Steve Bass, Senior Fellow, IIED

"Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract – sustainable development – and turn it into a daily reality for all the world's people."
Kofi Annan

SUMMARY

It is 20 years since the World Commission on Environment and Development — the Brundtland Commission — released its influential report on sustainable development. This is now the declared intention of most governments, many international organisations, and an increasing number of businesses and civil society groups. High profile 'intentions' have given rise to a bewildering array of sustainable development plans, tools and business models. But these have not yet triggered the pace, scale, scope and depth of change that is needed to make development sustainable. They leave the underlying causes of unsustainable development largely undisturbed. They include few means for anticipating non-linear changes – from climate change to economic cycles – and for building resilience to them. Consequently, most environmental and welfare measures continue to decline in almost all countries. Much energy has been spent crafting the sustainable development 'toolkit'. But that energy has been channelled largely through a narrow set of international processes and 'elite' national actors. The results are not yet integral to the machinery of government or business, or people's daily lives. This paper calls for energies to be directed in new ways, constructing a truly global endeavour informed by diverse local actors' evidence of 'what works', and focusing more keenly on long-term futures. The key drivers and challenges of a 'new era in sustainable development' are suggested, to elicit ideas and leadership from a richer vein of experience than has been embraced by the formal international endeavours to date. This paper is the first in a series on the sustainable development futures that face key sectors and stakeholder groups.

KEY MESSAGES

- The concept of 'sustainable development' has been widely endorsed over the past two decades, yet development remains far from sustainable.

- There are many 'top-down' policies, plans and tools for sustainable development. Only some of them are effective. They do not yet work as a set for changing institutions and behaviours at a fast enough pace and big enough scale.

- In contrast, many traditional, local and non-Western approaches could hold the key to achieving sustainable development on the ground, but most are unexplored.

- A re-energised 'new era' in sustainable development will be informed by many such local inputs, but it will also be globally constructed, creating shared public goods.

- It will be robust to powerful drivers that have emerged, some entrenching the root causes of unsustainability, but others offering new opportunities to tackle them.

- Key injustices and environmental 'tipping points' are likely to dominate the future sustainable development agenda.

What means exist for achieving sustainable development?

IIED is closely linked with the genesis and faltering implementation of the sustainable development idea. Its founder Barbara Ward used her 1972 book 'Only One Earth' and her lobbying of globally influential figures to promote sustainable development as a way to meet growing human needs without exceeding the finite limits of Earth's ecosystems.

But it was the 1987 Brundtland Commission that introduced sustainable development into the political mainstream, as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Global summits in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and Johannesburg in 2002 led to multiple governmental commitments on sustainable development, and helped to extend the concept's reach into the worlds of business, local government and civil society.

All of this international summitry has driven the development of an impressive sustainable development 'toolkit', nine key components of which are listed below.

1. **The 'three pillars' concept of integrating environmental, economic, and social objectives.** This idea has been adopted by many governments in their sustainability appraisal of new policies, and businesses in 'triple bottom line' planning. The public is increasingly aware of how the issues are interconnected e.g. 'sustainable consumption'.

2. **Legal principles.** Among the more impressive developments is the articulation and use of legal principles such as 'polluter pays', precaution and prior informed consent to balance the three pillars. Brundtland's report identified 22 such principles. Many are now widely used in multilateral environmental agreements and national laws. Along with the three pillars concept, they offer an international *lingua franca* for sustainable development.

3. **International agreements.** The Rio Declaration expresses global aspirations, while the three UN conventions on biodiversity, desertification, and climate change offer shared objectives for global public goods – even if they lack adequate teeth to be effective.

4. **Many plans and strategies.** International plans such as Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation were vague, as they had to accommodate various national positions. But they have inspired progressive responses from many governments. There are many national sustainable development strategies, and sustainability components in development plans, but these tend to be idealistic. They lack clear priorities, and have little influence on budgeting, investment and public administration.

5. **Political fora and councils.** From the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, through national councils for sustainable development, to local or sectoral initiatives, these serve mainly to identify and debate issues. Few have high status, or are adequately linked to the key processes of legislation and government.

6. **Tools for sustainability assessment, and for market, project and fiscal intervention.** There has been considerable innovation in information, analytical, planning, management and deliberative tools – particularly for internalising environmental issues and for enabling stakeholders to express views. But approaches that enable the machinery of government and business to routinely address all three pillars of sustainable development, and especially to set priorities, are in short supply.

