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Introduction

Each year another 6 million hectares of productive dryland turns into worthless desert ... More than 11 million hectares of forests are destroyed yearly ... In Europe, acid precipitation kills forests and lakes ... The burning of fossil fuels puts into the atmosphere carbon dioxide, which is causing gradual global warming. This 'greenhouse effect' may by early next century have increased average global temperatures enough to shift agricultural production areas, raise sea levels to flood coastal cities, and disrupt national economies. Other industrial gases threaten to deplete the planet's protective ozone shield to such an extent that the number of human and animal cancers would rise sharply and the oceans' food chain would be disrupted. Industry and agriculture put toxic substances into the human food chain and into underground water tables beyond reach of cleansing. (*World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987*)

There is now a rapidly developing scientific consensus that environmental problems of global dimensions have developed and that human economic activity has usually been the cause. At the same time, there is a deep reluctance to curtail or modify the activities that are causing these problems. Countries like Australia have a cultural momentum and economic interdependence with other countries that makes impediments to economic growth unthinkable. Sustainable development offers the promise that economic activities can be harmonised with environmental protection, that technologies can be found

and implemented that will ensure economic growth does not harm the environment, and that pressing environmental problems can be solved without social and political disruption.

Historical context

Sustainable development is part of a second wave of modern environmentalism, and heralds a new approach to tackling environmental problems. The first wave of environmentalism was associated with the counter-culture movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It grew out of traditional nature

conservation concerns into an awareness of the potential for a global ecological crisis.

Environmentalists at the time argued that the exponential growth of populations and industrial activity could not be sustained without seriously depleting the planet's resources and overloading the ability of the planet to deal with pollution and waste materials (see chapter 1). Some argued that new technologies and industrial products, such as pesticides and plastics, also threatened the environment (see chapter 5).

First-wave environmentalists, following the protest mood of the times, did not hesitate to blame industry, western culture, economic growth and technology for environmental problems. Although many of the key writers at the time were scientists or industrialists themselves (for example, the Club of Rome), the environment movement was easily characterised as being anti-development. Nevertheless, their warnings captured the popular attention, resonating with the experiences of communities facing obvious pollution in their neighbourhoods.

Although many governments did not recognise the importance of global environmental problems, they were forced by community pressure to respond to local pollution problems. During the 1970s many countries introduced new environmental legislation to cope with the gross sources of pollution. Australian state governments, following the international trend, introduced clean air acts, clean water acts, and legislation establishing regulatory agencies to control pollution and manage waste disposal.

The decade that followed saw a backlash against the early environmentalists. Various writers argued that global catastrophe was the fantasy of doomsday forecasters, and that scientific discoveries and technological innovations would easily cope with any

problems that might arise. Government departments and agencies found it extremely difficult, in this new climate of opinion, to administer properly the legislation that had been put in place at the height of the first wave of environmentalism: businesses did their best to ignore the laws or get around them.

The second wave of environmentalism, which began in the late 1980s, has had much broader support and has involved governments, business people and economists in the promotion of sustainable development. Scientific evidence about the build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the depletion of the ozone layer have made it difficult for anyone to deny the threat of global environmental problems. Many of the concerns of environmentalists have been taken up by senior politicians (including prime ministers and ministers of foreign affairs, of finance and agriculture) from countries around the world, as well as eminent scientists, jurists and international bureaucrats.

Sustainable development has succeeded in arenas of influence denied to first-wave environmentalism because of its central idea that environmental protection is not necessarily opposed to development. The concept of sustainable development accommodates economic growth, business interests and the free market and therefore does not threaten the power structure of modern industrial societies.

Many of the ideas associated with sustainable development had been previously articulated in the 1980 World Conservation Strategy produced by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) in collaboration with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF, now the

World Wide Fund for Nature). This document, which was circulated to all governments, defined conservation as:

the management of human use of the biosphere [the thin covering of the planet that sustains life] so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.

The World Conservation Strategy argued that while development aimed to achieve human goals through the use of the biosphere, conservation aimed to achieve those same goals by ensuring that use of the biosphere could continue indefinitely.

National conservation strategies based on this World Conservation Strategy were adopted in fifty countries including Australia, which adopted a national conservation strategy in 1984 following two conferences and 550 submissions (Department of Home Affairs and Environment 1984). The Australian national conservation strategy, like the World Conservation Strategy, argued that development and conservation were different expressions of the one process and that economic growth could be achieved through a more appropriate use of resources. It called for sustainable modes of development, a new international economic order, a new environmental ethic and population stabilisation.

The World Conservation Strategy and the Australian equivalent have had little impact and few people have even heard of them. However, in the mid-1980s the World Commission on Environment and Development rejuvenated the concept in its report *Our Common Future*, (also referred to as the Brundtland Report, named after the commission's chair, Gro Harlem Brundtland, who was prime minister of Norway at the time). In October 1987, the goal of sustain-

able development was largely accepted by the governments of one hundred nations and approved in the UN General Assembly.

