



The Social Dimension of Sustainable Development

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This paper was prepared in response to a request by the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development at the Office of the Auditor General to clarify the meaning of the social dimension of sustainable development. While the paper explores the roles of various sectors, it focusses primarily upon the federal government.

The challenge

Sustainable development is a term whose use is sustained but whose meaning is far from developed.

The challenge arising from ‘sustainable development’ is that the concept is not prescriptive. It does not spell out explicitly what to do. Rather, the notion of sustainable development is normative. It sets out a three-dimensional lens from which to view the world.

Sustainable development is an holistic approach to improving the quality of life. It postulates that there are intrinsic links among economic, social and environmental well-being. Changes in any one domain will have an impact upon the other two dimensions. From a social perspective in particular, human well-being cannot be sustained without a healthy environment and is equally unlikely in the absence of a vibrant economy.

While the desired objective of human well-being is clear, it is not easy to determine precisely which elements to include in the social sphere. Its connections to the economic dimension, such as quality of work and level of income, are more obvious. But its relationship to the environment as well as to the environment and economy together is more difficult to articulate. (One could argue that environmental challenges are primarily social issues in that they are largely a function of human behaviour.)

In addition to understanding the relations among the economic, social and environmental spheres, there are questions as to whether certain social actions are more consistent with the concept of sustainable development than others. While there are no definitive answers, there appear to be some key directions that arise from a studied interpretation of the concept. These include poverty reduction, social investment, and the building of safe and caring communities.

Underlying concepts

Two screens were used to identify the priority areas for the social domain. First, the priority areas are rooted in the principles underlying the concept of sustainable development. Second, the key directions derive from the conclusions of major international documents.

The focus on poverty results from clear warnings by international organizations on the pressing nature of this problem.

The need for social investment arises both from international documents that call for investment in human capital and from the ‘seventh-generation principle’ inherent in the concept of sustainable development. This principle refers to the importance of meeting present-day needs without compromising the needs of future generations. It stresses the significance of intergenerational bonds.

The caring communities theme is rooted in the concept of citizenship. Sustainable development emphasizes the importance of stewardship – i.e., taking responsibility for the well-being of the earth. By analogy, ‘social stewardship’ implies a responsibility to take care of the human environment, typically understood as communities.

Finally, informed citizen participation comprises the essence of democracy – a prerequisite to the protection of human rights and the equitable distribution of resources.

The priorities

i. Poverty reduction

Poverty reduction is a primary objective of sustainable development. This goal arises from warnings by the United Nations which identified poverty

as the “greatest threat to political stability, social cohesion and the environmental health of the planet” [United Nations Development Programme 1994: 20]. Poverty is both caused and exacerbated by the unequal distribution of land as well as other resources and assets [World Commission 1987: 29].

Communities can help reduce poverty in several ways [Torjman 1998a]. They can meet basic needs by ensuring that their members are adequately nourished, housed and protected from violence. Communities can remove barriers that prevent participation in training programs, the labour market and broader functions, such as recreational and cultural events. They can tackle poverty by building language, educational and job skills. And poverty can be addressed through various forms of local economic development.

Employers also can reduce poverty dramatically by paying adequate wages and providing associated benefits, such as pensions. *But while communities and employers play important roles in tackling poverty, the primary responsibility lies squarely with governments. The federal government, in particular, has the appropriate levers to alleviate – if not eradicate – the problem.*

Progressive income taxes and transfers in the form of income programs have significantly narrowed the gap in the earnings of rich and poor [Battle 1995]. This redistributive role is crucial, given the wide and growing gaps in market income – i.e., income from wages and salaries, self-employment, savings, investments and other private sources. Specific actions are proposed under the ‘federal role.’

But governments can reduce poverty not simply through income redistribution. They can make a significant dent in poverty by helping individuals acquire the skills they need to find reasonably paid employment. This teach-the-person-to-fish approach to poverty is discussed under skills development.

A major challenge at the international level is to reduce the gaps in market income not only

between rich and poor households but also between rich and poor nations. A combination of actions is required: direct aid, assistance for local development, reform of international financial institutions, support for democratic governance and investment in education, especially for women.

