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# Sustainable Development and Social Justice: Expanding the Rawlsian Framework of Global Justice

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## ABSTRACT

This article makes two arguments. First, that social justice constitutes an inherent part of the conception of sustainable development that the World Commission on Environment and Development outlined in *Our Common Future* (1987). The primary goal of the Commission was to *reconcile* physical sustainability, need satisfaction and equal opportunities, within and between generations. Sustainable development is what defines this reconciliation.

Second, it is argued that this conception of sustainable development is broadly compatible with liberal theories of justice. Sustainable development, however, goes *beyond* liberal theories of justice in many respects. It is based on three assumptions, which are for the most part ignored in liberal theories: an accelerating *ecological* interdependence, historical inequality in past resource use, and the ‘growth of limits’. These assumptions create a conflict between intra- and intergenerational justice, which is ignored in liberal theories, but which sustainable development tries to solve. It does so by imposing duties on developed countries that goes beyond liberal demands, and by abandoning the focus ‘solely on protection’ that dominates non-anthropocentric approaches to environmental sustainability.

## KEYWORDS

Biological diversity, climate change, global justice, sustainable development

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

What is the relationship between sustainable development and social justice? Is the relationship functional, dysfunctional, incompatible or is social justice an

inherent part of sustainable development? This article argues that social justice constitutes an inherent part of sustainable development. The construction of sustainable development in *Our Common Future* (1987) was an attempt by the World Commission on Environment and Development to create an ethical framework that could enable national societies, and indeed the global human society, to respond to the emerging environmental and developmental problems in an equitable manner.

The World Commission was established in 1983 as an independent UN Commission with a mandate that gave it three objectives: to re-examine the critical environment and development issues and propose realistic options for dealing with them, to propose new forms of international co-operation on these issues, and to raise the levels of understanding and commitment to necessary action (WCED 1987: 3). The answers provided by the World Commission to these questions have been the subject of much discussion and many opinions. One example is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 1996: 40), which simply states that the Commission 'clearly had in mind environmental considerations', but 'did not spell out exactly what sustainable development included'. The IPCC (1996), however, seem preoccupied with the second of the two main concepts of sustainable development they identify: 'Although sustainable development began as an ethical principle, it is at the same time an economic concept'. The latter focuses on the issues of intertemporal equity, and capital accumulation and substitutability (IPCC 1996: 40).

As an economic concept, sustainable development has been heavily debated (see for example the dispute between Beckerman 1994, 1995; Daly 1995; Jacobs 1995; Skolimowski 1995; Serafy 1996 and Common 1996). Sustainable development has received less attention as an ethical principle, despite the fact that it (and sustainability) was not intended to be understood in economic terms but 'were, and remain, essentially ethico-political objectives' (Jacobs 1995: 65). As Serafy (1996: 76) points out, 'weak sustainability' is not the same as 'sustainable development', and neither is 'strong sustainability'. Instead, 'weak' and 'strong' sustainability should be seen as 'rules' for how sustainable development could or should be attained (Asheim 1999).

According to Dobson (1998), the relationship between distributive justice and environmental sustainability 'can only ever be a contingent one'. In what he calls 'First thesis', Dobson (1998: 241) argues that the discourses of sustainability and justice can be related in three fundamental ways: '(i) *the environment as something to be distributed*, (ii) *justice as functional for sustainability*, (iii) "*justice to the environment*"'. The argument presented here, however, is that there is a much closer relationship between sustainable development and social justice in *Our Common Future* than what is captured by the 'environmental sustainability' or 'weak' and 'strong' concepts of sustainability as described by Dobson. In short, Dobson leaves out a fourth option: that (iv) *sustainability is a necessary condition for justice*.

