

ALTERNATIVAS FRENTE AL NEOLIBERALISMO: ¡Error! Marcador no definido.EL DESARROLLO REGIONAL SOSTENIBLE

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Neoliberalism is exacerbating the polarization of society in all of its dimensions. Structural adjustments, with their program for international economic integration and public sector austerity on the domestic front have radically reduced the possibilities for equitable growth and the satisfaction of social needs. For most Latin Americans, this neoliberal opening is a nightmare. Falling real income, increasing unemployment and the accelerated withdrawal of social safety nets leaves us with few alternatives.

A significant number of people, however, have chosen to attempt to construct their own independent paths to survival. At present many of these strategies are no more than precarious arrangements to assure the income needed to hold body and soul together. They involve a combination traditional forms of production for increasing local self-sufficiency, financed by other activities in the same region or elsewhere; at present, people are forced to migrate, often accepting jobs in the most unfortunate of circumstances, with a consequent deterioration of their own lives and contributing to the unraveling of culture and society.

This unexpected response by millions who are unwilling to accept the inevitability of their absorption into the neoliberal quagmire offers a point of departure for alternative strategies. These alternatives are now being explored by myriad communities and scholars throughout the hemisphere; the contradictions of neoliberal development are so profound that even the international development community now recognizes their importance as a way to responding to the present crisis and searching for a progressive transitional route towards a better world. They are so

important, that a new literature is focusing on grassroots approaches, including the exploration of problems related to participation and gender, while new organizations have emerged to take advantage of the political space that this opening is creating and to use the resources that are becoming available.

Many of these alternatives are emerging from concern about the need to search for a new approach to sustainability. This paper focuses on the problems of developing a strategy for sustainable development. Sustainability has become an important part of the discussion of development. It is increasingly clear to practitioners and academics alike that our thinking about development strategies must change; unless different approaches are allowed to thrive, the prevailing strategy of international economic integration with open borders will destroy our capacity to undertake these tasks. These new approaches require more than the defense of our natural environment. The conservation of a region's ecosystems depends on more than a political recognition of the importance of the problem. It also requires the strengthening and reconstruction of the social and economic capacity of people with the knowledge and ability to engage in the productive activities required for protecting and enriching the natural systems in which these resources exist. This paper turns to the task of exploring a strategy of sustainable development; it builds upon the principles of a diversified productive base, creative use of local resource base, and local participation in planning and implementation.

The Heritage of Development

Today's dual economy is an anachronism. While internationalization promises higher profits for capital than ever before, the contradictions bred by impoverishment are provoking a world wide rebellion. The international expansion of capital integrates resources and people into a polar system of great wealth accompanied by poverty and despoliation. Although this expansion has created vast extensions of land that have been denuded of their primary cover, it can no longer be profitably cultivated; in the process, large hoards of people are forced into precarious conditions in rural areas or urban slums; this waste of natural and human resources imposes a huge burden on society, not

only in terms of opportunities foregone, but also for the costs of managing the social control and welfare tasks.

Official development theory seeks the solutions to poverty in market-led structural changes. International development experts and environmentalists alike join in an effort to wrench these groups from their regions, blending the arguments of economic efficiency with those of natural destruction to justify their removal. But these strategies raise two important questions: 1) is a new era of growth in its current mode either possible or desirable given environmental limitations? and 2) given the historical record, is there demonstrated evidence that new levels of growth will provide for greater economic (and therefore political and social) equity amongst diverse groups of nations, regions, communities, and people?

The answers to both these questions are a resounding NO. A market-driven strategy will not bridge the chasm between rich and poor, with all its negative implications, characteristic of today's dualisms. Instead, an approach that recognizes the limits of natural resource exploitation and capital expansion is proposed, one that addresses the issues of poverty and sustainability by offering a program of rural development for those presently excluded, a program that eventually would also ameliorate conditions in the rest of society. Both the increasing number of poor people and the accumulating environmental problems require solutions that are less market dependent; that take into account the redundancy of large portions of the population to the current framework for production and economic growth, and, therefore, provide for these people by creating a system in which communities can survive without complete integration into the global marketplace.