While support for education is a primary form of social investment, it is also the key means to reduce poverty throughout the world. The evidence on population growth suggests that educational level and birth rate are inversely related; higher levels of education typically correspond with fewer children. Several international reports emphasize the need to improve the status and education of women as the principal route to poverty reduction and environmental protection [World Commission 1987; Independent Commission 1996; United Nations 1994].

It should be noted that some observers would minimize the importance of poverty reduction as a priority for the developed world. They would argue that both the extent and depth of poverty in industrialized countries are less profound than in the developing world.

It is true that citizens of the developed world may not face absolute deprivation – although many do. One only has to look at the numbers of homeless persons lining the streets of major urban centres. But the relative poverty that individuals experience in industrialized countries is just as serious a problem.

ii. Social investment

Social investment is a prerequisite to economic development; a vibrant economy requires a healthy and educated workforce. Canada ranks near the top of the world in terms of wealth as represented by natural resources. But the World Bank notes that the future success of nations depends on the extent to which they invest in human resources [World Bank 1998/99]. Two major areas for social investment are health and education.

a. health

Canada has made substantial investments in health by supporting a publicly funded medicare system. Despite this support, the system faces serious challenges and requires both structural and financing reform (discussed below).

But health is attained only partly through the provision of health care services which essentially are a form of remediation. The promotion of health is equally important, particularly in the areas of prenatal and postnatal care. And neither health care services nor health promotion can meet their respective objectives alone. They are both premised upon a healthy environment – clean air and water, a safe food supply and adequate housing.

In addition to investments in health that benefit the entire population, there are crucial social investments to be made at certain stages of the life cycle, notably during early childhood. There is ample evidence that investment in early childhood reaps substantial returns in overall health and well-being later in life [McCain and Mustard 1999].

Families too need a range of supporting services to help parents balance their responsibilities at home and work, enhance their parenting capacity and deal with problems that income alone cannot solve. The literature on crime prevention also points to the need for a range of family supports [Waller and Weiler 1986]. These include family resource centres, parent education, respite care, cooperative babysitting arrangements, parent matching and foster grandparent programs. Specific proposals are discussed under ‘federal role.’

b. education and skills development

Education and skills development are essential to the economic health of individuals and of nations. In order to compete in a rapidly changing knowledge-based economy, both developed and

developing nations must invest heavily in education, training and skills formation [Thurow 1999; Betcherman, McMullen and Davidman 1998]. Higher levels of education are associated with enhanced worker productivity and the ability to generate higher incomes.

But investment in education provides the basis not only for economic success. It is also the foundation for an informed intelligent citizenry that comprises the bedrock of democracy.

In addition to adequate support for basic education and skills development, a knowledge-based economy requires continual upgrading of skills. One way to promote continual upgrading is through ‘customized training,’ which involves the private sector, educational institutes and community organizations [Torjman 1999b].

Skills also are developed through the social economy – a distinct form of economic organization that includes training and job creation [Lewis 1999]. From a sustainable development perspective, local job creation could tap wide-ranging opportunities in the environmental field, such as energy efficiency upgrades and recycling.

iii. Safe and caring communities

The concept of sustainable development implies that all individuals and sectors have a responsibility to promote human well-being. They are the caretakers of each other’s welfare – much as individuals and all sectors are seen as stewards of the environment.

Safe and caring communities start with the citizen as the base. The active engagement of citizens in building safe and caring communities involves far more than polling their opinions on selected issues or inviting them to present their views at a public consultation.

One way that citizens engage with communities is through direct involvement in their institutions and activities, such as schools and recreational, cultural and environmental groups. Another way to encourage meaningful engagement is through community problem solving.

The identified problem may be negative – such as unemployment or poverty. But it also may be positive, such as how to promote appreciation of the arts or beautify a neighbourhood.

Community problem solving does not mean that any one person or group has the answer to a certain question. Rather, it is a process of engaging individuals from diverse sectors in deliberations that seek appropriate solutions.

Deliberation entails the careful weighing of options against what is valuable and possible. To deliberate, people must be involved in face-to-face discussions rather than simply listening to expert presentations. The process may not result in agreement but can produce a sense of direction or shared purpose [Mathews 1998].

