

Sustainable Development: Comparative Understandings and Responses

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The term “sustainable development” has achieved a notable prominence in discussions about environmental policy since the mid-1980s. Following its central role in the conclusions of the Brundtland Commission (1984–1987), it appeared with increasing frequency in academic studies and in government reports, initially in relation to the environmental problems of less developed countries, but subsequently in relation also to those of industrialized countries. So well used did it become that within a matter of years there were concerns that it had become a cliché.¹ This is curious, because despite the extensive literature on the subject, and the debate about the role that the concept plays—or should play—in public policy, there is almost no agreement on what “sustainable development” means. There have been lengthy debates about its political, economic, and social dimensions, but absent from those debates has been much discussion about how the concept can be turned into practical policy change, or how it can be measured. Some even doubt that it is a practical goal, charging that sustainable development is an oxymoron.²

This chapter examines the impact of the idea of sustainable development on environmental policies in the United States and the European Union. We do not try to add to the discussion about the meaning of sustainable development, but instead set out to show how the concept of sustainable development evolved, and to examine its impact upon thinking on both sides of the Atlantic. We conclude that while the principles of sustainable development can be traced back to nineteenth-century ideas about nature conservation and forest management on both sides of the Atlantic, the concept has more recently achieved greater prominence in policy discussions in the European Union. At the same time,

however, we argue that while there has been much discussion about the need to incorporate the principles of sustainable development into policy on both sides of the Atlantic, there has so far been little practical change in policy.

After examining the record in the European Union and the United States, the chapter ends with a discussion about the difficulties inherent in incorporating sustainable development principles into policy. These include questions about the appropriate level at which the principles should be implemented, debates about the extent of environmental problems and thus about the unsustainability of existing policies and norms, and questions about the extent to which sustainability can be achieved in two regions of the world whose economies are so heavily driven by consumption.

Understanding Sustainable Development

As a concept, sustainable development is nothing new. It has become conventional in the literature on sustainable development to suggest that it was first introduced into the environmental debate in 1987, with the final report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission).³ The occasional author might point out that it was used as early as 1980 by selected governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and by specialized agencies in the United Nations. Very few note that it is in fact much older, and that—far from introducing a new idea—the Brundtland Commission was merely reviving a concept that had been a part of discussions about how to respond to environmental problems for the better part of a century.

Most discussions about sustainable development use as their benchmark the definition provided by the Brundtland Commission: development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁴ There has been much analysis in the literature about just what this means.⁵ The common conclusion is that there is no simple answer, nor are there even straightforward answers to the meanings of the words “sustainable” or “development.” Discussions about sustainable development often include such terms as “vague” and “ambiguous.”

Modern discussions about sustainable development trace their roots back to the debate about conservation that accompanied plans for the creation of the United Nations and its specialized agencies after World War II. The rational management of resources was a central element, for example, in the work of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), whose constitution listed “the conservation of natural resources” as one of the means of achieving the organization’s goal of global food security. In 1949, the UN hosted an international conference at Lake Success, New York, which explored the theme of the “continuous development and widespread application of the techniques of resource conservation and utilization.”⁶

In the late 1960s the issue of conservation—by then more commonly known as sustainable development—was revisited during preparations for the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm. While much of the political debate about environmental issues in the 1960s had been driven by the priorities of industrialized countries (notably their concerns about pollution), preparations for Stockholm were heavily influenced by the priorities of developing countries, which were concerned that environmental regulation might retard their economic growth. The list of principles agreed upon at Stockholm included the arguments that natural resources should be conserved, the earth’s capacity to produce renewable resources should be maintained, development and environmental concerns should be combined, and poorer states should be given every incentive possible to promote rational environmental management.⁷

Meetings and studies after Stockholm sponsored by the UN subjected these ideas to further analysis. A 1973 FAO-sponsored report argued that the definition of conservation as “the rational use of the earth’s resources to achieve the highest quality of living for mankind” could be extended to define the goals of economic development.⁸ The term “sustainable development” was used in discussions at a 1974 UN-sponsored conference in Cocoyoc, Mexico, which emphasized the importance of implementing policies aimed at satisfying the basic needs of the world’s poor while ensuring adequate conservation of resources and protection of the environment. At the same time, the newly created United Nations

Environment Program (UNEP) was talking about the role of “ecodevelopment,” defined as development that gave attention “to the adequate and rational use of natural resources, and to applications of technological styles.”⁹

In the late 1970s a number of international environmental non-governmental organizations—notably the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN)—worked with several UN specialized agencies to develop the World Conservation Strategy, published in 1980. Designed to strengthen efforts to protect nature and natural resources, the strategy noted the importance of advancing “the achievement of sustainable development through the conservation of living resources.” Conservation was defined as “the management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.”¹⁰ The Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable development was to sound very similar.