Investigations show that when given the chance and access to resources, the poor are more likely than other groups to engage in direct actions to protect and improve the environment. From this perspective, then, an alternative development model requires new ways to encourage the direct participation of peasant and indigenous communities in a program of job creation in rural areas to increase incomes and improve living standards. By proposing policies that encourage and safeguard rural producers in their efforts to become once again a vibrant and viable social and productive

force, this essay proposes to contribute to an awareness of the deliberate steps needed to promote sustainability.

The essay identifies many opportunities to reflect on the importance of sustainability, and the possibilities of implementing approaches which move us in a new direction. But it also suggests that there are significant obstacles to such progress. Overcoming these obstacles requires more than well-intentioned policies; it requires a new correlation of social forces, a move towards broad-based democratic participation in all aspects of life, within each country and in the concert of nations. Strategies to face these challenges must respond to the dual challenges of insulating these communities from further encroachment and assuring their viability.

In this alternative view, the world system is one of increasing duality, polarized between the rich and poor A nations, regions, communities, and individuals. A small number of nations dominate the global power structure, guiding production and determining welfare levels. The other nations compete among themselves to offer lucrative conditions that will entice the corporate and financial powers to locate within their boundaries. Similarly, regions and communities within nations engage in self-destructive forms of bargaining A compromising the welfare of their workers and the building of their own infrastructure A in an attempt to outbid each other for the fruits of global growth. This dynamic is not conducive to promoting sustainable development. The regions unable to attract investment suffer the ignoble fate of losers in a permanent economic olympics, condemned to oblivion on the world stage. In their struggle for survival within the global marketplace, many of the world's rural populations are doomed to marginality and permanent poverty.

Among the many questions raised by this discussion, some of the more important ones might be grouped into the following areas:

- What is the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation?
- Can the obstacles to sustainability be overcome by raising national per capita income levels?
- Can policies directed towards poverty eradication also contribute to reducing pressures on the environment?

- Are wealthier people around the world confronting the problems of sustainability responsibly? What is their level of responsibility to support environmental protection and conservation in areas inhabited by the poor?¹

Sustainability is not possible in rural Latin America as long as the expansion of capital enlarges the ranks of the poor and impedes their access to the resources needed for mere survival. Capitalism no longer needs growing armies of unemployed to ensure low wages, nor need it control vast areas to secure regular access to the raw materials and primary products for its productive machine; these inputs are now assured by new institutional arrangements that modified social and productive structures to fit the needs of capital. At present, however, great excesses are generated, excesses that impoverish people and ravage their regions. Profound changes are required to facilitate a strategy of sustainable development: in the last section we explore such an approach, suggesting that it may be possible and necessary to promote a new form of development: *a structure local autonomy that allows people to rebuild their rural societies, produce goods and services in a sustainable fashion while expanding the environmental stewardship services they have always provided.*

A. Sustainability

Sustainable development has become a powerful and controversial theme, creating seemingly impossible goals for policy makers and development practitioners. Virtually everyone now couches their proposals for change in terms of its contribution to "sustainability." There is a widespread acknowledgment that *present levels of per capita resource consumption in the richer countries cannot possibly be generalized* to people living in the rest of the world; many argue that present levels of consumption cannot be maintained, even for those groups who now enjoy high levels of material consumption.² In this new discourse, resources encompass not just inherited natural capital, including raw materials (such as soil, sub-soil products, good quality air and water, forests, oceans and wetlands), but also the earth's capacity to absorb the wastes produced by our productive

¹ This list might also be joined by a question about the relationship between population growth, poverty and sustainability. I do not address this issues because in Latin America most research shows that the behavior of demographic variables depends on other fundamental factors of the nature and pace of development, such as those discussed in this body of this essay.

systems; of course, the analysis of resources also includes considerations about the quality of the built environments in which we live and work. (An excellent introduction to the underlying discussion can be found in Wilson 1992.)

The concern for sustainability has become global, reflecting the widespread fear of the deterioration in the quality of life. Existing productive systems and consumption patterns threaten the continuity of the existing social organization. The inequitable and undemocratic nature of current patterns of development raises the specter of the unraveling of present systems. A social, political, productive and even those of personal wealth. A different structure, more attuned to the earth's possibilities for supporting and reproducing life, must replace them.

To address questions of sustainability, then, is to confront the fundamental dilemmas facing the development community today. While the trickle-down approaches to economic progress enrich a few and stimulate growth in "modern" economies and sectors within traditional societies, they do not address most people's needs; moreover, they contributed to depleting the world's store of natural wealth and to a deterioration in the quality of our natural environment.

