

Sustainable development as freedom

Robert McDonald

Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA

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SUMMARY

There has been considerable debate about how best to define sustainable development. In this commentary, I argue that Amartya Sen's concept of 'development as freedom' is the appropriate theoretical framework for understanding sustainable development. Environmentalists should consider defining their goal as 'sustainable development as freedom,' the achievement of the greatest possible level of freedom without restricting the access of future generations to these same freedoms. The adoption of this framework has implications for the work of environmental NGOs, which are briefly discussed.

From its beginning, the concept of sustainable development has been contentious, and there has been a constant battle between those who put the emphasis on sustainability (e.g. Robinson 1993; Willers 1994) and those who put the emphasis on development (e.g. Holdgate and Munro 1993). Indeed, the term emerged as a sort of truce between the agendas of First World environmentalists and Third World development advocates, a compromise: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Furthermore, within the environmental community there has been considerable debate over what exactly 'sustainable' means, with various 'weak' and 'strong' interpretations (Beckerman 1994), and how exactly one would measure it (e.g. Wen *et al.* 2005). This has been mirrored by a debate among economists about what exactly 'development' means. Environmentalists need to be aware of this debate, and in particular understand how the broad definition of 'development' offered by Amartya Sen and others changes how we conceive of sustainable development. In this paper, I offer a

perspective on what those changes are and how it affects the mission of environmental NGOs.

Early definitions of development tended to focus on the creation of material goods, whether infrastructure, housing or dams. To make this easier to measure, development was often defined simply in monetary terms, such as the per capita gross domestic product (GDP). In the last several decades there has been a shift toward including social concerns in the concept of development (e.g. Ray 1998). Some of this shift has been recorded in the text of international environmental treaties, as the so-called three legs of the stool of development: the economic, the social, and the political (cf. Dawe and Ryan 2003).

The most powerful statement of this broad conception of development can be found in Amartya Sen's famous book, *Development as Freedom* (1999). Money or material goods do not matter to people, Sen argues, except to the extent that they provide freedom from different sorts of deprivation, a 'capability' for people to improve their life. Access to food and/or the money to buy it provides freedom from hunger. A social safety net, such as unemployment insurance or universal healthcare,

provides freedom from insecurity. The ability to participate meaningfully in governmental decisions provides freedom from a sense of powerlessness. In Sen's view, development properly construed is about strengthening all of these freedoms.

This broad definition of development has not been accepted by all economists (e.g. Navarro 2000; Prendergast 2005). It has been attacked as vague, difficult to measure compared with something like per capita GDP. Some have argued that it waters down the concept of development, distracting from the important task of increasing incomes in the Third World. Moreover, some have claimed it is dangerous to include political freedoms so centrally in the concept of development, for fear of turning off authoritarian governments to the idea. However, I believe that Sen's concept of 'development as freedom' is exactly what most environmentalists have in mind when they use the term 'sustainable development': not simply an increase in monetary income or consumption but a substantial increase in the quality of people's lives. Indeed, Sen's idea fits well into the three legs of development already accepted by most advocates of sustainable development. He just states his broad concept in powerful, human terms, not as some abstract process of development but as tangible freedoms in the lives of real people.

It is time for conservation biologists to think about 'sustainable development as freedom,' the achievement of the greatest possible level of freedom – from poverty, from want, from insecurity, from repression – without restricting the access of future generations to these same freedoms. Utilizing this language makes clear that sustainable development is about *people*, those alive today and those that will live in the future. Perhaps most important for many of the desperately poor in the world is freedom from material want, such as a lack of food or water or shelter. Ecologists can restate this as being freedom from the consequences of ecosystem services degradation. The loss of clean drinking water because of pollution or, in the case of South Africa (Richardson 1998), invasive exotic species is a loss of freedom from thirst. The loss of potentially arable land due to erosion affects global food production, potentially impacting the ability of humanity to be free of the scourge of hunger. The same might be said of the loss of the natural climate regulation capacity of the Earth's atmosphere due to increased atmospheric CO₂, which

could also decrease global food production. Biodiversity loss negates the freedom of future generations to experience the marvelous variety of life, and to profit financially, intellectually, and spiritually from its study. While this way of talking may seem somewhat cumbersome, ecologists are already quite comfortable with its message, as exemplified by the anthropocentric focus of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment's focus on ecosystem services (MEA 2003).

Freedom from poverty is another important goal of sustainable development. More than 1.3 billion people currently live on less than US\$1 per day (World Bank 2005), and so alleviating their plight is essential. At the same time, any actions to achieve this goal must not inhibit the freedom of future generations to be free from poverty. In effect, development today should not draw down the natural capital – ecosystem services broadly construed – so much that those yet to be born suffer. Environmental economists are already comfortable with this idea (e.g. Costanza and Daly 1992), and have made considerable progress toward quantifying natural capital (Goodland and Daly 1996).

However, viewing sustainable development as freedom also means that political freedoms, now and in the future, are important. Foremost among these is the freedom of people to actively participate in decisions made by their own government, and the freedom to peacefully dissent when they disagree with these decisions. The process of development must then include people in the decisions that affect them, while attempting to avoid actions that might remove the freedom of future generations to make their own decisions about the course of development. Ecologists are generally much less comfortable with this latter, political component of sustainable development. There is a fear it makes the concept of sustainable development too vague, difficult to measure compared with something concrete like tons of carbon dioxide emitted (Lele 1991). Some argue it dilutes the concept of sustainable development, making it too easily appropriated as a tool for other agendas (Willers 1994). Most significantly, some argue it runs the risk of making sustainable development too political, thus hampering the ability of conservationists to push for environmental sustainability (cf. Newton and Freyfogle 2005). These concerns are valid, and advocates of sustainable development must be careful about over-emphasizing this political

component. I believe two things can mitigate some of these concerns.

First, abstract concepts are often part of the vision and mission statements of organizations, and are usually operationalized in order to make them more useful. For instance, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment took the broad idea of 'ecosystem services' and came up with a specific list of different types of services. Each item on the list can be assessed for changes over time, and if desired their sum scores will give some sense of changes in 'ecosystem services' in general. In the same way, 'freedom from poverty' is already defined in tractable terms by agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme, which has created a Human Development Index. The extent of 'political freedoms' is routinely assessed by organizations such as Freedom House, using a large checklist of criteria. These kinds of checklists make the setting of concrete targets possible, and permit monitoring of performance over time.

Second, environmental groups can explicitly say that they promote a broad conception of sustainable development as freedom without losing their focus on conservation. Clearly environmental NGOs cannot achieve this broad goal on their own, and they should not try to, lest terminal mission creep set in. Nevertheless, it is part of our vision for the world, and we should say so. Most advocates of sustainable development would not support authoritarian governments or empires, even an environmentally responsible one. How decisions are made matters to us. Moreover, describing our vision of sustainable development in terms of the freedoms of people, now and in the future, can make our ideas much more compelling to the lay public. Environmental NGOs can leave the day-to-day work of poverty alleviation and championing democracy to other groups, while still making sure our conservation actions are consistent with, and indeed support, these lofty goals.

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