Conflict resolution is one example of community-based problem solving [Abdul 1996]. Conflict resolution mechanisms seek nonviolent solutions to economic, social and environmental problems, such as racial tension, domestic violence or conflict related to commercial interests – e.g., protection of fishing areas from overuse by sport fishers.

Opportunities 2000 (OP2000) is another example of community-based problem solving. This project was launched in Waterloo Region by the Lutherwood Community Opportunities Development Association (CODA). The long-term objective was to reduce the region's poverty rate to the lowest in the country [Hodgson 1998].

To achieve this goal, Lutherwood CODA sought to mobilize the entire community. It set out to engage in partnerships with at least 30 organiza-

tions to reduce poverty through training, funds for business startup and community enterprise. The project added a unique feature: a Leadership Roundtable composed of business, low-income households, government and social agencies. Members of the Roundtable provide overall direction and promote awareness of poverty and possible solutions.

Communities also can take concrete steps to counter the problem of exclusion. In the past two years alone, the potentially tragic consequences of loneliness and exclusion have been all too apparent in schools and communities throughout North America.

Some communities are making a conscious effort to ensure that all community members feel that they belong. In Prince Edward Island, for example, communities from across the province came together to make 'A Promise of Inclusion' [MacKinnon 1999]. They committed themselves to the principles of inclusion – accepting difference, promoting equality and respect for the dignity of all people, and taking personal and community responsibility. This effort was supported by the federal government's National Crime Prevention Centre.

In the case of OP2000 and the Promise of Inclusion, community groups played the convening role. But local governments also are in a unique position to convene diverse sectors for community problem solving. The Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton is a prototype for this convenor role.

In 1999, the Region created the *Partners for Jobs* Task Force with representatives from business, labour, anti-poverty groups, the education sector, social agencies, and the federal and provincial governments. Its mandate was to develop strategies to promote employment in the region. Its efforts have created several hundred jobs in less than a year.

Local solutions are particularly important with respect to environmental issues such as climate change and the reduction of greenhouse gas

emissions. Local actions include, for example, the intensification of community functions, mixed-use design for new sub-developments, supports for at-home work, improvements to public transportation, solid waste reduction to lower methane emissions from landfill sites, better insulation for commercial properties and private residences, and community projects such as tree planting [Torjman 1998e].

What's new?

The three substantive social dimensions of sustainable development – poverty reduction, social investment, and safe and caring communities – are not new social goals. Nations and communities have long sought to achieve these goals. What is new are the methods implied by the concept of sustainable development.

Sustainable development interprets very broadly the notion of resources. While financial capital is essential, additional resources can be harnessed for economic, social and environmental well-being [Kretzmann and McKnight 1993].

Natural/built capital includes natural resources and physical assets in communities. Human capital refers to the wealth inherent in people – their knowledge, skills, expertise, time and commitment. Social capital is the resource created when people come together out of a shared purpose or goal that goes beyond individual benefits [Putnam 2000; Riddell 1997]. All these assets – financial, natural/built, human and social capital – can be brought to bear upon the three dimensions of the social agenda.

Sustainable development also has influenced the problem solving process. By the complex lens that it applies to the world, sustainable development requires the application of multifaceted and more sophisticated solutions than employed in the past.

One way to address complex problems is through the creation of multisectoral partnerships and collaborative working arrangements. Collaborative relationships create new value by bringing fresh insights, expertise and resources to the table. However, these arrangements are not without their problems; both their strengths and weaknesses should be recognized [Torjman 1998c].

But the danger in promoting partnerships as well as active citizenship is that these involvements inadvertently can encourage governments to abrogate their responsibility for economic, social and environmental well-being. The opposite actually is required.

Governments have an important role to play in supporting citizen involvement in public and community problem solving. *And their role is more crucial than ever when it comes to income redistribution and social investment in a rapidly changing, knowledge-based economy.*

Possible federal actions

The social dimension of sustainable development gives rise to three major federal roles. Ottawa can play the lead role in poverty reduction. It can make major social investments alone and in conjunction with other key sectors. It can both facilitate and participate in processes of community-based problem solving.