In the ultimate analysis, we rediscover that in present conditions, the very accumulation of wealth creates poverty. While the poor often survive in scandalous conditions and are forced to contribute to further degradation, they do so because they know no alternatives. Even in the poorest of countries, social chasms not only prevent resources from being used to ameliorate their situation, but actually compound the damage by forcing people from their communities and denying them the opportunities to devise their own solutions. For this reason, the search for sustainability involves a dual strategy: on the one hand, it must involve an unleashing of the bonds that restrain people from strengthening their own organizations, or creating new ones, to use their relatively meager resources to search for an alternative and autonomous resolution to their problems. On the other hand, a sustainable development strategy must contribute to the forging of a new social pact, cemented in the recognition that the eradication of poverty and the democratic incorporation of the disenfranchised into a more diverse productive structure are essential.

² In this sense, we reject the notion that what is being sustained is growth itself, rather than a *process* that aims to

Sustainability, is not "simply" a matter of the environment, economic justice, and development. It is also about people and our survival as individuals and cultures. It is, most significantly, a question of whether and the way in which diverse groups of people will continue to survive. In fact, the burgeoning literature about the move towards sustainability celebrates the many groups who have successfully adapted their cultural heritages, unique forms of social and productive organization, and specific ways of relating to their natural environments.

Sustainability, then, is about the struggle for diversity in all its dimensions. International campaigns to conserve germplasm, to protect endangered species, and to create reserves of the biosphere are multiplying in reaction to the mounting offensive, while communities and their hard pressed members struggle against powerful external forces to defend their individuality, their rights and ability to survive while trying to provide for their brethren. The concern for biodiversity, in its broadest sense, encompasses not only threatened flora and fauna, but also the survivability of these human communities, as stewards of the natural environment and as producers.

Internationalization has stymied this movement towards diversity. The powerful economic groups that shape the world economy (transnational corporations and financial institutions, and influential local powers, among others) are striving to break down these individual or regional traits, molding us into more homogenous and tractable social groups. They would position us to support the existing structure of inequality and to engage in productive employment; and, for those lucky enough to enjoy high enough incomes, to become customers.

contribute to improved welfare of people in an environment whose integrity is being protected.

B. Review of the literature

In contrast to the generalized theories about the development process and sophisticated models of economic growth, the literature on sustainable development offers a mixture of high ethical principles, manuals for practical organization and implementation, and very concrete case studies of successes and failures. In this section we offer a rapid overview of some of the general approaches and solutions characteristic of this literature that might be suitable for various regions and problems. Rather than attempt to be comprehensive, this discussion is meant to convey the flavor of the discussion and the directions for future work. More than anything else, it is meant to reinforce the growing conviction that sustainable development may be an idea "whose time has come;" its implementation requires challenging not only the self-interest of the wealthy minority, but also the consumption package which is defining our quality of life. This is the real challenge we face today.

Sustainability is a process rather than a set of well specified goals. It involves modifying processes in nature, the economy and society. It has become more fashionable as people have discovered that increasing production or even national wealth does not guarantee improving living standards and a higher quality of life; but the challenges of environmental protection are perhaps the most immediate force making the discussion so important. There are fundamental ethical questions about the sustainability of a global structure that perpetuates high degrees of international inequality while working with rural communities with little chance of satisfying even the most basic of their needs. These overall questions go far beyond the scope of this paper, which addresses strategies to promote a greater degree of sustainability in rural development. But for an effort to be successful it will also contribute to modifications in national development programs conducive to greater popular participation in their design and implementation.

A strategy to promote sustainability must focus on the importance of local participation and control over the way in which people live and work. The question of local or regional autonomy and autarchy is an important part of any discussion of national and international integration. The issues of autonomy versus cooperation and coordination are very much related to others having to do with self-sufficiency versus international specialization. The analysis of the previous sections places strategies for sustainability at the opposite end of the spectrum from the prescriptions of the

neoliberal reforms. But yet, the advocates of sustainability recognize that the choices are not this simple: industrial products and technologies will not be rejected simply because they involve hierarchical control and maddeningly alienated work. The response must be more reflective, and confront the realities of an urbanized global society in crisis, with some nations incapable of providing for the most elemental needs of their citizens, while at the same time permitting others to enrich themselves while ransacking its storehouse of natural resources. In what follows we will briefly review some of the strategies proposed to promote sustainable development in different contexts.

