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SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS:

An Opportunity for the World Commission on Environment and
Development

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Summary Overview

This paper argues for a breakout from the ruts and traps of normal professionalism and 'first' thinking. It puts forward sustainable livelihoods as a new starting point and priority for analysis and policy concerned with environment and development. On both moral and practical grounds, it takes the view that poor people should be put first: the moral grounds are that current deprivation of hundreds of millions on the planet is an intolerable outrage; the practical grounds are that sustainable development will only be feasible if adequate, secure and decent livelihoods can be gained both by those already in absolute poverty and by the many more who will in future have to live in the rural areas of developing countries.

The WCED has moved from environment thinking (ET) to a synthesis with development thinking (DT) in emphasising sustainable development. The paper argues that it should go further and incorporate livelihood thinking (LT). This requires reversals of thinking, putting the last first, and meeting the priorities of the poor. The priorities of the desperate poor and of the responsible rich can be fused in the concept of sustainable livelihoods and in sustainable livelihood thinking (SLT). SLT opens up a new perspective by integrating criteria from different traditions: sustainability from environment thinking, productivity from development thinking, and the immediate satisfaction of needs and low risks from livelihood thinking.

SLT has many analytical and practical implications. It affects the choice and design of development actions. It impinges on energy, agricultural research, and all types of rural development programme. It presents an opportunity for the WCED to make a major and decisive contribution to the poor, to development, and to the environment. The question is whether the opportunity will be seen and seized.

Normal Professionalism and 'First' Thinking¹

Most of those with a concern for environment and development are likely to be unconscious victims of normal professionalism and 'first' thinking. Normal professionalism means the thinking, values, methods and behaviour dominant in a profession or discipline. The 'first' thinking which goes with it has a structure, traits and values generated by and serving the richer nations, and in all nations the urban, industrial and elite cores. In much normal professionalism and 'first' thinking, it is things, especially the things of the rich, which come first; and people come last - with the poorer rural people last of all.

The 'standard agenda' of key issues noted by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1985: 20-21) reflects normal professionalism and 'first' thinking. None of the 24 items on the agenda starts with people, let alone with the poor. The key environmental pollution issues are concerned with physical things and conditions - CO₂, trace gases, climatic change, air pollution, acid rain, water pollution, hazardous waste, and so on. The key natural resource issues are again concerned with physical entities, inanimate and animate, such as depletion of forests, loss of genetic resources, loss of cropland, soil erosion, and desertification. Even the key human settlements issues start not with people but with categories for things and services - land use and tenure, shelter, water supply and sanitation, social, health, education and other services, and managing very rapid urban growth - the mega-city. Finally, the management issues are stated at a macro level and again use 'first' categories - environment and international trade, environment and development assistance, environment and transnational corporations, and so on. None of the standard agenda items starts with people as they might have done - for example with pastoralists, female-headed households, the landless, those who rely on common property resources, forest-

¹ These two concepts are elaborated and analysed in two papers (Chambers, 1985b and 1985c), and are only treated in summary fashion here. Any reader who finds this unsatisfactory or unconvincing is requested to write to me at Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, and ask for these two papers.

dwellers, or marginal and small farmers. People, and categories of people like these, least of all the poor, are not where normal professional thinking starts. People come later, if at all, and often as residuals and problems after technical solutions have been sought and found to what are seen as antecedent physical problems.

The Commission's critique of the 'standard agenda' and the 'alternative agenda' it proposes, come closer to people but still do not put people first, or poor people first of all. The four limitations of the standard agenda are identified as an approach of react-and-cure instead of anticipate-and-prevent; the tendency not to treat issues as jointly environment-and-development; the neglect of common causes of problems; and treating environmental considerations as an 'add-on' rather than as a comprehensive, horizontal policy field, an integral part of economic and social policy. The alternative agenda which follows, and the Commission's working agenda which incorporates it, again follow normal professional lines. Those topics closest to people are expressed in general physical terms, such as: Perspectives on Population, Environment and Sustainable Development

Food Security, Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Development

and Human Settlements: Environment and Development

In the absence of any countervailing statement, it is reasonable to suppose that these categories and topics, already phrased in 'first' terms, will in turn be analysed in 'first' terms.