In 1983, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the creation of a commission charged with investigating the relationship between development and the environment. The following year the World Commission on Environment and Development was created under the chairmanship of former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. Its final report was published in 1987, and argued that environment and development were inextricably linked, that the goals of policy-making institutions were too focused on increasing output rather than sustaining environmental resource capital, and that the environmental dimensions of policy should be considered at the same time as economic, energy, agricultural, and other dimensions.¹¹ Sustainable development, which until that time had been the subject of discussion only by a relatively small circle of environmental activists and NGOs, together with selected UN specialized agencies, was brought to the attention of a broader constituency.

Its new role in the environmental debate was reflected in the title of the next big global summit on the environment, the UN Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. One of the outcomes of Rio was the publication of Agenda 21, a lengthy plan

of action for implementing the conclusions of the conference, in which sustainable development featured prominently. Rio also resulted in the creation in December 1992 of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), a UN body whose task was to periodically bring together government representatives and to monitor progress on the implementation of the principles in Agenda 21, and on the development of national sustainability plans, which were to be completed by 2002.

The Earth Council was subsequently established with headquarters in San Jose, Costa Rica, to promote and monitor the work of national councils for sustainable development (NCSDs), and to sponsor contacts between these national councils and the CSD. By 2002, the list of NCSDs and of national sustainable development strategies was still modest—no more than two dozen countries had founded councils or drafted strategies, the majority of them developing countries.¹² The CSD was meanwhile organizing another high-visibility international conference, the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August–September 2002. One of its tasks was to review progress on the implementation of Agenda 21 and on the development of national sustainable development strategies.

The European Response

European Union initiatives in the field of environmental protection began after 1972, when the member states agreed to take collective action on the environment. There was no “constitutional” basis for this, because there was no explicit reference to the environment in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which founded the European Economic Community. It was only with the changes made by the 1987 Single European Act (SEA) that a clear base for environmental policy was provided in Community law.

Although the SEA did not use the phrase “sustainable development,” it defined one of the Community’s environmental objectives as the “prudent and rational utilization of natural resources.” The SEA stated that environmental policy should be guided by the principles of prevention and of sectoral policy integration (that is, environmental protection requirements should be a component of other policies). Further amendments made by the 1992 Maastricht Treaty on European Union called

explicitly for “sustainable and non-inflationary growth respecting the environment.”

Semantic confusion caused by the term “sustainable growth” was addressed by the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, which called for “balanced and sustainable development of economic activities,” and adopted sectoral policy integration as a key means to achieve sustainable development. More important, the Treaty of Amsterdam made sustainable development one of the objectives of the Community; thus it is now applicable to the general activities of the EU, not just its activities in the sphere of the environment. As a result of the amendments brought by the SEA, Maastricht, and Amsterdam, it has been argued that “there is probably no single government or other association of States with such a strong ‘constitutional’ commitment to sustainable development.”¹³

The EU’s commitment to the promotion of sustainable development is also driven by a sense of moral obligation. As the European Commission has argued:

As Europeans and as part of some of the wealthiest societies in the world, we are very conscious of our role and responsibilities. . . . Along with other developed countries, we are major contributors to global environmental problems such as greenhouse gas emissions and we consume a major, and some would argue an unfair, share of the planet’s renewable and non-renewable resources.¹⁴

For the commission, playing a leadership role in international efforts to promote sustainable development is one way of meeting its moral obligations.¹⁵ The aim is to have sustainable development accepted as a guiding principle or norm of international politics.¹⁶ Getting its own house in order by taking steps to change Europe’s unsustainable patterns of production and consumption is seen as an important first step in bringing that leadership role to fruition.¹⁷

Environmental policy in the EU is largely framed by environmental action programs (EAPs), of which there have been six to date. Although the first four EAPs did not have sustainable development as their explicit focus, they were nevertheless influential:

- The First EAP (1973–1976) acknowledged that economic growth was not an end in itself, but a means of obtaining a more environmentally sustainable and equitable form of social development.¹⁸