Unfortunately, the federal record of the past several years has not been entirely consistent with the priority social areas of sustainable development. Cuts to Employment Insurance, to health, welfare and social services under the Canada Health and Social Transfer and to social housing have moved in the opposite direction to the first two objectives of poverty reduction and social investment [Battle, Torjman and Mendelson 2000]. The primary areas of progress have been the new National Child Benefit and the reindexation of the income tax system and child benefits announced in the 2000 Budget.

In contrast to general disinvestment, the federal government has provided additional support (at least with respect to research) in one key area: building the capacity of communities to tackle economic, social and environmental issues. However, the problem, as earlier noted, is that effective community work is predicated upon the presence of a solid public infrastructure.

Several federal actions can be taken that would be more consistent with the directions implied by the concept of sustainable development. In the area of poverty reduction, Ottawa should continue to invest in the National Child Benefit. While the 2000 federal Budget moved the total maximum benefit closer to the \$2,500 interim target, the amount should be increased even more – ideally to \$4,000 per child for low-income families [Battle and Mendelson 2000]. The higher level would offset more adequately the true costs of raising a child, estimated by various studies at \$100,000 per child over the course of a lifetime.

The higher level also would help tackle the affordable housing problem that has reached crisis proportions in many parts of the country [Battle, Torjman and Mendelson 2000]. The lack of high-quality affordable housing is particularly acute among First Nations' communities.

Although improved benefits to families will do nothing to create an adequate supply of affordable housing, at least they will help ensure that low- and modest-income households can pay for decent shelter. In fact, the need for safe and healthy human settlements has been identified as a pressing global issue [United Nations 1993].

On another front, Ottawa could move to extend the coverage of Employment Insurance, which has fallen to its lowest level since the post-war inception of the program [Torjman 2000]. It also could improve the adequacy of benefits from its current replacement rate of 55 percent of average insurable earnings.

While the tax burden on all households has been rising over the years, low-income households have been hit hardest relative to their income. This burden arises from the combined impact of income taxes, sales taxes and payroll taxes.

Income taxes, in particular, kick in at very low levels of earnings. The federal 2000 Budget fixed part of the problem by restoring full indexation to the income tax system. The taxpaying threshold had been dropping and income taxes rising over the years mainly because of an insidious problem – known as 'partial deindexation.' Low-income households paid a particularly high price [Battle 1999; 1998].

Payroll taxes are another burden on low-income workers. While Employment Insurance premiums have declined steadily since 1994, the fall has been offset by rising Canada Pension Plan contributions. These have increased substantially since 1996 as a result of changes to the financing of the plan [Battle and Torjman 1999]. Caledon has proposed a redesign of the nonrefundable tax credit for CPP contributions to provide geared-to-income tax relief that could ease the regressivity of the CPP contributions increase.

In the area of social investment, the federal government must play a substantial investor role but need not be the only contributor. The health care system is in need of repair as a result of serious mounting pressures. These include an aging population, the growing demand for health services from a relatively affluent population, costly new diagnostic and procedural technologies, and funding cuts [Battle, Torjman and Mendelson 2000].

A national home care program is urgently needed to ease the shift from costly hospital and institutional care to more natural community-based care. But the health care system requires fundamental restructuring not only in terms of service delivery. Financing issues also must be addressed.

Provinces and territories are primarily responsible for delivering health care services. Ottawa provides services only to designated populations, including First Nations' communities on reserve and the military.

However, the federal government does play a crucial funding role. It contributes to the cost of health care through cash transfers and tax points under the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). As part of its efforts to slay the deficit, Ottawa drastically cut its cash transfers to provinces when the CHST took effect in 1996.

In 1999, the federal government injected \$7.5 billion over three years back into health care to stem the withdrawal of funds from the transfer arrangement. It also invested in a wide range of health research and information initiatives. The 2000 Budget announced a one-time boost of \$2.5 billion in cash transfers in respect of health care. Provinces still claim that these recent investments do not compensate for the substantial CHST losses.

And despite a publicly funded medicare system, Canada ranks behind other OECD countries with respect to investment in public health care as a share of the public/private mix. The public share of financing for health care in Canada is 70 percent with 30 percent as a private share compared to the 75/25 public/private OECD average financing [Battle, Torjman and Mendelson 2000].