7. **Voluntary codes and standards.** Many resource-intensive sectors – notably food, forestry, energy and latterly mining – have been driven to develop these codes for varied reasons of reputation, cost, and resource security. So far, they have tended to mark out existing good players rather than transform whole sectors.

8. **'Triad' partnerships.** After initial excessive faith that governments would lead the way to sustainable development, the notion of the 'sustainable development triad' of government, civil society, and business actors has taken root. Some partnerships have led to 'soft policy' change in several sectors; e.g. the Forest and Marine Stewardship Councils were deliberately articulated around sustainable development principles.

9. **Considerable debate and research.** The discourse has been wide, reflecting many academic and professional perspectives – from the technical (rooted in ecology, economics and sociology), to the applied (management and planning) and the political (assertions and criticism of values and structures). This pluralistic approach is critical. Whilst strides have been made in multi-stakeholder debate and policy processes, setting impressive precedents, we do not yet have truly integrated research approaches – 'sustainability science' for today's complex problems.

These nine components are very much the product of the formal sustainable development 'industry', which is based largely in the West and a few international institutions. However, the components rarely appear as a complete, coherent set, and are not deeply rooted in the workings of nations or organisations. They also lack clear values and norms connected to basic ideas that matter to people, such as the 'quality of life'. Smaller and poorer countries, communities and businesses have not been able to contribute to, access, or use many of these components, which therefore remain on the fringe for the very people and places that most need sustainable development. Finally, they offer inadequate equipment to anticipate and develop resilience to climate change and other future systemic changes. Clearly, at very least a 'tenth component' – if not an alternative list – is needed for a new era in sustainable development, as we shall explore later.

So has development become more sustainable?

This paper is not the place for a full 'report card' on sustainable development since Brundtland. But we can make three major observations: first, the pace, scale and depth of progress towards sustainable development has been inadequate; second, the root causes of unsustainability remain firmly in place even if some symptoms have been tackled; and third, most people do not yet 'feel the burn' to act, whether in government, business or as individuals.

In 2005, three landmark reports commissioned by the UN emphasised the scale of the problem. The Millennium Project confirmed that progress in reducing poverty was too slow. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment concluded that 16 out of 25 services that ecosystems provide to humanity were being critically degraded. And the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change clearly demonstrated one major impact of unsustainable development paths. The fact that these reports were not treated together is itself a sign that an integrated, sustainable-development approach is not being pursued globally. Thus the underlying causes of unsustainable development remain – in brief:

- Economic growth is considered an inviolable principle, rather than people's rights and welfare, or environmental processes and thresholds;
- Environmental benefits and costs are externalised;
- Poor people are marginalised, and inequities entrenched;
- Governance regimes are not designed to internalise environmental factors, to iron out social inequities, or to develop better economic models;
- Therefore unsustainable behaviour has not been substantially challenged.

There are three paradoxes here. First, the economic paradigm that has caused poverty and environmental problems to persist is the very thing that we are relying on to solve those problems. Second, this unsatisfactory state of affairs co-exists with a policy climate that espouses sustainable development. Third, action is being neglected just when it is most urgently needed: sustainable development remains at best a 'virtual' world, a planners' dream.

Why is this? If pushed, it is not very difficult for any government, company or individual to define what they are doing as 'sustainable' using the current vague terms associated with the concept: they have considered the 'three pillars' and balanced them in a way that makes apparent good sense, selecting the boundaries of analysis (global or local, short or long term) so as

to avoid the need to make any difficult trade-offs. Environmental interests are guilty of this, too. Many conservation organisations are still unwilling to address trade-off questions such as 'how much biodiversity is really needed?'

The concept of sustainable development has caught on quickly in recent years, especially in larger corporations. Such a wide adoption contrasts sharply with the continuing lack of meaningful targets, action and accountability associated with it. Thus what was once seen as revolutionary is now just as likely to be seen as regressive. It has become neglected.