The alternative agenda does, however, pay more attention to people than did the earlier standard agenda. There are references to human welfare and poverty, though at a very general level. Where people are mentioned, they are usually considered as a whole and not clearly differentiated, for example into richer and poorer. Nor does the mind-set revealed in the text appear to put people, or poor people first. Measures to address the sources of acid rain

'would prevent further damage to property, water ecosystems, forests and human welfare. On the other hand, failure to address acid rain will have the reverse effects, with significant negative impacts on

the capacity of the nations most affected to sustain higher levels of production and use.'

'Human welfare' does not differentiate rich and poor, comes at the end of the list in the first sentence, and does not appear at all in the second. Or again, in considering energy, it is written that unless effective measures are greatly accelerated in many developing countries to replenish fuelwood and other biomass sources, environmental degradation and poverty will increase. That poverty is mentioned is good, but it is seen as a negative end product of a process rather than as the primary problem; and the energy crisis is not seen also as an opportunity for the poor to gain, as it might be if thinking started with them. Or again

'restrictions on access to markets for goods in which developing countries have a comparative advantage can not only slow down their development generally, thus extending poverty induced pressures on the environment, but also force them into the production of alternative goods involving non-sustainable uses of land and other resources.'

Here the terminal bad effects are not poverty, but poverty-induced pressures on the environment, and non-sustainable uses of land and other resources. Or again, in mentioning downstream costs, they are listed as associated with damage to 'ecosystems, property and health', with health, the human element again coming last (ibid: 33). One is left with the impression that people have been added to existing lists, at the end; and sometimes they have not made the lists at all.

In making these points, I do not wish to underestimate or undervalue the shift in thinking which the Commission has already achieved. It has brought people and poverty more into consideration than before, and made 'sustainable development' central. But it is a Commission on Environment and Development, and in presenting a modified version of 'first' thinking it is being true to its title. In moral and practical terms, though, it should be a Commission on Poor People, Environment and Development, putting poor people first. Were this done, the elements in the discussion would arrange themselves in a new, important and exciting manner.

Putting the Last First

The new professionalism of reversals and of 'last' thinking² puts people first and poor people and their priorities first of all. Thinking starts with them and ends with them. The environment and development are means, not ends in themselves. The environment and development are for people, not people for environment and development.

For adopting this mode of analysis there are two sets of justification - one moral, and the other practical.

The moral justification is simple. The deprivation of hundreds of millions of people on this planet is an intolerable outrage, an affront to humanity, a cause for personal shame for all those of us who are well off.

There are two main practical justifications. The first is that deprivation is most effectively tackled by starting with poor people and their resources where they are and enabling them to gain more of what they want and need. For this, their priorities have to come first, not those of outsiders.

The second main practical justification concerns the environment and development. Poor people in their struggle to survive are driven to doing environmental damage with long-term losses. Their herds overgraze; their shortening fallows on steep slopes and fragile soils induce erosion; their need for off-season incomes drives them to cut and sell firewood and to make and sell charcoal; they are forced to cultivate and degrade marginal and unstable land. Putting poor people first, and enabling them to meet their needs, can be, then, to reduce these pressures, to reduce degradation, and to maintain potentials for sustainable agriculture and sustainable development at higher levels of productivity. And this in turn means that more people in future can have adequate, secure and decent levels of living.

This point has to be seen in the context of the enormity of the problem. It is not just that some 800 million people are currently in a state of totally unacceptable absolute poverty. If that were all the problem, it would still daunt human will and ingenuity. But beyond this there are the many more people for

² For elaboration please see Chambers 1983; 168-189, 1985c; 12-25.

whom a decent living will be needed in the future. Moreover, the population grows fastest where it is poorest, and is growing fastest of all in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), precisely where the environmental base is most fragile and deteriorating fastest. In the 17 years from 1983 to 2000 the population of SSA is estimated to rise from 393 to 664 million, that is, by nearly 70 per cent (WDR 1985: 210). Kenya is an extreme example, but is a warning of what will soon happen elsewhere.³ To attack current poverty, to restrain the growth of urban slums, to enable future populations to gain a decent living, and to avoid irreversible degradation of the environment, sustainable and equitable rural development based on putting the last first appears an inescapable priority.