In the area of early childhood development and family supports, Caledon recently proposed a federal investment of \$7.5 billion over five years towards a National Child Development Fund [Battle and Torjman 2000]. Ottawa would transfer money to the provinces and territories, subject to reasonable conditions: comprehensiveness, universality, accessibility, quality and accountability.

But neither Ottawa nor other levels of government can build a comprehensive system of family supports without the involvement of other

stakeholders: parents, municipalities, employers, unions, schools, child care providers and community groups. The system ideally would be built upon desirable practice guidelines: service integration, mixed delivery and community base.

In the field of education, Ottawa withdrew funds from postsecondary education through cuts to the Canada Health and Social Transfer although it has made some new investments in university research. Tuition rates at postsecondary educational institutes have continued to rise and recent changes to the Canada Student Loans Program have created financing pressures for students [Torjman 2000]. Several provinces also have withdrawn funds from their primary and secondary educational systems. These cuts represent a serious disinvestment in human capital, given the economic and social significance of high-quality education.

Finally, the federal government can play a crucial facilitation role by supporting the problem solving capacity of local communities. The concept of sustainable development adds a strong community or 'local' focus to the concept of economic and social well-being. However, this community focus is feasible only within the context of adequate public investments earlier described.

In addition to facilitating community-based problem solving, Ottawa can participate actively in these local processes. Federal representatives on the *Partners for Jobs* Task Force, for example, have made a major contribution with respect to local labour market information.

Solid and up-to-date information is an essential ingredient for local labour markets. The federal Department of Human Resources Development is responsible for collecting labour market information through several national surveys. Its regional offices, in turn, develop local labour market profiles. But there are problems with the existing data.

Current occupational classifications must be updated. Many occupations have emerged since the inception of the National Occupational Classification Coding System. There is no reliable way of identifying emerging labour force needs at the local level; information tends to focus primarily upon what exists right now rather than on the skills required in the near future.

Problems also arise from data collection methods. There is an inordinate reliance, for example, on printed 'help wanted' ads without taking into account electronic labour exchanges. Neither do existing surveys include jobs, such as construction work, typically posted in union hiring halls.

As part of the *Partners for Jobs* initiative, federal representatives have taken the lead role in resolving shortcomings in local labour market information. In conjunction with provincial, regional and community partners, the federal government is exploring ways to update current surveys, create new instruments and employ diverse methodologies to gather relevant data.

Directions arising from the federal role

What are the implications for the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development? This discussion of the federal role suggests several possible tasks. These include setting a framework for federal departments, identifying selected indicators and documenting the evaluative 'story.'

The first task is to create a framework of desirable directions within which federal departments and agencies can develop their respective work plans. The framework should be specific enough to give clear guidelines but general enough to allow interpretation and creative responses.

A second step is to identify selected indicators that would help determine whether desired

objectives are being met. Possible indicators might include, for example, measures of inequality in market and in total income (i.e., after transfers and taxes), waiting lists for affordable housing and use of food banks throughout the country.

The third task involves the documentation of various departmental activities that are deemed relevant within the context of sustainable development but that are not easy to measure or quantify. Clearly, this approach entails the collection of 'soft' information. It may be unrealistic to expect anything more than process outcomes and indicators.

Because the social dimension of sustainable development involves no single correct action, the Commissioner also might consider convening a small group of individuals both within and outside government to discuss the work that is being assessed. In effect, they would be engaged in the process of deliberative problem solving – much like the way in which the federal government itself is being encouraged to support communities.

One final point

The social dimension of sustainable development is concerned primarily with poverty reduction, social investment and the building of safe and caring communities.

In addition to clear goals, sustainable development provides guidance as to possible means. A wide range of resources should be harnessed in the achievement of these objectives. Complex problems are best tackled through multisectoral solutions.

It should be stressed, however, that these proposals are an *interpretation* of the social dimension of sustainable development. There is no 'right' answer – or single correct reading of this term. These proposals represent one view as seen as through a three-dimensional lens.

But there are likely as many views as there are viewers. It is only through sustained debate that the both the means and ends implied by the concept of sustainable development will come into sharper focus.

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