- The Second EAP (1977–1981) referred to the physical limits on material growth stemming from natural resource limitations, stressed that the “harmonious development of economic activities and continuous and balanced expansion” of the Community could not be achieved without environmental protection, and affirmed that “economic growth should not be viewed solely in its quantitative aspects.”¹⁹

- The Third EAP (1982–1986) emphasized the importance of environmental policy as an element in the Community’s industrial strategy, not least because it could stimulate technological innovation. Environmental protection has since been seen as having the potential to enhance the competitiveness of the EU’s economy.²⁰ The limits to growth argument was rejected in favor of a belief in continued economic growth based on environmental protection. As the commission later stated: “the main message is that we need to change growth, not limit growth.”²¹

- The Fourth EAP (1987–1992) emphasized that “ecological modernization” could offer competitive advantage to European industry. Ecologically modernized industry treats the environment not as a free resource, but as a factor of production that has to be priced. In the short term, this results in ecoefficient businesses (those that use fewer natural resource inputs for a given level of economic outputs or value added). In the long term, ecological modernization can protect the resource base upon which further economic development depends, and environmental protection can stimulate technological innovation, which can open up or expand markets. This thinking was critically important in facilitating the acceptance of sustainable development as a norm of EU policy.

A change of emphasis came with the Fifth EAP (1993–2000), which made the first explicit policy commitment to the promotion of sustainable development, defined as “continued economic and social development without detriment to the environment and natural resources, on the quality of which continued human activity and further development depend.”²² It also called for the use of a wide range of policy instruments, including fiscal and voluntary measures to improve implementation.

Among the many reviews of the Fifth EAP, the commission’s own *Global Assessment* found that while it “set out an ambitious vision” for

sustainable development, progress had been limited. Sectoral policy integration remained weak and "shared responsibility" (involving different levels of government) still needed to take more widespread hold. More seriously, it found that there had been no reversal in economic and social trends harmful to the environment, particularly in relation to transport, consumer goods, and tourism. It concluded, "unless more fundamental changes are made, the prospects of promoting sustainable development remain poor."²³

The Sixth EAP (2001–2010) attempts to address some of these shortcomings. It highlights climate change, overuse of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, and accumulation of persistent toxic chemicals in the environment as central issues. It makes sectoral policy integration one of five key "thematic strategies," alongside more effective policy implementation, enhanced citizen and business engagement, and developing a more environmentally conscious attitude to land use.

Concerns about the lack of progress also led to the launch in 1998 of the Cardiff Process.²⁴ Named after the location of the June 1998 European Council meeting, its aim is to promote sustainable development through a focus on sector-specific integration strategies, identification of sustainability indicators, and construction of monitoring mechanisms. It is evidence of recognition that environmental law is not enough to promote sustainable development, especially when developments in areas that create environmental pressures, such as transport, energy, or agriculture, often outweigh the benefits of new regulations.

Unfortunately, there has been a great deal of unevenness in the response of the EU councils to the Cardiff Process, with the Agriculture Directorate-General (DG) having made the most progress, and the Internal Market DG among the least.²⁵ Moreover, member states with less progressive environmental policies still continue to halt progress toward sustainable development.

The difficulties the EU faces in trying to realize its commitment to sectoral policy integration can be seen more clearly by examining some key policy areas:

- EU transport policy has long been a key source of environmental stress, particularly with the large-scale infrastructure projects that have come

as part of the European single market program. The integration of environmental considerations into these projects has been slow; "sustainable transport" remains poorly conceptualized in policy terms; and long-term targets have not been developed.²⁶ A lack of commitment in many member states also remains a problem; this is especially true in peripheral areas and in east and central European states that have applied for EU membership, where road building represents a strategic response to the competitive challenges posed by the completion of the European single market.

- The energy sector has made some progress in integrating environmental considerations into policy. The need to meet the obligations of international agreements on global warming has resulted in institutional capacity building; there is an EU-level Energy Framework Program (1998–2002), and there are programs to promote renewable energy (Altener) and energy efficiency (SAVE). However, concerns about security of supply and ensuring that energy prices do not threaten European competitiveness take priority over environmental considerations. Furthermore, the primary responsibility for energy policy remains with the member states.