C. Food self-sufficiency and the relationship between production and consumption

The first issue that must be dealt with squarely is that of self-sufficiency versus integration into the global trading system with a tendency towards specialization based on monocropping systems. Sustainability need not be tantamount to autarchy, although it is conducive to a much lower degree of specialization in all areas of production and social organization. Food self-sufficiency emerged as a necessity in many societies because of the precariousness of international trading systems; specific culinary traditions developed on the basis of highly localized knowledge of fruits and vegetables, herbs and spices. Although the introduction of green revolution technologies raised the productive potential of food producers tremendously, we soon found out how hard it was to reach this potential and the high social and environmental costs that such a program might entail.

Food self-sufficiency is a controversial objective that cogently raises the question of autonomy. Development practitioners are virtually unanimous in rejecting calls for an extreme position, although Mexico's declaration in favor of such a program in 1980 to the World Food Council was broadly applauded by third world representatives. Today the discussion is more complex, for there is general agreement on two contradictory factors in the debate:

- 1) on the one hand, local production of basic commodities which can be produced equally well but more efficiently elsewhere is a luxury few societies can afford, *if and only if* the resources not

dedicated to the production of these traded goods can find productive employment elsewhere; and

- 2) on the other hand, there are probably few exceptions to the observation that greater local production of such commodities contributes to higher nutritional standards and better health indices. In the context of today's societies, in which inequality is the rule and the forces discriminating against the rural poor legion, a greater degree of autonomy in the provision of the material basis for an adequate standard of living is likely to be an important part of any program of regional sustainability. It will contribute to creating more productive jobs and an interest in better stewardship over natural resources.

There are many parts of the world in which such a strategy would constitute a wasteful luxury. It would involve the diversion of resources from other uses which could be more productive in contributing to the availability of goods for trading. But even in circumstances in which wholesale importation of basic commodities is advisable, people concerned with sustainable development raise questions about modifying local diets so that they are more attuned to the productive possibilities of their regions; in the current scene, the tendency to substitute imported products for traditional foods is particularly troublesome with terrible consequences for human welfare in many societies.³

Food self-sufficiency, however, is only part of a broader strategy of productive diversification whose tenets are very much a part of the sustainability movement. The principles of greater self-reliance are fundamental for the whole range of products and services which a society would like to assure itself. Historically, rural denizens never have been 'just' farmers, or anything else, for that matter. Rather, rural communities were characterized by the *diversity of the productive activities in which they engaged to assure their subsistence*. It was only the aberration of transferring models of large-scale commercial agriculture to development thinking in the Third World that misled many into ignoring the multifaceted nature of traditional rural productive systems. Sustainable

³ The complexity of the task of ending hunger is widely recognized. But recent literature has stressed the social rather than the technical (or supply-based) origins of famine and hunger; Sen (1981, 1982) is a particularly effective exponent of this point, while others have gone into greater detail about the "social origins" of food strategies and crises (Barraclough 1991). The "modernization" of urban diets in Nigeria, by substituting wheat and rice for sorghum and millet, is an egregious case of creating dependency, reducing opportunities for peasant producers and raising the social cost of feeding a nation (see Andrae and Beckman 1985).

development strategies directly face this problem, attempting to reintroduce this diversity, as they grapple with problems of appropriate scales of operation and product mix.

Productive diversification related to a pattern of local needs and resources is another important expression of this line of thought. To the extent that people are not involved in the design and implementation of programs to assure their own consumption needs, they are also going to have less appreciation of the impact of their demands on the rest of society and the natural environment. Thus, the approach discussed in the literature being reviewed here places a great deal of importance of some direct relationship among the people involved in the planning of production and those examining the question of what levels of consumption are possible.

D. Popular participation, social justice, and autonomy

Sustainability is about direct participation. If there is one constant in the diverse literature in the area, it is the recognition that the movement has emerged from the grassroots to participate in and support intermediate level NGOs which claim to speak for the extraordinary proliferation of community groups and civic organizations which are beginning to demand an increasing role in the national policy debate.

These demands and the responses from official agencies on the multilateral and national levels are quite instructive.

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