



## Sustainable development of what?

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## **Sustainable Development of What?\***

*By John Bellamy Foster*

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio marked a turning point in world history. Faced with the reality of a planetary ecological crisis, all the countries of the world joined in declaring their support for “sustainable development” — or the goal of striking a balance between present development and the potential for future development, the latter requiring some degree of protection of the earth’s resources.

However, the emerging world consensus on the necessity for sustainable development hides more fundamental disagreements. In the view of the dominant interests of society, sustainable development, despite its environmental associations, remains primarily an economic concept serving narrow economic ends. As British economist David Pearce, the author of the British government’s Pearce Report, *Blueprint for a Green Economy*, has stated, “sustainable development...[is] fairly simply defined. It is continuously rising, or at least non-declining, consumption per capita, or GNP, or whatever the agreed indicator of development is. And this is how sustainable development has come to be interpreted by most economists addressing the issue.”<sup>1</sup>

Sustainable development, in these terms, is essentially the same thing as sustained economic growth. This is often made more compatible with ecological considerations by insisting that environmental costs need to be internalized by the market, ensuring that losses in “natural capital,” for example, be accounted for in any computation of growth or development. Also the need to preserve certain specific forms of “critical natural capital,” such as tropical rainforest ecosystems, is sometimes incorporated into this dominant

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\* Adapted from the Preface to the Korean edition of *The Vulnerable Planet*.

<sup>1</sup>David Pearce, *Blueprint 3: Measuring Sustainable Development* (London: Earthscan, 1993), p. 8.

economic approach to sustainable development. Nevertheless, the emphasis throughout remains on sustaining *development*.

In contrast, for those who are concerned primarily with sustaining the earth and creating liveable, sustainable communities, rather than with sustaining development or expanding profits, the conflict between economic growth and the environment is much more likely to be emphasized. This alternative view starts out by recognizing that most economic activity demands raw materials and energy from the planet and generates waste that the planet must absorb. The environmental consequences of economic growth cannot therefore be avoided (though they might be lessened). A three percent annual average rate of growth in world output would mean that world production would double every 23 years; in a single century, it would increase 16 times. Yet, even now there are signs that the world economy is overshooting certain critical ecological thresholds. It is highly unlikely therefore that the planet could long sustain exponential growth of this kind, involving doublings of economic output every quarter century, without experiencing worldwide ecological catastrophe. There is no technological fix that will allow unlimited economic growth within a limited biosphere.

Does this mean that those concerned with the fate of the earth should abandon the goal of economic development altogether? The answer is “no.” Economic development is still needed in the poorer regions of the world. But more than ever before what is also needed is a critique of development. What kind of development do the people of the world want and need and under what conditions? How is this to be made compatible with the environment? Such questions cannot be answered without a critique of our present form of society. Capitalism, which now dominates every corner of the globe, is in its essence a system of accumulation, geared to the production of capital and profit. As the socialist economist and ecologist James O'Connor has put it, “a capitalist economy based on what Marx called ‘simple reproduction’ and what many greens call ‘maintenance’ is a flat impossibility....While there are many variations in economic growth theory, all presuppose that capitalism cannot stand still...that it must ‘accumulate or die,’ in Marx’s words.”<sup>2</sup>

In the past, such accumulation has been “subsidized” by a global environment that has been systematically robbed of its natural wealth. The environment has been reduced to a tap from which resources can be

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<sup>2</sup>James O'Connor, “Is Sustainable Capitalism Possible?” Martin O'Connor, ed., *Is Capitalism Sustainable?* (New York: Guilford, 1994), p. 159.

extracted and a sink in which wastes (often of a very toxic nature) can be dumped. The history of the last 500 years has therefore been a history of unsustainable development.