- The goals of agricultural policy have long been contrary to the goals of sustainable development, mainly because the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has promoted intensive agriculture, resulting in the pollution of the aquatic environment, altered natural habitats, and reduced biodiversity. Fortunately, recent reforms of CAP provided an opening through which environmental considerations could begin to be integrated into agricultural policy.²⁷ For example, direct agricultural aid payments to farmers are now linked to environmental criteria, and payments are available for farmers who, on a voluntary and contractual basis, protect the environment and maintain the countryside. Environmental considerations have also been attached to the EU's structural funds (which support economic and social development, particularly in peripheral and rural areas), although they still cause environmental problems by focusing on the funding of infrastructure development.

However, the promotion of sustainable agriculture remains hampered by six main problems:

- Member states have much discretion over how to meet their obligation to undertake environmental measures in the agricultural sector, and the level of commitment varies from one state to another.
- The agricultural sector is plagued by poor compliance with environmental legislation.
- Eastern enlargement threatens to cause new problems because it will bring states with less progressive environmental policies into the EU, several of which have given agricultural modernization priority over environmental protection.
- While the EU hopes that its biodiversity strategy will promote sustainable agriculture,²⁸ there are continuing problems with the implementation of key pieces of the law on biodiversity.
- In the industrial sector, many large European companies have already reaped the rewards of ecoefficiency,²⁹ and an integrated product policy is developing, while the commission increasingly makes use of the principle of shared responsibility in its dealings with industry. However, there are serious weaknesses in efforts to promote sustainable development, including those within the strategy on policy integration. Meanwhile, small, medium, and domestically oriented businesses have made little or no commitment to the promotion of sustainable development.³⁰
- The EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) was designed to resolve conflicts among member states over territorial fishing rights and to prevent overfishing. Annual quotas have been imposed on the take of Atlantic and North Sea fish, and there are regulations on fishing areas and equipment, including limits on the mesh size of fishing nets and on the size of fish caught. New ways in which a balance can be found between fishing activity and stock levels are being explored,³¹ and new efforts are being made to integrate wider nature conservation objectives into the CFP.³² However, most CFP reforms have been driven by the fishing crisis caused by overexploitation. Much still needs to be done to support the conservation and sustainable use of commercial stocks and marine ecosystems, especially since efforts to date have not halted the decline in fish stocks.

As this review shows, when analysis moves from exploration of the European Union's constitutional and declaratory commitments to its

implementation efforts, especially at the sectoral level, a different, and altogether more pessimistic picture emerges of the promotion of sustainable development in the EU. The planned expansion of the EU eastward could see this capability–expectation gap,³³ a gap between policy outcome and declaratory intent, grow ever wider.

Enlargement through the addition of eastern states, the first phase of which is expected to take place in May 2004, will see several former communist-bloc countries become member states of the EU. Unfortunately, official Community discussions about the institutional and policy reforms that the EU needs to make in preparation for its unprecedented expansion have so far failed to address the thorny issue of how enlargement can be reconciled with the commitment to sustainable development. That an enlarged Europe will be a greener Europe is far from certain. With enlargement, Europe's environmental future will be in the hands of a European Union that has accepted into its fold several environmentally laggard states that are bent on economic modernization and development. A predilection to sacrifice environmental protection to the goal of economic development already marks the countries of the region.³⁴

The rush to development—in part to meet the membership criteria laid down by the EU and, ironically, also partly funded by the Union—has already seen massive infrastructure development, rising consumerism, and a push to modernize agriculture. These threaten the rich biodiversity of the region and are giving rise to growing problems of consumer waste. With enlargement, the further danger is that through the exercise of their new voting rights in the council and driven by the centrality of their economic goals, the new member states will exert a downward pressure on European environmental policy. Here, we can justifiably be fearful that in the new European Union collectively, the implementation deficit that has long plagued the EU's commitment to the promotion of sustainable development will become all the more marked and all the more challenging to confront.

However, this is not to deny the importance of the EU's declaratory and legal commitments to the promotion of sustainable development. On the contrary, declaratory political statements are important because they oil the wheel of European integration politics. They help consolidate the

integration process by providing a basis upon which Europe is articulating the values that will shape its shared, environmental future.³⁵

More generally, ideas and values act as a vehicle through which the European Union, *as a group*, is defining its identity. As well as helping in the construction of the identity of the EU, values and norms help in legitimizing the integration project.³⁶ This need for legitimization stems from the fact that the EU is both an emerging and a hybrid entity, which is neither a state nor a nation, but a unique combination of supranational and international forms of governance. As such, the EU is forced to pay a great deal of attention to the identification and articulation of shared values and legitimizing principles. Such values and principles help in the mobilization of support for the integration project.³⁷ In the early days of the European Community, this mobilization was driven by elites. However, in the post-Maastricht Europe, mobilization of a wider support base is seen as increasingly important.

