Major concerns as well as interests beget ideas, then concepts, principles, eventually practice, practice of law, at least sometimes. These are the familiar ways of all law including international law, everywhere and at all times. The present book on *International Law and Sustainable Development. Principles and Practice* is a vivid testimony in favour of that process.

International legal doctrine, while forever seeking to establish or at least paint certainty and predictability of legal order, has recently had to grapple with relatively unfamiliar, possibly somewhat unsettling phenomena of international life, to wit the proliferation of states, international organisations and of non-state actors, the “opening up” of supposedly “self-contained régimes” (such as that of the World Trade Organisation) and of the classical system of sources of international law, to name but a few.

Two of the most important legal questions arising from these changes of international socio-political reality, so to speak, constitute the central theoretical theme underlying all chapters of this copious collaborative work. The first is the emergence of evocative ideas relating to at least two pressing global problems, environmental degradation and poverty. The second concerns the still somewhat controversial contention, made at least implicitly throughout the book, that the principle of “sustainable development” is amply supported and re-enforced by numerous instances of “practice”, justifying its elevation into the pantheon of international law.

Principles and practice of international law, its raw material, have one thing in common: both may develop from a state of amorphous flux until, after meanderings, and metamorphoses – “Prinzipienwanderung”, “Verdichtung von Praxis” – they may crystallize as the (legal) crux of a subject matter, perhaps enjoying unquestioned even unchallengeable authority in law. Naturally, while
some good ideas have succeeded in this manner, for instance “self-determination”, others, such as that of the “common heritage of mankind”, have had a more mixed reception.

However, there has been much debate, if not confusion lately about the range of sources of international law and, more particularly, about the tests for their validity, confusion that was, if anything, compounded by the International Court of Justice in its Nicaragua judgment of 1986. Fortunately, neither the editors nor the contributing authors have embarked on a review of that already somewhat dated theoretical debate. Nor have they sought to contribute to it. Instead, they have, refreshingly, assembled a variety of case studies all illustrating instances of practice, some of it state practice, deduced from the principle and objective of sustainable development. In so doing they have embraced contemporary complexity of international life, not merely state practice, thereby avoiding siding with either the dwindling number of traditionalists who tenaciously cling to the biblia pauperum of Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice, or with radical obfuscationists steeped in the art of campaign-hardened advocacy of their preferred standards of international law, regardless of the degree of their acceptance by the community of states or even by different so-called civil societies.

Still, the first part of the book presents an overview of the evolution of principles, some kind of quasi-theoretical prolegomena to the case studies assembled in parts two and three of the book. These studies examine practice in the fields of International Trade, Foreign Investment, Human Rights and Natural Resources and Waste Management as well as selected Regional and National Experience in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The editors, as well as most authors who contributed chapters to this volume, readily acknowledge some degree of relative conceptual uncertainty inherent in sustainable development. But perhaps it is inevitable that content and contours of an integrative concept such as that of sustainable development which was endorsed as such by the world community as a whole, lacks the kind of clarity of articulation of concepts one might be accustomed to in a more limited, homogeneous group of states. However, that need not necessarily be considered a disadvantage. Indeed, it may well have been the very lack of conceptual rigor which permitted the entire world community to embrace it.