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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS A POLITICAL CATEGORY

1. Introduction

Lowe [1985, 163] rightly observed that from the daybreak of history man has engaged in economic activity and no other activity has consciously occupied him to such an extent. The scale of economic activity and its character has changed, the economy and civilisation has developed. Yet systematic reflection regarding this major sphere of human activity did not occur until the 17th century, when economics emerged from philosophy as an independent discipline of study. During the last twenty years we have witnessed quite a lively discussion of the concept of sustainable development, seen as an attempt to integrate social, institutional, economic and environmental aspects of development. It is sometimes analysed as a philosophical, economic and political concept, in its theoretical and practical, positive and normative, global and local aspects. The multitude of approaches to the notion of sustainable development demonstrates the significance attributed to this mode of describing and shaping reality. This paper concentrates on political aspects of the development and implementation of sustainable development.

2. The essence of the concept of sustainable development

The fact that individuals desire to consume more goods and services than they have at their disposal indicates that there is a relative shortage

of means for satisfying these needs. This, in turn, results in the need to implement a social mechanism of distributing limited resources among unlimited and alternative applications. None of the known ways of allocating these resources, such as conflict, tradition, market or distribution by the authorities, has guaranteed the sustainability of social and economic growth and development. The crises currently occurring throughout the world are of a highly varied nature (economic, social, political, cultural and ecological) and have led to an increase in inequality in development and a conflict of interest between individual groups of countries and social groups. The discussion of ways of governance, which would allow elimination, or at least reduction, of the influence of various negative phenomena, both in individual countries, as well as in the global economy, not only has not become any less topical, but has expanded to cover issues mainly concerning aspects of development related to the environment.

The international debate devoted to environment-related factors conditioning development was started in 1968 by Resolution No. 2398 (XXIII) of the UN General Assembly, which obliged the UN Secretary General to prepare a report on relationships between man and the environment. The report, entitled *Man and his Environment*, was published a year later by the UN Secretary General U'Thant. During the Stockholm Conference held in 1972 the representatives of the participating countries presented data concerning the state of the environment and ecological threats occurring in individual countries. The image that emerged from these reports induced the participants to adopt the Stockholm Declaration, which became a model set of principles for shaping the relationships between the socio-economic system and the environment.

In 1983 the World Commission on the Environment and Development – the so-called Brundtland Commission – was created in order to investigate the question of whether there is a negative relationship between environmental protection and the functioning of businesses and development understood in its widest sense. In 1987 the commission's report, *Our Common Future*, was published, whence the most often quoted definition of constant and sustainable development originates. It is development that satisfies current needs without eliminating the chance of satisfying them in the future [Brundtland, 1987]. A true highlight of the discussion over ecological issues in the context of development occurred during the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This can be seen in the documents adopted then: the *Global Action Program* AGENDA 21, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Declaration on the Management, Conservation and Sustainable Development of Forests. All subsequent studies and documents concerning development, as regards ecological issues, refer to those adopted in

Rio. This is confirmed in all the actions undertaken by individual states and international organisations. In December 1992, in order to assure the effective implementation of AGENDA 21, the *UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD)* was called into being.

Sustainable development has turned out to be the most advanced concept of the organisation of the global economy and, so far, the only one which takes up the question of preventing a global ecological catastrophe [Borys, 1999, 2005; Piontek, 2002; Kistowski, 2003]. It can be most fully presented as a process of building an integrated order combining:

- ecological order, implemented within a policy of protecting the natural environment;
- social order, accomplished through the implementation of a social policy;
- economic order, achieved through the implementation of a policy of economic development;
- spatial order, built within the framework of a spatial policy;
- institutional order, consisting of the creation of appropriate political and legislative support.

Sustainable development is a type of socio-economic development, realised by man in the technosphere, according to an anthropocentric perception of the world. It has an inter-generation dimension and therefore can only be achieved if balance is maintained between satisfying the needs of future generations and the needs of people living now. Sustainable development integrates all human actions and is aimed at eliminating inequality in satisfying needs on a global scale.

3. Implementation of a strategy for sustainable development on a global scale

The success of the implementation of sustainable development depends on its widespread acceptance as a theoretical concept and its translation into the language of economic practice. This means that a strategy for sustainable development should become, in a way, a standard of governance. The data published by the Division for Sustainable Development of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs indicate that this is still a long way away. On the basis of data collected up to March 2004, a report concerning 191 countries was drawn up. Such strategies have been implemented in 12% of countries, governments have adopted such strategies in 2% of countries, 22% of countries declare that they are preparing such a strategy. Some elements typical to strategies for sustainable development have been found in 41% of countries, no information or

no undertaken activities have been reported from 23% of countries. European countries are the most advanced in the implementation of strategies for sustainable development. This stage of work was reported by as many as 14 countries, which makes up one third of the countries in the region. Within one year, the number of countries implementing their strategies has doubled and another 18 countries have elements of such a strategy, 10 are working on the preparation of such a strategy and 2 countries have documents adopted by their governments. Europe is clearly leading in conducting action for sustainable development, since in the Asia-Pacific region, which ranked second, only 4 countries out of 45 have implemented strategies, 23 show some activity in this respect and as many as 18 have not displayed any such activity (or have not provided any data). The lower places are taken, in order, by Africa, America and the Caribbean and West Asia. Subsequent reports published by CSD indicate that progress in developing strategies for sustainable development is very slow but consistent [Assessment Report, 2004, 6].