The idea of sustainable development has many of the key elements needed for it to act as a legitimizing, mobilizing value for the EU integration process. It conforms to deep-seated European social constructs. It is undeniable that the European integration project was founded on economic values, especially belief in the achievement of economic prosperity through the construction of a single, European, free market. However, it is also the case that the integration project has roots in a deep-seated belief in the ethos of collective societal responsibility for the welfare of the community as a whole.³⁸ This has allowed Europeans to see environmental protection as part of the protection of the common good. The promotion of sustainable development resonates with this belief and, more important, it provides a framework for the reconciliation of ecological, economic, and social goals. By combining the social and economic underpinnings of the integration project, the commitment to sustainable development allows the European integration project to be seen as part of the construction of a new European society, one that is based upon and develops shared, European values grounded in the idea of social responsibility.

Beyond the borders of the EU, the commitment to the promotion of sustainable development can also help to shape the EU's identity by singling it out as different from other actors. European Union norms,

including its constitutional principles, such as the principle of sustainable development, act as constitutive factors determining the international identity of the EU. This allows the EU to act as a normative power (as opposed to a military power) in international politics.³⁹ This marks a major difference with the United States.

Thus, while we may be sceptical about the implementation of the principle of sustainable development in the EU, the declaratory and constitutional commitments made by the EU to this principle are of deep and, we hope, lasting significance. The diffusion of this norm, not least through the conditionality clauses laid down for new applicant states in east and central Europe, offers one hope: that enlargement may diffuse the norm of sustainable development eastward. Here we would be foolish to ignore the power of ideas in the development of politics. To deny the importance of the EU's commitment to sustainable development is to see the European integration project only in terms of its structural, procedural, and material components. European integration is also a project based upon, but simultaneously rearticulating, shared European values. We can thus see the commitment to sustainable development as the Community's contribution to what Weiler calls "the flow of European intellectual history."⁴⁰ Until the time comes to write the history of twenty-first-century European ideas, we must wait to see how the EU has shaped the environmental politics and ethics of the new Europe. In waiting, and in knowing that the European integration process is also built upon the construction of new environmental values, we remain somewhat optimistic about the environmental future of the new Europe.

The American Response

The idea that exploitation should be more carefully managed began to enter policy thinking in the United States in the late nineteenth century, as the new western territories were being opened up to white settlement. The forester Gifford Pinchot, who was instrumental in the creation in 1905 of the US Forest Service, argued that environmental management should be driven by conservation, which he defined as "wise use" or the planned development of resources.⁴¹ Building on a tradition of

progressive, scientific agriculture that dated back to the eighteenth century,⁴² Pinchot argued that conservation should be based on three principles: development (using natural resources for the needs of the present generation), the prevention of waste, and the management of natural resources for the many rather than the few.⁴³

Conservationist ideas found support in President Theodore Roosevelt, who sought the counsel of Pinchot and made resource management a principle of federal policy. At the core of that policy was a belief in efficiency and the "scientific" management of natural resources. For example, sustained-yield forest management—by which the cutting of trees was balanced with growth to ensure a continuous supply of wood—was promoted by the US Forest Service. Meanwhile, water management was promoted by a short-lived Inland Waterways Commission, created in 1907. In the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt argued that professional resource management and efficiency should be a cornerstone of economic recovery following the Great Depression, and such objectives were at the core of several New Deal programs. For example, the Tennessee Valley Authority became the apogee of the belief that natural resources should be sustainably exploited for multiple purposes, and the Soil Conservation Service was created in 1935 to help farmers fight soil erosion.

Elements of the sustainable development rationale can also be found in approaches to the management of public land: nearly 650 million acres of land (covering about 29 percent of the land area of the United States) that are owned and managed by the federal government. The use of that land has been driven since 1960 by the Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act and other legislation that requires that public land be used for different purposes and in a sustainable manner. Multiple use is defined in Section 531 of the act as the management of natural resources so that they "will best meet the needs of the American people . . . and harmonious and coordinated management of the various resources . . . without impairment of the productivity of the land." Sustained yield is defined in the same section as "the achievement and maintenance in perpetuity of a high-level annual or regular periodic output of the various renewable resources of the national forests without impairment of the productivity of the land."

