

# Sustainable Development

## • Inspiring a New Global Partnership

A strange thing happened on the way to the June 1992, UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED): governments, industry leaders and grassroots activists — more accustomed to polarized argument than constructive debate — took a few cautious steps away from their entrenched positions and discovered common ground in the idea of sustainable development.

In their quest to define and implement a sustainable form of development, UNCED participants began to explore a new way of working together, one built on openness, inclusion, a broad base of knowledge and greater public participation in decision making — a relationship that "launched a new process of planetary management."<sup>1</sup>

While Rio did not — could not — provide instant solutions to the planet's economic and environmental problems, the value of hearing all stakeholders' voices came to be realized. Thus, not only was sustainable development established as a global goal at UNCED, but the seeds for a partnership process, crucial to its realization, were also sown. A process, which in the words of Willy Brandt, recognizes that "the shaping of our future is much too important to be left to governments and experts alone."<sup>2</sup>

It is that process, and the concept from which it arises, that will be explored here, for few terms have aroused as much interest, debate, misunderstanding and even scepticism as sustainable development.

### What is sustainable development?

In 1987, The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), called for "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>3</sup> The WCED submitted that such "sustainable development" was the means to resolve both the environmental and developmental threats being faced by all countries. In the ensuing years, sustainable development has not only entered into common parlance, it has been endorsed by UN agencies, national governments, multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) alike.

Popularity aside, the concept has not gone unchallenged. Sustainable development has been criticized as an oxymoron, unachievable, or a new way to justify the status quo.

All three arguments might hold true if we were to define "develop-

ment" purely as "growth" or the infinite quantitative expansion of the economy. International models of development have changed considerably over the last few years, and today most participants in this debate recognize that development must be both qualitative and quantitative. The term "sustainable development" embraces both concepts.

Sustainable development regards quantitative growth — measured by such indicators as gross national product and per capita income — as only one element in the economic health of a nation. Of equal importance are such qualitative factors as life expectancy, literacy, wealth distribution and environmental integrity.

An economy based on sustainable development seeks to maintain its natural resource base, pursuing economic progress through adaptation and improvements in knowledge, organization, technical efficiency and wisdom.<sup>4</sup> When

*"SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ... unites virtually all human concerns: for security, a nourishing environment, economic progress, democracy, international co-operation and a safe future for our children. Thus is created a powerful global partnership, which has never before been possible."*

*From a statement by the World Commission on Environment and Development, London, April 24, 1992*



development reflects these standards, it can be both sustainable and capable of solving our most pressing economic, ecological and social problems.

After decades of supporting the development-as-growth model, the major international financial institutions are now reaching this same conclusion. The World Bank stated, in its 1992 World Development Report:

"Development is about improving the well-being of people. Raising living standards and improving education, health and equality of opportunity are all essential components of economic development. Ensuring political and civil rights are broader development goals. Economic growth is an essential means for enabling development but in itself is a highly imperfect proxy for progress."<sup>5</sup>

By favoring a process-led approach over those focused primarily on end products, sustainable development is ideally suited to the integration of economic and environmental goals. A more useful definition for sustainable development may be:

*"Improving the quality of life while living within the capacity of supporting ecosystems."<sup>6</sup>*

### What do we do differently?

As a process, sustainable development has several distinguishing characteristics: based on a long-term perspective, it tends to encourage diversity and pluralism; it promotes equity and justice within

countries (regardless of social class and gender) and among countries (North and South); and, taking a holistic approach to problems, it functions best in a participatory, partnership milieu.

A high degree of trust is also essential. The message from UNCED is that, where trust between participants is not always possible, trust in the process is. By focusing on values and common goals, the partnership process takes participants out of traditional spheres of interest and responsibility and into a search for solutions.

Bridges between government, industry, environment and development NGOs and a plethora of other interests can thus be built by concentrating not on the point of view that each stakeholder brings to the table but on their shared objectives, allowing all participants to become valued "partners."

Attempts to build such a partnership process in Canada's preparations for UNCED were encouraging. By the time of the conference, environment and development NGOs, women's organizations, indigenous, labour and youth groups, and business and industry were not only represented on the official delegation but were helping to frame Canada's positions.

These partnerships by no means died away after Rio. In Canada, a national stakeholders' group, comprised of representatives from every major sector of society, agreed to respond to the commitments of UNCED. They have come together to develop national, sectoral and community plans for a sustainable future.

Similar Canadian efforts to promote non-governmental participation

in international fora, most notably at the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, form part of the broader global trend characterized recently by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali as "a new, more participatory, people-centred way of conducting international affairs."<sup>7</sup>

### Designing the future

Resolution of contemporary global problems in virtually any sphere — economic, trade, social, development or political/security — now requires a greater degree of broad international agreement and commitment. Partnership and co-operation among states is now all the more important when dealing with problems that ultimately affect everyone. For example, climate change and biodiversity loss cannot be stemmed by one powerful nation, or even a bloc of nations.

In this new era of international diplomacy, the ability of active middle powers like Canada to shift the process from "the old game of concessions grudgingly extracted in an atmosphere of ill will"<sup>8</sup> to one of global partnership, may well be the deciding factor in designing the future.

Sustainable development offers the prospect of protecting the environment, revitalizing global economies and opening up a new era of innovation and creativity. The benefits however, can only be fully realized when both the concept and the process are widely adopted. By committing to a foreign policy that promotes sustainable development and strengthens those international institutions in which these issues play out, Canada is working to ensure that the future we leave to the next generation is more prosperous, safer and healthier.

1. Roche, Douglas, *A Bargain for Humanity: Global Security by 2000*, Edmonton: 1993.

2. Brandt, Willy *North-South: A Programme for our Survival*, 1981.

3. The World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, 1987.

4. International Union for the Conservation of Nature/United Nations Environment Programme/World Wildlife Fund, *Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living*, 1991.

5. The World Bank, *World Development Report 1992: Development and the Environment*, Washington, 1992.

6. IUCN/UNEP/WWF, *op. cit.*

7. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, from his message "My message from the United Nations is one of Hope" inserted in *Life*, December 1992.

8. Roche, *op. cit.*, p. 94.