The beginning of the new millennium was an opportunity to intensify the discussion about visions of development. The report from the Millennium Summit (*Sustaining our Future*) by the UN Secretary General, published in 2000 and the debates at the 2002 Summit in Johannesburg clearly indicate that the possibility of continued development, including the effective fight against hunger and poverty, together with protecting the condition of the natural environment, is generally accepted nowadays. In the long-term perspective, *i.e.*, on a multi-generation time scale and in inter-regional, *i.e.*, international and global dimensions, there cannot be any conflict between socio-economic and ecological aims, if development is to be sustainable and if it is to bring improvement to the situation of the poorest inhabitants of the Earth. The global dimension of sustainable development has been reflected in the eight Millennium Development Goals, to be achieved by 2015, which include fighting hunger, social inequality and degradation of the environment. The problem still waiting to be solved effectively is the practical realisation of tasks related to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The primary obstacles are a lack of funds, a lack of adequately developed institutional and organisational structures and of technical potential. These obstacles are to be overcome with the help of a partnership agreement (Goal 8), which includes the promotion of aid from developed countries to developing countries [www.un.org/millenniumgoals].

The choice of these goals leaves no doubt as to the existence of relationships between the condition of the natural environment and the quality and length of people's lives. Environmental degradation, both in the country and in cities, affects poor people to the largest extent. Most

individual countries have noticed the interrelations between poverty and the environment, but five years after the Millennium Goals were adopted, it seems that it will not be possible to achieve them by 2015, unless the planning and implementation of developmental aid are changed. The UN Secretary General Kofi Anan observed that in his report of September 2004 [Rev.27 October 2004].

4. Sustainable development and public choice

Sustainable development may only really become a way of shaping reality if it becomes a political category, in other words, if it is supported during public elections. Today, the notion of sustainable development certainly belongs to the language of official state documents, international agreements and particularly to all kinds of charters and declarations of a non-binding nature. Looking at the day to day practice of governance looks much worse. The concept of sustainable development has not found widespread public support yet. Its essence does not get into the programs of parties or election slogans, no-one asks politicians about it. The reasons for this situation are worth considering. It seems that the term "sustainable development" is too general and therefore incomprehensible to the "man on the street". A typical voter requires specific, easily envisaged goals which, in addition, are consistent with his own expectations. Most often, a voter's perception of the world is limited to the local area and is based on information of a local character. This is a major obstacle in creating long-term action plans reaching far beyond voters' mental horizons. Thinking in global and inter-generation terms does not happen in domestic political arenas. What counts in everyday life are safety and security, primarily economic security: jobs, the assurance of steady employment, access to basic public goods, such as education or health care. Even such seemingly important issues as the quality of water we drink and the air we breathe are not within the scope of interest of an average inhabitant of the Earth. It would be naive to expect people to be willing to give up part of their current consumption in favour of some vague profits accessible to future generations, when they suffer from poverty now. The qualitative aspects of life are more appealing to the populations of more developed (industrialised) countries, in which the readiness to protect natural environment is growing together with an increase in the knowledge of ecological factors conditioning life and the economy.

Sustainable development requires thinking in human, economic and ecological categories simultaneously. Omitting any of these elements means wandering off the path of sustainable development. Ecological issues

find it most difficult to penetrate into the world of politics. It is actually possible only when they become important from a human point of view. 20th-century concepts of socio-economic development paid no attention to values of an ecological character. One may vainly seek justification for a pro-ecological style of life in beliefs, moral norms, likes and preferences. The ethical norms of a particular community are related to the way it perceives nature, customs and the form and level of consumption. These norms constitute the cultural layer of the present ecological crisis. Dominant egocentrism is manifested in consumers seeking maximal utility and entrepreneurs seeking maximal profit. This constrains any analysis to the study of a period limited by the length of human life, which is short in social and ecological terms. Stressing the importance of inter-generation justice enforces putting a longer perspective on actions which come from an anthropocentric approach, putting the interest of mankind in the centre of interest. However, only abrupt deterioration of the environment and resulting threats to man make it important for him to "build bridges between that which is human and that which is natural".