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It can be argued, of course, that this is simply a truism. Sustainability is a necessary condition for most things in the future. The argument in this article, however, is that how the relationship between social justice and sustainability is structured, has profound consequences for environment and development policies. It affects not only the goals of development, but also the priorities and strategies that follow from the concept of sustainable development. The following quote from Dobson (1998) illustrates what is at stake here:

The functional relationship between justice and sustainability is nearly always presented as a virtuous one, but what if it turned out that, under some circumstances, social and economic inequality (another version of what social justice might entail) was conducive to environmental sustainability? For many, this would force a difficult choice between sustainability and justice, and would make clear – for those who chose the former, even on the basis that its realisation would demand the deepening of inequality – the subordination of justice to sustainability. (Dobson 1998: 241)

I think Dobson (1998: 243) is wrong, however, in his assertion that ‘the question of whether sustainability and justice are compatible objectives can only be resolved empirically’. The claim made in this article is that, from a purely anthropocentric perspective, the relationship between social justice and what I prefer to call physical sustainability, is basically ‘theoretical’ and ‘normative’ and therefore not dependent upon a functional relationship. The fundamental goal in *Our Common Future* was to *reconcile* physical sustainability, need satisfaction, and equal opportunities within and between generations. Sustainable development is what defines this reconciliation.

Dobson (1998: 245) is partly right, however, in his ‘Sixth thesis’, that sustainable development is broadly compatible with liberal theories of justice. I say partly, because sustainable development goes *beyond* liberal theories of justice in many respects.<sup>2</sup> Sustainable development addresses two of the extensions that Rawls (1993b: 44) argues *Justice as fairness* may yield reasonable answers to: to other societies and to future generations.<sup>3</sup> Sustainable development, however, is based on the assumptions of growing economic and ecological interdependence and ecological limits at the global level. These assumptions are more or less neglected in liberal theories of justice. From the perspective of sustainable development, these assumptions generate distributional principles that are more demanding and egalitarian than liberal principles. I argue that sustainable development leads to what can be called an ‘open-ended egalitarianism’ or ‘constrained inequality’.

In order to substantiate these claims, I shall, from a purely anthropocentric view, focus upon intragenerational justice, global poverty, intergenerational justice – and, most importantly, the linkages between them – through the problems of climate change and biological diversity. That implies addressing the two Conventions adopted at the Earth Summit in 1992, the UN Framework

Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity. The reason is that both Conventions, and the ongoing negotiations within the Conventions, reveal strong conflicts around questions of social justice and the relationship between social justice and sustainable development. Conflicts that, in my view, are captured neither by the economic nor the environmental concepts of sustainability.

### 1. THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is a contested concept. Contestable concepts are complex and normative (Jacobs 1999). *Our Common Future* (WCED 1987) is nonetheless said to represent 'the key statement of sustainable development' (Kirkby, O'Keefe, and Timberlake 1995: 1). It became the key principle underpinning environment and development policies at both national and international levels (Jacobs 1999; Lafferty 1996; Lafferty and Langhelle 1999). There are different opinions, however, concerning the origin of the concept of sustainable development (see Worster 1993; O'Riordan 1993; McManus 1996; Jacob 1996; Murcott 1997). The World Conservation Strategy (IUCN et al. 1980) is often seen as one of the first to make use of the term, but the earliest expression, to my knowledge, relates to work done within the World Council of Churches in the early seventies. The following, which could have been a quotation from *Our Common Future*, is actually from a report made by a working group within the World Council of Churches in 1976:

The twin issues around which the world's future revolves are justice and ecology. 'Justice' points to the necessity of correcting maldistribution of the products of the Earth and of bridging the gap between rich and poor countries. 'Ecology' points to humanity's dependence upon the Earth. Society must be so organised as to sustain the Earth so that a sufficient quality of material and cultural life for humanity may itself be sustained indefinitely. A sustainable society which is unjust can hardly be worth sustaining. A just society that is unsustainable is self-defeating. Humanity now has the responsibility to make a deliberate transition to a just and sustainable global society. (Cited from Birch et al. 1979)

Although this report speaks of a transition to a just and sustainable global society, not sustainable development, there are several stipulations made on the relationships between social justice and physical sustainability. Social justice, physical sustainability and the global dimension are crucial parts of the framework of sustainable development. The definition of sustainable development in *Our Common Future* to some extent conceals all three dimensions and their (inter-)relationship. In order to identify the relationship(s) between social justice and sustainable development, it is therefore necessary to focus on the 'conception', and not only the 'concept', of sustainable development. According to

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Rawls (1993a: 14), the concept is 'the meaning of the term, while a particular conception includes as well the principles required to apply it'. To see sustainable development as a conception implies that the definition must be seen in the broader context of other concepts, conceptual and normative preconditions, and the implicit interrelations that shape the framework (Verburg and Wiegel 1997).