Indeed, the sustainable development 'toolkit' has barely influenced the recent raft of debates, policies and action relating to two major global issues that demand sustainable solutions – climate change and poverty elimination. This is a real problem. On the one hand, this presents risks e.g. that poverty reduction will be at substantial environmental cost, or that climate change mitigation will lead to economic stagnation. On the other hand, those promoting sustainable development can learn from the tactics that poverty and climate change initiatives have used to achieve such high political, business and public profiles. In both, a clear focus on three things – human values, economics and drivers of future change – has helped to give these agendas traction beyond narrow 'climate' or 'poverty' communities.

What emerging trends challenge our current approach to sustainable development?

Powerful drivers of change that have been emerging over the past 20 years may further entrench the root causes of unsustainability or offer real opportunities to address them:

- **The rapid emergence of the 'BRICS' (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, etc) countries as major economic powers** – and potentially also as the new 'gatekeepers' of sustainability. With enormous reach as both producers and consumers, they could either establish sustainable paths or exacerbate asset-stripping approaches and inequities.
- **The shift from rural to urban settlement and investment,** and consequent changes in demands and scarcities, as well as in dominant value systems. How urban governments are organised, and how they work with stakeholders, will be significant in shaping debates, rules and investments for sustainable development.
- **Globalisation's dramatic reshaping of economies,** whether based on subsidised capital for rapid investment as in China, or on the supply of under-priced raw materials as in Africa. The democratic governance of consumerist societies is increasingly 'taking from the future' rather than creating resilience for the future. We need positive visions of, for example, a sustainable Chinese trade strategy or a sustainable African economy.
- **The increased frequency and severity of non-linear events.** This trend is already evident in climate systems and some ecosystems, with increased floods, droughts and storms. Other potential risks, often linked to globalisation, include global disease epidemics and economic collapse. The ticking clocks or sudden shocks associated with such events may spur practical action.
- **The multiplication of ways for communities of interest to interact.** Globalisation and the internet open up many possibilities to redirect sustainable development efforts through trade, learning, lobbying, communication and coalitions for action.

- **The dramatic improvements in surveillance, mapping and information technology.** These offer efficient, effective and potentially highly transparent means to clarify just what is going on with resource use and abuse, and how this correlates spatially with other problems.
- **The increasing risk of clashes between 'haves' and 'have-nots'.** The possibility that some people are able to adopt what today are considered to be 'sustainable lifestyles', and others are not, will threaten many people's current ideas of sustainable development. It will also open the debate up to key discussions on security and society.
- **Decreasing public appetite for 'big ideas'.** The end of the Cold War and the emergence of various forms of terrorism and fundamentalism have limited the political and public attractiveness of concepts unless they can be brought home and given a human face. This presents a big challenge where sustainable development is still seen as an external, distant aspiration.
- **The erosion of multilateralism** by powerful unilateralists, and the fragile path towards improving multilateralism being trod by others. Sustainable development offers an approach that values global public goods and demands an equitable multilateral regime. UN reform offers one opportunity for sustainable development to be constructed globally as a common, unifying goal.

Where should we focus our energies now?

The table overleaf contrasts efforts over the past 20 years with the challenges to come. By its nature, sustainable development is a process, whose different attributes need to be emphasised at different stages. *Looked at globally and over 20 years, the process to date has been characterised by top-down commitments, plans and tools* – the 9-part sustainable-development 'toolkit' identified above. The number of commitments, and of engaged countries and companies, has perhaps been more impressive than the depth of each commitment or the pace and scale of consequent action.

Efforts over the next 20 years should now be directed at the entrenched structural problems that distort both developmental and environmental prospects – focusing on key injustices and environmental tipping points, notably climate change. They will have to get to grips with fast-changing dynamics, and anticipate futures more keenly. Systems that link information on human and ecosystem well-being will be a key part of this. They will focus on making hard decisions on real priorities – and less on refining the grand plans of the past, with their overly comprehensive agendas and long wish-lists of win-wins (the 'cop-out' way to keep everyone on board). Ways of 'wiring together' public administrations to support sustainable development will be a key part of this.