The danger with this line of poverty-population-environment thinking is that it fits neatly and comfortably into an elitist mindset which blames the poor for degrading their land, while diverting attention from the similar acts of the rich.⁴ The poor, their agriculture, their cutting of trees, their cultivation of steep slopes, and so on, are seen as culpable. Though victims, they are blamed. Even if their actions as

³ 'In Kenya, the dominant feature is pressure of population on land. The subdivision of land has been rapid in many areas. Estimates suggest that hectares of good agricultural land per person will drop dramatically: in Kiambu and Machakos Districts, halving from 1969 to 1989, from 0.40 and 0.36 to 0.20 and 0.18 hectares per person respectively (Livingstone 1981, vol. 2:5). However, the single most important way in which population pressure has been absorbed is spontaneous rural to rural migration, which is more significant than rural to urban. It has been marked in the past decade as families have moved in search of land. Evidence (Migot-Adholla cited in Livingstone 1981, vol. 2:14) indicates that those who move have come over time from less poor sections of the community than before. As Livingstone observes, 'Given the inevitable increase in land pressure, and the associated poverty, it is evidently serious if it requires wealth to migrate, since the poverty of those remaining will tend to be reinforced' (Livingstone 1981, vol. 2:14). Much of the migration has been to semi-arid regions where unstable and risky agriculture competes with and displaces pastoralists.' (Chambers, 1985a)

⁴ The double standard applies widely. Consider for example the jingle from the enclosure movement of 17th century England:

They clap in gaol the man or woman
who steals the goose from off the common
but let the larger knave go loose
who steals the common from the goose.

victims are sympathetically understood, it is still easy and convenient to focus attention on them and what they do, to attribute the reduction in the world's forest cover to the poor, ignoring the major role of the rich. The WCED could perform a public service by establishing authoritative estimates of how much forest is cut by whom and for what purposes. As with other aspects of environment and development, it might emerge that the major culprits are the rich, and that restraining them is vital if the poor are to do better.

In any case, it is in order to survive that the poor are forced to degrade the environment, whereas those who are inclined to condemn them are consuming the earth's non-renewable resources not to survive but for luxury and pleasure.

Putting the last first entails a flip which is both alarming and exhilarating. An attempt is made to reverse many normal professional values, to see things from the point of view of the poor, and to follow their priorities. When this is done, nothing is ever quite the same again. It is not that science is rejected; far from it. But instead of science, technology, and professionalism determining what is done, they are instead enlisted in a support and consultancy role to serve the poor. A synthesis is sought, but normal professional biases are so strong that they have to be heavily offset by repeatedly asking what poor people want and need, and how they can be enabled to achieve it.

Sustainable Livelihoods

Poor people have many priorities, and their priorities will vary from person to person, from place to place and from time to time. Health is often, if not always, one. But perhaps the most common and universal priority expressed is the immediate desire for an adequate, secure and decent livelihood. Livelihood here can be defined as a level of wealth and of stocks and flows of food and cash which provide for physical and social wellbeing and security against becoming poorer. Again and again, when they are asked, poor people give replies which fit this definition. This is not the same as 'first' definitions of poverty and of poverty lines, which are concerned with flows only - with income or with outlays; for it also includes, what is very important to the

poor, reserves which can be used to meet contingencies (of sickness, accidents, losses, sudden or major social needs, and so on). It includes, thus, secure command over assets as well as income.

If immediate livelihoods are a priority of the poor, sustainability is a priority of the enlightened rich.

Sustainability of development is identified by the WCED in its Mandate for Change as one of its transcending themes. The term 'sustainable development' is used repeatedly. This is justified by taking a long-term view of the planet, its resources, and human needs. From a 'first' point of view, this is responsible, far-sighted and humane.

But the priorities of the poor and of the enlightened rich conflict. Poor people have short time horizons. From year to year, from season to season, and from day to day, they need to survive. They cannot afford the luxury of the long view. That is for the rich. Sustainability is irrelevant for those who starve.