While particular environmental problems have been influenced by the principle of sustainable development, this principle has yet to be adopted as part of a generalized policy on the environment in the US. Even since Rio, sustainable development is a term that has been used only on the margins of the debates about environmental management. One of the first attempts to bring it into the mainstream was made by the National Commission on the Environment, a group that included former administrators of the US Environmental Protection Agency, and that issued a report in 1992 that argued that "US leadership should be based on the concept of sustainable development. By the close of the twentieth century, economic development and environmental protection must come together in a new synthesis . . . sustainable development can and should constitute a central guiding principle for national environmental and economic policymaking."⁴⁴

The following year the Council on Environmental Quality, a presidential advisory body, called for the establishment of a President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD). This was created in 1993 by the Clinton administration, and was charged with working to forge agreement among government (including seven cabinet-level government departments), business, industry, labor, NGOs, and private citizens, and to develop a sustainable development strategy based on that agreement. A preliminary report was duly published,⁴⁵ which included policy goals in ten areas, including health, nature, population, and education, and a set of recommendations for changes in government, business, and individual behavior. Multiple meetings were held, and the final report of the council⁴⁶ was published as the council was wound up in June 1999.

This final report is long on rhetoric and short on substance. It concluded "a sustainable United States will have a growing economy that provides equitable opportunities for satisfying livelihoods and a safe, healthy, high quality of life for current and future generations." The "national goals towards sustainable development" included a healthy environment, economic prosperity, justice for all, the conservation of nature, sustainable communities, civic engagement, and a leadership role for the US in the development and implementation of global sustainable development policies. These were all laudable goals, to be sure, but they have been among the goals of government for generations. Besides, who

would *not* be in favor of “a healthy US economy that grows sufficiently to create meaningful jobs, reduce poverty, and provide the opportunity for a high quality of life for all?”⁴⁷ The problem lies in finding the means to achieving the goal, and then making the necessary practical changes.

In its 1999–2000 report on progress in the development of national sustainable development strategies, the Earth Council noted that while the PCSD had a diverse and high-level membership, participation in its meetings had declined in its closing years, attendance by the seven cabinet secretaries was sporadic, the implementation of the council’s recommendations was not well tracked, and attempts to encourage Congress to implement the recommendations had been difficult. “Sustainable development is not yet a mainstream idea in the United States,” the Earth Council concluded. “A . . . critical issue is the difficulty in overcoming established patterns of activity, and . . . creating change. Without a crisis, it is difficult to motivate people to accept a new way of doing things.”⁴⁸

Symbolic of the difficulties was the approach adopted by two presidents to one of the more specific recommendations of the PCSD that dealt with climate change. The council suggested that climate protection policies should be “fundamentally linked” to any national agenda for economic growth, outlined an incentive-based program designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and suggested policies for the development and deployment of climate-friendly technologies. Yet little was done under the Clinton administration to address the problem of climate change; road traffic and gas consumption grew in tandem in the United States; and the Bush administration—within weeks of taking office—withdrawed the US from any agreement to meet the requirements of the Kyoto Protocol to the 1992 UN climate change convention.

While action at the federal level suggests that there is only marginal political interest in promoting sustainable development, there may be indications of more tangible changes at the local level. Indeed, one of the key recommendations of the PCSD was for the development of urban and rural strategies for sustainable communities. One of the proposals made by the PCSD was for the creation of regional councils, which were subsequently founded in the Pacific Northwest and in the San Francisco Bay area. However, its conclusion⁴⁹ that “sustainable and livable community concepts *have become mainstream*, and communities *all across*

the country are implementing innovative initiatives and projects” [emphasis added] is patently an exaggeration.