These efforts require greater engagement with local, traditional and non-Western actors, with poor people and environmentally dependent stakeholders – as well as with diverse scientific traditions. Many local institutions have evolved precisely to integrate changing social, environmental and economic objectives in people's daily lives, to make clear trade-offs where integration is not possible, and to foster equity within and between generations – in other words, sustainable development. This contrasts with governments, corporations and even many interest groups, which tend to treat issues such as poverty and environment separately. We need to bring on board discourses and traditions that have been missing from the sustainable development debate, asking 'what is desirable to improve the

quality of life?' and 'what has already improved this, from whatever source?' We have less need to ask 'what is the impact of formal policies to date?' – a question that will dominate this year's 20th anniversary of the Brundtland Commission. We have more need to ask 'What changes lie ahead, and how can we be resilient to them?' – a question that also demands greater engagement with scientists. In the past 20 years, scientists have proven to be key in identifying and exploring issues such as ozone layer depletion and acid rain. For the next 20 years, nothing less than a joint scientific endeavour – 'sustainability science' – will be required to investigate complex syndromes, such as climate change and biodiversity, that shape our future wellbeing.

The 'stretch' challenges in the table below will be neither easily raised in political debate nor easily accomplished. In presenting the table, we do not wish to give the impression that all sustainable development work to date is necessarily imposed or ineffective. Nor do we imply that it has achieved its objective. Rather, we wish to draw attention to the upcoming and contrasting challenges that are also required as key steps in the process, and to encourage engagement by a wide variety of groups in creating an agenda for the next twenty years – a 'new era in sustainable development'. **By the end of 2007, IIED aims to present such an agenda, and welcomes readers' ideas at new-era@iied.org.**

"Sustainable development is the only intellectually coherent, sufficiently inclusive, potentially mind-changing concept that gets even half-way close to capturing the true nature and urgency of the challenge that now confronts the world. There really is no alternative." - Jonathan Porritt, chair of the UK Sustainable Development Commission.

THE FIRST ERA – EFFORTS FROM 'BRUNDTLAND' 1987 TO DATE	A NEW ERA – 'STRETCH' CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT 20 YEARS
SUMMARY: **Top-down commitments, 'wish-list' plans and tools – but inadequate pace, scale and scope of change.** An emphasis on integrated processes – a great administrative puzzle – has challenged many stakeholders, but not yet changed them. For most, sustainable development is an external or 'add-on' idea with no compelling drivers.	**SUMMARY:** **A shared emphasis on social justice and ecological principles changes governance and behaviour.** A focus on developing integrated systems and capacities, from UN to local levels, to internalise sustainable development. Tougher decisions are made to tackle underlying causes of unsustainability, and to improve resilience to increasing pressures.
Conceptual approach – offering principles and 'best practices' rooted in natural science and economics	**Operational approach –** based on 'options that work' to improve both human and ecosystem well-being
Policy change – policy research targets governments and decision makers' plans but does not yet change them	**Political change –** engaging electorates in demanding and embracing sustainability in daily lives and jobs
Generic case for sustainable development – but the implications are not clear in specific cases	**Specific case –** clarity about what needs doing first/most, and with what benefits/costs
Environment policy arena – an emphasis which insulates other policy domains from the need for real change	**Mainstream agenda –** goals are also pursued in the major domains of trade, security, industry and social affairs
Driven by elite – a 'sustainable development community' dominated by narrow (Western, environmental) initiatives	**Diverse and bottom-up drivers –** poor people, social movements and other traditions engage
Organised by governments – but politicians and civil servants have little leverage on 'implementation'	**Globally constructed –** sustainable development mandate is created and shared through the UN and diverse coalitions
'Horizontal' consultation – to unprecedented degrees in sustainable development plans, if not in action	**'Vertical' participation, too –** learning from many people, and encouraging/engaging them in shaping solutions
Scattered pilot projects – a few subsidised operational trials in exceptional, 'safe' conditions	**Mainstream institutional change –** scale-up and normalisation of rules, accountability and incentives
Focus on easy 'win-wins' – some 'low hanging fruit' (cost-savings, etc)	**Tackle underlying causes –** establish priorities and trade-offs, and make hard choices
Marginal private sector changes – 'voluntary' approach increases business comfort but also cooption	**Private sector structural changes –** responding to fair legislation and developing SD business plans
Technology-led progress – on single issues, notably pollution and ozone layer depletion	**Governance-led progress –** on complex syndromes, notably climate change, poverty and inequitable trade
Uncertainty and poor information – with disciplinary separation, all constrain decision-making	**Future-searching –** plus knowledge management and systematic monitoring, improves decisions and resilience
Economic goals – set the limits for sustainable development in practice, scarcities being managed through the market	**Social justice and environmental thresholds –** a new focus on these boundaries enables a paradigm change