The World Commission defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. This definition, according to the report, contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs (WCED 1987: 43).

The satisfaction of human needs must, in light of both the definition and the first key concept, be seen as the primary objective of development (WCED 1987: 43). Malnes (1990: 3) calls this the *goal of development*. The qualification that this development must also be sustainable is a constraint placed on this goal, meaning that each generation is permitted to pursue its interests only in ways that do not undermine the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Malnes (1990: 3) calls this the *proviso of sustainability*. Since the sustainability constraint is a necessary condition for future need satisfaction, which is part of what sustainable development is supposed to secure, the proviso of sustainability becomes a necessary part of the goal of development, thus providing the interdependency of the concept. Or, as Malnes formulates it: 'the proviso is entailed by the very goal whose pursuit it constrains' (Malnes 1990: 7).

This way of understanding the concept of sustainable development has several important consequences for the goals, priorities, and strategies that follows from the concept. For one thing, it puts intragenerational justice as the first objective of sustainable development policies.

## 2. INTRAGENERATIONAL JUSTICE AND GLOBAL POVERTY

*Our Common Future* thus places social justice *at the core* of sustainable development. The relationship is not, therefore, as Dobson (1999) argues, first and foremost 'empirical' or 'functional'. Social justice is *the* primary development goal of sustainable development. Dobson (1999) is, of course, right in pointing out that *Our Common Future* strongly argues that there are 'empirical' and 'functional' relationships between social justice and sustainable development. Poverty is seen as a 'major cause and effect of global environmental

problems' (WECD 1987: 44), and the 'reduction of poverty itself' is seen as a 'precondition for environmentally sound development' (WECD 1987: 69).

But the priority given to the world's poor is also *independent* of the poverty-environment thesis (Langhelle 1998, 1999a). That is, even if the thesis is proved wrong and there is no clear dependency between poverty and environmental degradation, the underlying framework of *Our Common Future* would still lead to a prioritisation of the essential needs of the world's poor in the name of social justice (and sustainable development). As stated in the report, poverty is 'an evil in itself' (WCED 1987: 8). Sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of *all*, thus extending to all the opportunity to fulfil aspirations for a better life (WCED 1987: 8), and 'an adequate livelihood base and equitable access to resources' (WCED 1987: 39). The equal opportunity principle should thus be seen as an inherent part of the concept of sustainable development (Lafferty and Langhelle 1999; Langhelle 1999a).

There is no doubt, therefore, that intragenerational justice – understood as need satisfaction and equal opportunity – is the first priority of sustainable development. It constitutes the first part of the definition: 'development that meets the needs of the present ...', and is seen as the primary concern both within countries and between countries. As such, sustainable development entails a strong commitment to redistribution between rich and poor- nationally and globally. And, in this respect, Jacobs (1999: 30) is wrong in his claim that environmental protection is 'without doubt the central idea' of sustainable development. As Adams (1990: 59) points out: '*Our Common Future* starts with people'. It is an anthropocentric approach, although there are also non-anthropocentric perspectives to be found (WCED 1987: 13, 57; Wetlesen 1999; Benton 1999). As such, the anthropocentric view of *Our Common Future* should fit well with liberal theories of international justice.

### 3. LIBERAL THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL (DISTRIBUTIVE) JUSTICE

As several commentators have pointed out, the priority given to the world's poor has a strong resemblance with Rawls' (1973, 1993a) difference principle: 'Social and economic inequalities are ... to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society' (Rawls 1993a: 6). In *The Law of Peoples* (1993b), however, Rawls explicitly argues against those who have argued that the principles of domestic justice also should apply among nations (Rawls 1993b: 75). The egalitarian features in Rawls' principles of justice – the fair value of the political liberties, the fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle – are not, and should not, according to Rawls, be part of the law of peoples (Rawls 1993b: 51).