When analysing issues of the implementation of sustainable development within the framework of public choice theory, one has to ask a question concerning the existence of social rationality. According to Buchanan, attributing rationality or irrationality to a social group assumes that the group constitutes an organic whole, distinct from the sum of the entities constituting it [Buchanan, 1954, 114–123]. Yet acts of public choice take place through individual choices. Politics becomes the result of these actions that are targeted at state institutions and which are relayed by formal and informal mediating institutions. As a result, guided by economic rationality, rational people may follow a harmful policy depending on the economic, political and institutional conditions in a particular country [Edwards, 1993, 2.]. This is a new insight into economic policy and the people responsible for it. In practice, however, we most often obtain sub-optimal solutions. This is because of incomplete and asymmetrical access to information and the risks involved, as well as because individuals and/or certain interest groups maximise their own utility. The state achieved is a combination or a resultant of intertwining choices made by decision-makers operating at different levels of authority. The phenomenon of particular interest groups using the state to obtain funds is known as *rent seeking* [Buchanan, 1980].

New institutional economics makes the premise that people who govern or manage are opportunists who *seek rent* insidiously through the distortion of information and even fraud. Directly unproductive activities are also described, which are aimed at *directly unproductive profit-seeking*. In their desire to accomplish their goals and interests, citizens, politicians

and bureaucrats try to achieve such a transfer of wealth, by means of the state, that would maximise their benefits on the political market. This obviously contradicts the idea of sustainable development.

On the demand side for means of regulation, there are various interest groups, industries, or individual companies who may benefit considerably from the application of a particular means of regulation. The supply for these groups is created by legislative organs which count on obtaining votes in future elections, as a manifestation of gratitude from the members of society satisfied with the regulations introduced. Taking into account all that has been done so far to implement sustainable development, one can conclude that the demand for institutions designed for this purpose is insufficient. Society may not understand the relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness of institutional solutions and choose variants which are contradictory to the idea of sustainable development.

In recent years, much attention has been given to determining the conditions that will generate domestic demand for good institutions and political reform. This direction of study has been called the theory of rational choices and – with the help of game theory – there have been attempts to find the best solution in the form of best contracts. According to Fukuyama [2005] the explanations presented are often incomplete and unsatisfactory, since game theory gives solutions in the form of a set of equilibrium states which are, in general, suboptimal (Nash equilibria). It is also important to know why the demand for new institutions emerges at a particular moment. The answer is that this is conditioned by the circumstances of major acting forces. In other words, the readiness to include ecological issues in decision-making criteria appears together with the awareness of the existence (growth) of an ecological crisis. Many countries then reach for solutions known world-wide and transfer them directly or adapt them to their local conditions. However, differences in proneness to such behaviour can be observed between countries. More developed countries are much more open to change. The demand for new institutional solutions became apparent there and their implementation is usually successful (for instance, the Central and Eastern European countries undergoing systemic transformation used models from the economies of highly developed countries with well rooted democratic governments and market mechanisms of allocation). No demand or insufficient demand for new institutions is characteristic of poorly developed countries. In these countries the demand for such institutions usually comes from external sources, such as various assistance funds, donators and lenders, whose support and cooperation is subject to meeting certain institutional conditions by the country in question. Information from various parts of the world on the structure and transformation of institutions indicates,

however, that there is a need for some internal demand to be created, mainly by local elites. Fukuyama [2005] observes that the ability of external sources to stimulate the demand for institutions is highly limited. This observation is essential in the context of attempts at transplanting institutional arrangements and reforms to developing countries. This should be taken into account by various international financial organisations, charities, etc., which still hope to succeed in "building potential". In order to be effective, these institutions must be efficient not only in the administrative sense, but also obtain social legitimacy.

5. Conclusions

The shaping of the concept of sustainable development is a result of a long-term process, the participants of which are scientists, activists from ecological organisations, politicians and representatives of communities spread all over the world, who have experienced the growth of the ecological crisis in its various manifestations. Translating the idea of sustainable development into practice requires transforming it into a political category and including it as a social choice. The success of implementing a strategy for sustainable development has so far consisted mainly of various documents and declarations, principally of an international character. Implementation will be genuinely successful only when it filters into the internal development policies realised in individual countries. This, however, requires a change in our way of thinking, giving up a fragmented view of reality and a transfer to activities integrating the social and economic sphere with the environmental sphere. This will be possible when an appropriate institutional framework is created. In other words, there must be demand from society for regulations convergent with the idea of sustainable development. Understanding the concept of sustainable development is not intuitive, but requires some background preparation, building potential based on knowledge. At the same time, one must keep in mind that strategies of sustained development "sell" poorly on the political market, due to their long-term nature and the fact that voters hold politicians accountable for tangible rather than potential benefits.

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