

## Sustainable Development in Canadian Foreign Policy--Global Vision, Asian Myopia

The landmark 1987 Bruntland Commission Report popularized the notion of sustainable development, defining it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>10</sup>

Various civil society groups have since used the idea to help support their environment and development work. However, many NGOs and international development and environmental experts have also criticized the idea as a smokescreen for sanctioning continued economic growth and expanded consumption at the expense of the earth's environmental carrying capacity.<sup>11</sup> Many argue that the sustainable development idea has allowed policy makers the appearance of making changes while supporting mainstream development thought. Some say it has let business people adopt or distort sustainability language calling for "sustained growth" without making significant changes in ways NGOs argue would reflect more ecologically sustainable and socially responsible development. Moreover, NGOs say the idea also lets government avoid fundamental changes while allowing business relative freedom to carry on as usual, and to interpret the concept voluntarily without adequate regulatory frameworks or conservation safeguards.<sup>12</sup>

The Bruntland Report led to UNCED in 1992. UNCED, attended by some 170 world leaders ostensibly made environmental and economic integration a mainstream goal by attempting to practically implement the sustainable development concept through the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21 and national action plans. The UNCED report was a remarkable document, a milestone for the depth and breadth of input from all sectors of civil society (called "major groups" in the document) and its pathbreaking global

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<sup>10</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> David Korten, "Sustainable Development: A Review Essay," World Policy Journal 9,1 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 157-190.

<sup>12</sup> These concerns reflect comments of many NGOs I heard while attending NGO caucus meetings during the NGO Global Forum at Rio Earth Summit and during sessions of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development in New York in 1995, 1996 and 1997.