Yet both priorities - livelihoods and sustainability - have transcendent importance. Poor people must be enabled to gain better livelihoods now, and their priorities must come first. But there will also be poor people in the future, perhaps many more even than now. In their interests, the long-term potential for supporting livelihoods must be maintained and enhanced. The challenge is, then, to reconcile the short time horizons of the desperate poor and the long time horizons of the responsible rich, to achieve the priorities of both together. This can be done by making sustainable livelihoods the central objective.

Sustainable Livelihood Thinking (SLT)

In development there have been a succession of 'add-ons' to existing methodologies and analytical approaches: with project appraisal, in succession, we have had impact on the poor, impact on the environment, and impact on women. It may be tempting to make sustainable livelihoods yet another 'add-on'. What I am proposing here is more radical: sustainable livelihood thinking (SLT) not as an add-on, but as an alternative.

We can approach this by examining three ways of thinking:
 environment thinking (ET)
 development thinking (DT)
 and livelihood thinking (LT)
 These can be contrasted in a table and diagrams as follows:

	ET	DT	LT
dominant people	normal biologists	normal economists	poor people
primary focus of concern	the environment	production	livelihoods
criteria in decision-making and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sustainability - conservation of resources - maintenance of diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - economic returns - productivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - immediate satisfaction of needs - low risks
time horizon	long	medium	short
value placed on future compared with present benefits	future valued more than present	future valued less than present (discounting)	future valued much less than present
structure of thinking ends means			

The continuous arrows represent causal connections and directions emphasised in the way of thinking. The dotted arrows represent connections that are recognised but not stressed.

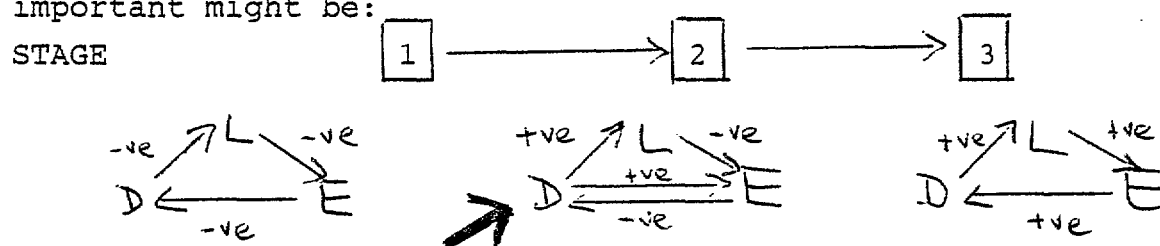
E = environment D = development L = livelihoods

ET and DT are both forms of 'first' thinking, manifestations of normal professionalism. When challenged, many with ET or DT mindsets will concede that of course people, and poor people, should come first, should be ends not means; but will then revert to their normal professional patterns of thought. Thus normal biologists emphasise the negative effects on the environment both of development and of poor people's livelihoods; and normal economists value positive contributions to economic development and production from both environment (land, water, trees, crops, etc.) and labour (as aspects of livelihoods). It remains for new professionals to reverse the causal directions and give primacy to positive impacts on livelihood from both the environment and development.

What the WCED has achieved so far is a shift from ET towards DT, and a synthesis of the two in 'sustainable development'. This includes an equity and social element - it is 'sustainable development (economic, social, health and education)' (ibid: 15). Equity is also one of the transcending themes. But all this falls short of LT. It remains a manifestation of normal professionalism and first thinking, albeit with an increasingly human face.

In contrast, sustainable livelihood thinking (SLT) goes further, and is a synthesis of all three ways of thinking - ET, DT and LT. From ET it takes sustainability. From DT it takes the need to enhance production. From LT it takes the primacy of poor people's livelihoods.

SLT looks intellectually exciting and practically promising. Strategies might seek various sequences of change. One of the most important might be:



In this particular model, a vicious downward spiral, as say in the Sahel, has people exploiting an environment which becomes

less productive and in turn diminishes their livelihoods. A solution is sought not through conservation but through livelihood-intensive development which has a positive impact on livelihoods which, in turn, later become sustainable. Short-term improvements in living create conditions for later livelihood-intensive human use of the environment which is sustainable.

