable negotiaiting tim put in by hundreds of diplomats. My assessment was that so much time and energy had been invested by the negotiators in the process and so many of their formulations were now included in the bracketed text that they would find the time and the enrgy to complete the process. In the end I was proved right and by the end of the New York prepcom 85% of the text was agreed. This left a substantial but manageable load for the two week meeting in Rio.

The Forest Principles were one of the things held over. The OECD countries wanted a Forest Conventio. Brazil and Malayasia would have nothing to do with this and resisterd stoutly. The situation was only resolved at Rio with an arduous negotiating process led by Klaus Topfer of Germany.

The finance issue was another hold out. The prepcom had asked that all programme areas should be costed and again my ignorance of UN polical dynamics helped and we did prepare very rough and ready estimates which, fortuitously showed that the international support required could be mobilised if the developed countries met the 0.7 % aid target that had been around for some time. The problem was the USA which had never accepted the target and which was concerned by the magnitude of requirements that the numbers revealed. In the end the Brazilian diplomat ubens Ricupero worked out a compromise text at RIo.

Energy was another issue where the opposition to the proposed text came from Saudi Arabia. They held out till the end and accepted only after a passionate plea from Tommy Koh.

There are many other rough patches that I would talk about. One that is amusing relates to the language on family planning. The compromise waswhat is described as Mewxico language the language which was agreed at the Mexico population conference. A South American delegate continued to resist this and when told that his government had already accepted this language, he declaimed "On this I do not take instructions from my Government; I only take instructions from Him" and pointed his finger up at the sky. At this point His representative on earth, the Holy See, was mobilised to persuade the devout delegate to agree.

The negotiating process for the UNFCCC started in Feb 1991 and went through five rounds. It was designed as a GA based process rather than a UNEP based process because of the G 77 concerns about losing sight of the development imperative if the issue was treated simply as a classical pollution issue. But the scientific assessment of IPCC was still ambiguous about the anthropogenic origins of the problem and the US stoutlly resisted European attempts at binding obligations. At that time the economic boom in China and India was not yet in sight and there was no serious pressure to bring them into the commitment framework. Some skilful diplomacy by the Indians led by Chandrasekhar Dasgupta ensured that the principle of common but differentiated responsibility was included in the UNFCCC.

One example of the linkage between the processes is the refusal of the USA to commit President Bush to attend because that would have reduced the credibility of their intransigence in the climate negotiations. In fact Maurice Strong was told before the Feb 1992 meeting of the UNFCCC prepcom that Bush would attend but that this must be kept confidential till the UNFCCC negotiations were over.

Today many people describe the outcome of Rio as path breaking, though a more constructive phrase could be path making. But that was not the case then. Betrayal, weak, lost opportunity were the phrases used by some NGOs who swear by Agenda 21 today. But I suppose that is because if politics is the art of the possible, some varieties of environmental activism are committed to the impossible.

Concluding remarks

The outcome of international negotiations is always the result of the interplay of power. But to understand the Rio process we must take account of how this expression of power is influenced by domestic lobbies.

As Ramachandra Guha points out in his recent, misleadingly titled book on environmental history,"How much should a person consume?", US environmentalism has involved two lines of action. One, reflecting the romanticisation of wilderness, is the national park movement in which the US is truly a world leader. The other is downstream pollution management where also they led the way with their pollution control legislation. The one characteristic of these two action areas is that they do not require any fundamental reconsideration of the market system. Removing land from the production system is relatively easy when it is done in the vast emptiness of deserts and mountains. As for pollution control a technological fix is all that may be required. Pollution legislation can be seen simply as an extension of municipal regulations to control potential nuisances. In particular these action areas do not require any reconsideration of lifestyles and consumption nor do they require global cooperation.

European environmentalism was different as it started asking questions about consumption standards quite early on as is evident in the European obsession about recycling. Latin American environmentalism always pointed to their resource exploiting economies and trade pressures as the problems that had to be addressed. As for us in India, our environmentalism came from a concern about agriculture and rural livelihoods. That is why the world other than the USA readily accepted the core ideas of sustainable development that came out of Rio in 1992 and recognised that addressing environmental problems required action in matters like energy, land, forest and water policy.

The threat of climate change reinforced this link between environment and development and gave a sharper edge to the equity issue. At Rio in 1992 the threat was still speculative. But now, with each IPCC report being even more definite and more alarming than the previous one, the case for precautionary action is strong. But the action cannot be end-of-the-pipe clean up. It has to address and change how energy is produced and consumed. It has to address the issue of a fair sharing of the space available for carbon emissions. The US way of life and, for that matter, the way of life everywhere has to be up for negotiation because climate change is the mother of all externalities – global, long term and potentially catastrophic in its impact.