Research Note

Harmonizing Environment and Development: Ideological and Other Considerations

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Introduction

The current focus on balancing the environment and development requires the effective participation of almost all countries, regardless of their political systems and development ideologies. Long-term solutions to global environmental problems like transboundary pollution control can only be reached through global cooperation. The top 50 countries with the highest greenhouse gas net emission levels in 1990 come from the entire development spectrum. The top 10 countries in this list includes the U.S., Japan, China and Indonesia.

In terms of negotiation, four key problems have been identified as arising from the way countries are being encouraged to pursue their environmental interests (Susskind, 1991). First, agendas for negotiation are often set without the concurrence of all the stakeholders. Second, the task of inventing policy options is not separated from the task of securing agreement. Third, countries are often encouraged to overstate or otherwise misrepresent their economic needs in an effort to achieve strategic advantage. Finally, the difficulty of linking environmental negotiations with negotiations in other policy arenas makes it equally difficult to find "elegant trade-offs" that meet the interests of all sides.

The key problem concerning the consensus of all major stakeholders in negotiations apply not only to nation-states but also regions and communities within these states who would be affected by all decision-making on development and the environment. There is, in effect, a hierarchy of territorial units ranging from the state to local community, which has a stake in decisions and policies. The issue involved is one of representation of interests at negotiations. Such a right of representation implies recognition of the stakeholder in the first instance, which is in turn determined by the policy decision-making approach towards development planning.
Regional development planners are, however, divided in their views on whether development planning should be done "from below" through community-based projects. The development paradigm "from the center downwards" has been challenged because of the general failure of centralised planning and the ecological disasters which have resulted in developing countries. On the other hand, there is doubt that "local communities" possess the potential for political power and putting such power to use in their decision-making on development as well as environmental issues.

Critics like Sandner (1985) suggest that local level planning requires more than just a mere change of scale. Antagonism between what are seen to be integrative and participative social policies as well as the power relations between the state and local community have to be recognised. The political dimension has to be introduced into planning and the state cannot be taken to be the single leader in the socialization process. Other critics like Soja (1985) argue that the proposal of planning "from below" is a tool for maintaining the status quo. For Soja it is apolitical as well because it does not recognize the conflicts between territorial community and the state. According to this dissenting view of decentralization, it is utopian, using this mystifying utopia as an ideological instrument of power.

On the other hand, counterposed to the above views on decentralisation is the proposal that "without making ecological balance a public concern, communities face the danger of vanishing water supplies, salination of soils, deforestation, erosion, and other forms of resource deterioration. Disaster areas can be found in all parts of the globe, from the northern plains of China to the Ecuadorean highlands. Such disasters can be averted or even reversed through actions that take into account the enormous variety of local ecological conditions and the specific stresses to which they are subject, one village at a time, and even household by household" (Friedmann, 1985:160). Emphasis has therefore been placed by proponents of decentralization such as Friedmann, on a multicentred multilevel system of societal guidance. They are of the view that making ecological balance a public concern implies the consideration of the interests of communities and even households.

Practical considerations against the devolution of power to the local level have been raised by Becker (1985). Local projects tend to be fragmentary, limited to a specific location and pragmatic because they are particularistic. There is also difficulty with territorial identities and the delineation of political units which may have internal forms for learning the will of the majority. Problems will vary in different countries and political systems. There are structural problems in implementing a policy oriented towards decentralization and power delegation including a lack of human and technical ability for a more participative approach, conflicts within the community itself and unequal relations between decision-making levels. These problems, if unresolved, can "petrify" local projects or lead to the ecological disasters which have prompted the rethinking on centralized planning.

Critics like Becker (1985) also observe that the view of a monolithic state as an instrument of capital ignore the many projects which have been aimed at the