SLT has analytical and practical implications. Some of them can be sketched but they deserve further explanation and development.

Some Analytical and Practical Implications

SLT has many analytical and practical implications. A simple preliminary listing is no substitute for fuller working out, but can at least make a start.

i) sustainable livelihood-intensity (SL-intensity)

SL-intensity is the key criterion in searching for and appraising actions concerned with environment and development. This selectively subsumes and amalgamates the criteria of ET (sustainability), DT (productivity), and LT (immediate satisfaction of needs and low risks).

ii) political economy and net SL effects

With SLT, who gains and who loses from development actions will be asked more than ever. The net SL effects of a project may often be low or negative while its benefits in conventional economic terms appear high. Exploitation by the rich, as with much current deforestation in developing countries, has low or negative net SL effects. Transnational corporations and logging contractors should be evaluated for the net SL effects of their activities.

iii) reserves and buffers

Livelihoods, by including security against becoming poorer, require assets as buffers against contingencies. The 'flow' approaches of normal (e.g. the Integrated Rural Development Programme in India) anti-poverty programmes does not include this. Reduced vulnerability and ability to withstand shocks are an important part of an adequate, secure and decent livelihood. Once buffers become a priority, the ownership of trees by poor people is seen as one big opportunity for SL-intensive programmes.

iv) energy and sustainable livelihoods

The energy crisis has been perceived as a problem for the rich and the urban rather than as an opportunity for the poor and the rural. But growing, harvesting and selling energy can be highly SL-intensive and represents a chance for sustainable livelihoods for many of the rural poor. This is, however, not a part of 'first' professional thinking.

v) hedgehogs, foxes and sustainable livelihoods

Poor people's strategies can be understood as those of hedgehogs, with one big idea, or of foxes, with many ideas (Chambers, 1983, 142-3). Hedgehogs are dependent on one source of livelihood, often exploitative, and often allowing them little bargaining power. Foxes, in contrast, have multiple sources of income and food as their strategy for survival. Many hedgehogs subsist in conditions which they and others consider intolerable. But many foxes can also be desperate at some times of the year. 'First' approaches to rural and agricultural development often seek to turn foxes into hedgehogs, with 'jobs' and 'employment'. SL approaches, however, would often seek to strengthen and stabilise foxes' current strategies. Moreover, the strengthening or introduction of one additional enterprise in a household which already has several can have high livelihood-intensity, by enabling a household to move up above a notional livelihood line.

iv) types of action

Types of action with high SL-intensity will vary by environment, for example as between core poverty - where poor people are found in accessible areas of intensive agriculture and dense population, and peripheral poverty - where poor people are found in areas which are remote and marginal. SL-intensive approaches to core poverty are likely to include homestead gardening, rights to trees, access to common and private property resources, labour-demanding farming systems to generate work and wages, and irrigation to provide productive work round more of the year. With peripheral poor, SL-intensive approaches are likely to concern marginal farming, crops and livestock, water harvesting, soil retention and fertility enhancement,

agroforestry, counterseasonal strategies, and forms of energy farming.

vii) agricultural research

SLT reorients much agricultural research. Sustainability forces a long-term view of the productivity of a farming system. Livelihood-intensity directs attention to labour requirements round the year and to wages. Much farming systems research treats labour requirements as a constraint, a cost. Livelihood-intensity puts it on the other side of the equation, as a potential benefit through productive and remunerative work.

A final question

Sustainable livelihoods may be a concept whose time has come. With its capacity to integrate and its reversals of thinking, it fits the concerns of the WCED. The question is whether the WCED can reorient its thinking to put sustainable livelihoods in the centre of the stage. This would be a revolutionary change, catching hold of the other end of the stick. It may be too difficult for the Commissioners. But I believe that they have the opportunity here to make a major, dramatic and decisive contribution to the poor, to development, and to the environment. To seize the opportunity entails a mix of moral unease, intellectual excitement, and practical thrusts based on new analysis and criteria.

Is the idea right?

Does it come too late?

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