A more ecological form of social development is possible but only if the maldevelopment, which now goes under the name of development, is addressed. Such a form is about having enough, not having more. It must have as its first priority people, particularly poor people, rather than profits or production, and must stress the importance of meeting basic needs and ensuring long term security. Above all, we must recognize the old truth, long understood by both romantic and socialist critics of capitalism, that increasing production does not by itself eliminate poverty.

The main historical sources of the present global ecological crisis lie in what the Editor of the Italian edition of *CNS*, Giovanna Ricoveri, has aptly called "the mortal conflict between capital and nature." Yet, it is important to remember that "people are also part of nature, and the exploitation of nature is therefore also the exploitation of some people by other people. Environmental degradation is also the degradation of human relationships."<sup>3</sup> Ecological development is therefore about environmental justice as well. The struggle to create a greener world is linked inseparably to the struggle to reduce social injustice.

The need for an ecological critique of development along these general lines is particularly clear when one turns to South Korea, one country that has come to symbolize for the world at large the miracle of rapid economic growth. Close examination of the Korean experience shows the danger of confusing sustained economic growth with sustainable development. As Kim Chi-ha, a famous environmental activist and Chairman of the Korean Environmental Council, has explained, "The myth of limitless economic growth pounded into us by successive governments has devastated our precious land almost to the point where it no longer has the ability to heal." Air pollution levels in Seoul are among the highest in the world. A study in the 1980s concluded that 67 percent of the rain falling on that city contained levels of acid hazardous to humans. Sulphur dioxide emissions in Seoul have been found to be five times that of Taipei and eight times that of Tokyo, two cities well known for heavy air pollution. In 1989, the government discovered that water at ten purification plants contained heavy metals such as cadmium, iron and manganese at twice the official

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<sup>3</sup>Giovanna Ricoveri, "Culture of the Left and Green Culture," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 4, 3, September, 1993, pp. 116-17.

tolerance levels. Pesticide use increased by a factor of 26 between 1967 and 1985, making Korean agriculture one of the heaviest consumers of pesticides per hectare in the world; pesticide runoff is a major source of groundwater pollution. According to studies conducted in the mid-1970s, fertilizer use per hectare in Korean agriculture was six times the U.S. level and 13 times the world level. By 1990, Korea was relying on nuclear power for more than half of its electrical energy generation, and was the most nuclear power-dependent country in the world. Korea has one of the highest rates of occupation-related illnesses in the world, with 2.66 out every eleven persons suffering from occupation-related illnesses, compared to 0.70 in Taiwan, 0.93 in Singapore and 0.61 in Japan. Fortunately, these conditions have resulted in the rapid growth of an environmental movement in Korea, which has already won some major victories.<sup>4</sup>

Sustained economic development over decades, as the Korean case so clearly shows, is therefore not the same thing as environmentally sustainable development. Still, Korea is far from being one of the worst offenders from a global perspective. The United States alone accounts for about 25 percent of world primary energy demand, about as much as the entire "developing world." Any discussion of the global ecological crisis must therefore concentrate on the excesses of the advanced capitalist states, and their impact on the periphery of the world economy. It is here at the heart of the capitalist world system that the problem of unsustainable development arises in its most acute form. Ecological struggles are therefore connected inseparably to the struggle against imperialism, which takes on new meaning when viewed in terms of the exploitation of the earth's resources.

All of this suggests that we need to create through our struggles a global society that elevates the status of nature and community above that of the accumulation of capital; equality and justice above individual greed; and democracy above the market. A new accord with nature is needed. Above all, we need to rethink the meaning of human progress. Countless people around the world are already engaged in this struggle and many millions more will join them. Nothing less than the fate of the earth as we know it is at stake.

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<sup>4</sup>Walden Bello and Stephanie Rosenfeld, *Dragons in Distress* (San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1992), pp. 95-112; Martin Hart-Landsberg, *The Rush to Development: Economic Change and Political Struggle in South Korea* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), pp. 265-68; Kim Chi-ha quoted in "Curbing a Pollution Economy," *South*, February, 1991, p. 21.