Mazmanian and Kraft argue that there has been a shift in the United States away from an era of environmental regulation to one in which a more diversified set of environmental polices have been adopted, based on the goals of achieving sustainability and making decisions increasingly at the local and regional levels.⁵⁰ They offer case studies of how local communities have experimented with innovative approaches such as market incentives, but it is questionable whether the cases are reflective of a broad-based trend in the United States toward the use of sustainable development principles. The authors admit that the cases are indicative only of what “could be” a transition toward sustainable communities, whose effects are difficult to predict.⁵¹

The US Department of Energy maintains a Center of Excellence for Sustainable Development, which provides information “on how your community can adopt sustainable development as a strategy for well-being.”⁵² The center maintains a list of “sustainable development” projects around the country, which include community recycling programs, attempts to encourage residential communities to become more sustainable, and the development of sustainability programs by whole cities and states. However, the reports of these projects are replete with terms such as “vision,” “objectives,” “heightening awareness,” and “aspire”—there are few examples of sustainability projects with a track record of measurable results.⁵³

Attempts to make sustainable development part of policy thinking in the United States are undermined by several substantial handicaps, related to the attitudes of government and corporations, and to individual consumer taste. Regulation and “big government” is anathema to US corporations, and the idea that limits should be placed on exploiting resources wins little corporate or public sympathy. The United States is a high-consumption society, in which there has long been an assumption that the exploitation of land and natural resources is central to the establishment of economic and personal independence. In a country where there is still considerable space, considerable untapped resources (including forests, coal, and minerals), and where vehicle ownership is regarded almost as a basic human right, the idea that the present generation should

curb its wants because of concern about future generations is a hard one to sell.

Conclusions

There is little doubt that the European Union is committed to the promotion of sustainable development. From earlier concern about resource management and ensuring that economic development resulted in an "improvement in the quality of life," EU environmental policy has become ever more deeply engaged in the promotion of sustainable development. This engagement is boosted by involvement in international environmental management regimes and by EU treaty obligations. The promotion of sustainable development is now an objective of the EU and, as such, it has become embedded in the EU integration process. Resonating as it does with deeper European social constructs, sustainable development now acts as a legitimizing and mobilizing value for the EU integration process. In addition, sustainable development has become a norm of EU policy, especially at the international level.

For the United States, sustainable development has long been an element in selected arenas of environmental policy, most notably in the management of national forests and public lands. Within the past 10 years, the United States has formed a blue ribbon commission to make recommendations on how sustainable development could be integrated into policy. It reached the same conclusions as the EU about the value of sustainable development, although the objectives it outlined were not formally adopted by the federal government. Sustainable development has not become an objective of national government in the same way as it has become an objective of collective European governance.

However, Mazmanian and Kraft note that "the ultimate test of sustainability will not be in its rhetoric but in real-world applications."⁵⁴ In reading the literature on sustainable development, and in studying the policies of the European Union and its member states, and of the United States, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that while there have been many words written and spoken in support of the general principle of sustainable development, and a strong legal, moral, and political commitment on the part of the EU, significant policy results are hard to find.

Take the case of the European Union. While economic growth has contributed to an improved quality of life, growing consumption has increased the use of natural resources and increased pressure on the environment. EU environmental policy has had some success in combating the effects of these pressures, for example, in relation to cleaner fuel or reducing and preventing industrial discharges. However, policy has not been able to keep pace with the increasing pressures from road transport, energy production and use, tourism, the production and consumption of consumer goods, and intensive agriculture. Growth in these areas has simply outweighed the improvements attained by better technology and stricter environmental controls.

This growth continues to threaten both the biodiversity and the health of Europe. The decoupling of growth from resource consumption, polluting emissions, and waste generation has not been achieved, and only faltering steps have as yet been made toward reducing material consumption. The policy priorities of the EU, including the commitment to intensive agriculture, ensuring cohesion, completion of the single market, and preparation for eastern enlargement have been major contributory factors to the intensification of pressure on Europe's environment. As a result, the EU integration process continues to result in the encouragement, stimulation, and funding of obstacles to sustainable development.

Much the same can be said for the United States, only more so. The overall quality of life for most Americans has improved dramatically since World War II, and part of the improvement has come from a tightening of regulations on air and water quality. However, Americans face the same pressures as Europeans from an expansion in road transport, energy consumption, the production and consumption of consumer goods, and intensive agriculture. More worryingly, the concept of sustainable development is not understood or discussed in the hallways of federal or state government to the extent that it is among national leaders and bureaucrats in the EU. On both sides of the Atlantic, much remains to be done to translate declaratory and legal obligations into concrete output that actually protects the environment. Regardless of the varying degrees to which Europeans and the Americans have explored the nature of sustainable development, its practical implementation faces a number of substantial hurdles.