The commission defined sustainable development as:

development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Although the above definition is the one that is most often quoted, there are many definitions of sustainable development and it has been argued that interest groups define sustainable development to suit their own goals. However the idea of sustainable development embodies certain common concepts and assumptions. This book sets out to give the reader a unified, comprehensive understanding of what sustainable development is all about.

Sustainable development in Australia

In June 1990, the Commonwealth Government released a discussion paper on ecologically sustainable development (ESD). Shortly afterwards, it set up working groups to study how sustainable development would be applied to nine different industry sectors that were thought to use or have a significant impact on natural resources. These sectors were:

- agriculture
- energy use
- energy production
- transport
- mining
- fisheries
- forest use
- tourism
- manufacturing

Membership of the working groups comprised representatives from government, industry, unions, consumer/social welfare organisations and conservation groups. In addition there were a number of academics and CSIRO scientists. The groups were, however, dominated by bureaucrats from state and federal government departments, particularly those from development-oriented departments such as the Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE).

Only two environmental groups took part: the Australian Conservation Foundation and the World Wide Fund for Nature. These groups were provided with finances by the Commonwealth Government to enable them to participate fully. Greenpeace Australia pulled out of the process after the government signalled its intention to pass resource security legislation which would guarantee companies access to natural resources in some areas. Other groups were not invited or chose not to take part.

The working groups produced draft reports in 1991 which were made available for public comment. A few 'community consultation forums' were held to enable working group members to get a feel for community concerns and the priorities the community accorded to various issues. A 'public attitudes survey' was also taken (of approximately 2400 people) to give the working groups and the government some idea of how much the community knew and cared about the environment and sustainable development and to see what they thought of the working group reports. The public consultation process did meet with some criticism at the time, because the forums were very limited in number and scope (For example, one day in total in Sydney and one in Dubbo for the whole of NSW), and because very little public discus-

sion was promoted outside the forums or in the media.

The final ESD working group reports were issued at the end of 1991 and were followed up in early 1992 with two other reports compiled by the three people chairing the groups. One report was on the greenhouse effect; the other covered issues such as health, population, urban issues, coastal issues, employment and equity.

For those who took part in the working-group process, it was a worthwhile exercise. They found it useful to discuss environmental issues with people they had formerly opposed and to work out areas of agreement and disagreement. It was claimed the process had enabled them to break the entrenched hostility and mistrust that had marked environmental debate in Australia up to that time. There was said to be a surprising degree of consensus between those taking part.

However, there were also criticisms. Environmentalists felt that intersectoral issues—those that overlapped various industry sectors—were not properly dealt with because of the way the groups were divided up. Others were troubled by the way the groups operated. They argued that attempts to reach consensus on the content of the reports and their recommendations required contentious issues or recommendations to be left out. This meant that the groups concentrated on the more conservative and 'safe' policy options, and recommendations were aimed more at gradual, incremental change rather than more radical, dramatic change.

The degree of public involvement and debate over the issues has also been criticised by those not included on the working groups. The working group discussions were not open and their very existence tended to

remove discussion about sustainable development from the public arena to closed meetings of select people. Dissenters outside the process were marginalised.

However, even the parties involved in the working groups are unhappy with the way the Commonwealth Government subsequently treated their reports and recommendations. Environmental groups, business groups and others were disappointed with the watered-down reports produced by the government.

At the international level, talks and negotiations have been held between national governments to work out international responses to the environmental problems facing the world. These talks recently culminated in the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. For many, the Earth Summit was disappointing. No specific targets could be agreed on for the reduction of greenhouse emissions. The US refused to sign the Biodiversity Treaty. Agenda 21, a program of action for the twenty-first century to be undertaken by all nations, was criticised as being weak and lacking any strong statements on some of the more important yet contentious issues such as population control, consumption by people in affluent countries and the role of transnational corporations.

Yet for those who took part, as in the case

of Australia's ESD process, it was useful to come together and exchange views, come to some agreements and set other processes in motion. They argued that there was great symbolic value in having so many heads of state coming together to discuss environmental problems in what was the largest gathering of its kind in history. Non-governmental organisations also took the opportunity to hold their own forum across town from the summit, where they formulated their own treaties and formed beneficial alliances.

The Australian working groups and the Earth Summit have been early manifestations of an unprecedented degree of consensus that the concept of sustainable development seems to have achieved about the desirable direction and thrust of environmental policy. Sustainable development draws its strength from the recognition by governments, economists, industry groups and others that modern societies cannot continue to develop in the ways they have in the past, with little attention being paid to protecting the environment. Sustainable development is the principal mechanism that these decision-makers intend to use to solve the environmental crisis. It is therefore vital that the wider public understands what it means and can judge for themselves how effective it will be.