

## **Sustainable Development Again**

*By Jean-Guy Vaillancourt*

Herman E. Daly: *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

Neil E. Harrison: *Constructing Sustainable Development*. Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2000.

It seems like a new book on sustainable development has been coming out nearly every week for the past ten years. Each one comes from a particular discipline or combines a few different perspectives. Daly focuses on ecological economics and ethics, Harrison gives a lot of attention to politics and is more interdisciplinary in his approach, but both contain interesting ideas that deserve a hearing. Daly, a defrocked World Bank economist does not have a very high opinion of contemporary economics as taught in universities or as practiced at institutions like the World Bank, when it comes to taking the environment into account. For him, sustainable development is a dynamic, dialectical concept, which requires the economy to be viewed as a part of the ecosystem. It is a qualitative improvement, a development which does not entail growth beyond the environment's carrying capacity and which insists on an equitable redistribution of wealth and income, some population control, and technological improvements in resource productivity. It means moving to a steady-state economy in the North and eventually in the South, and respecting the biophysical limits of planet Earth, because we are now consuming natural resources beyond their sustainable capacity of renewal.

After having thus defined sustainable development, Daly seeks to present us with operational principles for implementing it. His thesis is that we are moving away from an era in which man-made capital was the limiting factor, to one in which the remaining natural capital has become the limiting factor. We can't replace resources by man-made

capital. If fish stocks are depleting, we can't compensate with bigger boats and nets. Consequently, we must maintain and increase natural capital by letting salmon spawn and by stocking rivers and lakes, by enriching the soil instead of mining it with chemical agricultural, by fostering ecoforestry instead of practising clear-cutting. He ends up making four suggestions: 1) stop counting the consumption of natural capital as income; 2) tax labor and income less, and tax resource throughputs more; 3) maximize the productivity of natural capital on the short run and invest in increasing its supply on the long run; 4) make capital more national and less global, i.e., aim at domestic production for local markets rather than at global integration.

In today's context of mobile labor and financial capital, Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage no longer holds. Growth induced by free-trade is outweighed by transport costs' external dependance, reduced choices, fiscal evasion, cost internalization and the lowering of social and environmental standards. The rich get richer, while most workers are penalized. Daly thinks nations should consume less, and become more self-sufficient, not the other way around. He also believes free-trade is an obstacle to the goals of adjustment policies, and in chapters 6 and 7, he makes a case for changing national accounts, and he offers suggestions for measuring income with a better method than with GNP. Also, Daly believes in the great virtue of tradeable pollution permits, in spite of their shortcomings. Daly placed the section on Religion and Ethics at the end of the book because of its more controversial nature, but he views these topics as important. He shows that the Bible calls for limited inequality and for a respectful stewardship of nature. For him, economic and political principles must be grounded in a process ethic, and ultimately in religious motivation. In sum, Daly teaches that we must recognize natural limits, and reject growth idolatry.

Harrison's book is not so much about the ethics and the economics of sustainable development, as it is about the contributions of political science to the debate. He is very critical of what has been written in these three fields concerning sustainable development. He starts off by saying that after teaching a seminar on the topic he became "progressively uncertain of what the course was about" (p. VII). So he wrote the book to be able to understand what it would take to make development sustainable. His approach is debatable, but quite interesting, a little bit too postmodernistic for my taste, but he is on to something which warrants looking into. His point is that sustainable development has been hitherto presented in terms of three goal-oriented narratives, the first stressing eco-efficiency, (chapters 3-4), the second

equity politics (chapters 5-6) and the third environmental ethics (chapter 7). He is dissatisfied with the ineffectiveness of these interesting but limited and often contradictory linear approaches. What is needed is a metanarrative which focuses on process, not on goals. The journey is what it is all about, not the possible utopian point of arrival. There is too much scientific uncertainty concerning the limits of resources and sinks, problems are too specifically local and interacting, reality is too complex to permit anything else than debate and expert guesses based on reasoned risks and the precautionary principle. Sustainable development entails continuous adaptation rather than a formal design oriented towards an end. It is whatever enhances the social adaptive capacity of the complex system. "Sustainable development is a Holy Grail that does not exist. It is a legend. A Myth" (p. 99). It cannot be defined and known with precision. It is not a destination but a way of travelling. It is a continuous process with no specific and precise goal that can be pin-pointed, circumscribed and analyzed. This is why he thinks that post-modern ideas are more appropriate than traditional ones, because they accept contingency, decentralization and subjectivity.

Each of the three policy narratives describes the policy means based on its preferred values and formulated in order to help reach the goal of sustainable development, but each is incomplete and impractical because of its limitations and of a lack of common ground. A discursive metanarrative based on goals would still be too constraining, but one based on process might just be the answer, according to Harrison. Since complex adaptive systems have certain characteristics (i.e., emergent properties, adaptivity, order and chaos, dissipative structures, flexibility), we can decide on the basis of general principles in each concrete case, focusing on values rather than on interests alone, and on collective needs at various levels rather than on individual interests only.

Harrison goes on to enunciate five principles of robustness for processual action: 1) address community needs of both cohesion and change; 2) use new information to anticipate change; 3) balance adaptation with community, and participation with learning; 4) optimize eco-efficiency, as well as both market and command mechanisms; 5) favor flexibility, experimentation, voluntarism and simplicity. Harrison then goes on to give four initial policy directions, applicable anywhere, at all levels: 1) encourage subsidiarity, community, decentralization and local identities; 2) increase eco-efficiency by using taxes, price signals and subsidies; 3) disseminate information through the web and databases; 4) give priority to ideas and education. "Sustainable development is a deliberate process of conscious collective evolution" (p. 118). It is not a quick fix. Like good manners,

it is a host of little things based on the principles of respect, in this case for all humans, for animal and plant life, and for non-living things.

I don't think Harrison's book is the definitive solution to the problem of the disarray of those who find sustainable development difficult to comprehend and to apply, but it certainly will give them some valuable insights. I must admit I still think there are other ways of reconciling eco-efficiency (i.e., economic goals), environmental ethics (i.e., ecological goals) and equity politics (i.e., social goals), but I have learned a lot from this book, as I have from Daly's, which will be useful to me as a teacher, as a researcher, and as a sometimes practitioner of sustainable development.