First, in order for planners and policymakers to understand whether development is sustainable, the political, economic, social, and scientific dimensions of that development must be understood, and built into the actions taken by governments. However, there is little political agreement on the existence of many of the most critical environmental problems. A good case in point is the greater reluctance of American policymakers, relative to their European counterparts, to accept that human behavior is having a detrimental impact on the Earth's climate. Even where there is such agreement, there are differences of opinion about the most effective responses to such problems. Similarly, the economics of environmental management are often poorly understood, most environmental problems being too complex to lend themselves to conventional cost-benefit analysis. The social dimension raises troubling questions about how to promote environmental justice (ensuring that the poor or minorities are not disproportionately exposed to environmental risk) and how to ensure that the imposition of new patterns of production and consumption will not lead to a loss of jobs or the flight of polluting industries to regions with looser regulations. Finally, the science of many environmental problems is either not fully understood, or is denied by policymakers or industrialists opposed to change.

Second, there are questions about the appropriate level at which the principles of sustainable development should be implemented. The Europeans have made it a goal of macrolevel regional integration, but have so far held member states to broad principles. There is a strong case to be made for national or regional policies, and indeed several EU member states have their own national plans and policies. However, when it comes to practical implementation of those policies, the US model of focusing on the local level—counties, cities, and neighborhoods—may offer the best chances of success. However, microlevel policy initiatives of this kind demand changes in the lifestyle of individuals. How is this to be achieved in societies where personal success is measured in large part by consumption?

Third, there are substantial institutional obstacles to the application of sustainable development. No national government has yet succeeded in establishing a network of environmental agencies that is effective, in part because of the doubts about how best to distribute policy respon-

sibilities. There is an environmental dimension to the work of all government departments, and sustainable development cannot be applied effectively unless all those departments are working to the same plan. In order for this to happen, there needs to be a level of coordination—or at least a consistency of purpose—which to date has been lacking in most national environmental policy structures. Different national governments have defined different sets of priorities, and have created institutions that are often at odds with one another. The EU's commitment to sectoral policy integration may offer a solution to this problem.

Fourth, there are questions regarding the seriousness of environmental problems. There are some who suggest that environmentalists may have overstated their case, an intellectual thread that can be traced through from critiques of *The Limits to Growth* in the 1970s to the work of Julian Simon and Herman Kahn in the early 1980s (with their criticisms of the *Global 2000* report)⁵⁵ to the arguments made by Bjorn Lomborg.⁵⁶ If—as Lomborg argues—stocks of natural resources are able to meet demand, if agricultural production is keeping up with population growth, if threats to biodiversity have been overstated, and if the air is cleaner than at any time since the industrial revolution began, then the arguments in favor of sustainable development are moot. Or, at the very least, we are already living a sustainable lifestyle.

Finally, all the talk about sustainable development sounds hollow when it is applied to two regions of the world—western Europe and North America—where much development is apparently unsustainable. The data—if they are to be believed—suggest that while there have been achievements in some areas, notably the reduction of many kinds of air and water pollution, and rapid agreement on the actions needed to remove threats to the ozone layer, many other problems are becoming worse. There is more vehicle traffic on the roads, more consumption of fossil fuels, too little being invested in renewable sources of energy, continued urban sprawl, threats to biodiversity, ongoing problems with the production of waste (much of it hazardous or toxic), and few signs of significant responses to the problem of climate change.

In short, while sustainable development has become central to the environmental lexicon on both sides of the Atlantic (more so in the European Union than in the United States), it remains a declaratory

commitment, an aspiration, or—in the case of the EU—a legal obligation. It has been applied to limited policy areas, but many difficulties remain in moving from declaratory politics to the implementation of policy, and to the kinds of changes in behavior that will really make a difference. In making that difference, however, we should never underestimate the power of ideas in the shaping of politics. When viewed in terms of substantive policy, the EU and US share a common default on implementation. However, when we view the US and the EU in terms of values and principles, a view that enables us to see European integration as a project based on the construction and rearticulation of shared values, a transatlantic divergence begins to emerge. Sustainable development has become a legitimizing and mobilizing value in the construction of the new Europe. As such, we expect that the future will see environmental values take a stronger grip on policy in Europe than in the US. Thus the current divergence on principles and values may well be translated into substantive transatlantic policy differences.

Notes

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IV

Transnational Networks and Dialogue