Beitz (1999a) distinguishes between three different liberal perspectives on distributive justice: social liberalism, laissez-faire liberalism, and cosmopolitan liberalism.<sup>4</sup> Given Rawls' rejection of applying the difference principle globally, cosmopolitan liberalism seems to be the perspective which corresponds best with sustainable development. Pogge (1989: 242) thus argues that, taken seriously, Rawls' conception of justice will 'make the social position of the globally least advantaged the touchstone for assessing our basic institutions'. Likewise, Beitz (1979: 170) argues that 'the appropriate global principle is Rawls' difference principle'.

Three sources of disagreement for the applicability of the difference principle are of special importance from the perspective of sustainable development. The first relates to the subject matter. The second concerns the different views on ideal and non-ideal theory, and the third concerns the interpretations of the 'empirical' world.

*The subject matter.* The subject matter relates to what seems to be Rawls' (1993b) primary concern. Rawls seems to be most interested in determining where to draw the reasonable line of toleration with regard to non-liberal regimes (Rawls 1993b: 43). This he formulates as giving a suitable rationale for two basic changes, which he identifies as having occurred in international law since World War II: first, that international law now tends to restrict a state's right to wage war to cases of self-defence; and second, that international law now tends to limit a state's right of internal sovereignty. Because of this, international law has become more demanding than before, and *The Law of Peoples* should fit these empirical changes (Rawls 1993b: 49).

Rawls' primary concern is, in a sense, backward-looking. It is an attempt to justify changes that have more or less already occurred. As such, it is a more modest – but not less important – theory<sup>5</sup> that sets the limits of toleration by providing a political conception of right and justice for international law and practice. To achieve this, however, Rawls surrenders egalitarian concerns of liberal justice, and as Pogge (1994: 216), and Beitz (1999a: 276) point out, some important human rights too; namely political and economic rights.

*Ideal and non-ideal theory.* According to Rawls, ideal theory is ideal in the sense that 'the relevant concepts and principles are strictly complied with by all parties to the agreements made and that the requisite favourable conditions for liberal and hierarchical institutions are on hand' (Rawls 1993b: 52). At the same time, Rawls argues that in 'actual affairs, non-ideal theory is of first practical importance and deals with problems we face every day' (Rawls 1993b: 53). The difference principle, however, is 'not feasible as a way to deal with the general question of unfavourable conditions among societies' (Rawls 1993b: 75). Actually, Rawls believes all liberal distributive principles to be 'unsuitable' for this purpose (Rawls 1993b: 22, fn. 51).



Pogge and Beitz, however, want to address the questions of global poverty and inequality directly in ideal theory. As Beitz (1979: 157) argues, ideal theory ‘prescribes standards that serve as goals of political change in the non-ideal world, assuming that a just society can, in due course, be achieved’. As such, ideal theory points to the future, not to the past. According to Pogge (1989: 230), it is ‘a minimal demand upon political ideal theory that it develop an ideal of a *future* world’. Moreover, this must be ‘a world that is connectable to the status quo by a morally admissible route’ (Pogge 1989: 230). The primary concern for Pogge and Beitz thus seems to be more in accordance with the subject matter of the World Commission’s mandate – ‘to help define shared perceptions ... and aspirational goals for the world community’ (WCED 1987: ix).

But the differences between social and cosmopolitan liberalism should not be exaggerated. Rawls’ (1993b) ideal theory still addresses human needs and global poverty along two different routes. The first is by the ideal conception of the society of peoples as consisting of well-ordered societies. This gives rise, according to Rawls, to duties and obligations of assistance to societies burdened by unfavourable conditions.<sup>6</sup> So, every society now burdened by unfavourable conditions ‘should be raised to, or assisted toward, conditions that make a well-ordered society possible’ (Rawls 1993b: 75). Because of the ideal conception of the society of peoples as consisting of well-ordered societies, ‘there is no need for a liberal principle of distributive justice ...’ (Rawls 1993b: 228, fn. 52).

The second route is by human rights and Rawls’ interpretation of basic human rights. Among the rights Rawls refer to as human rights, are the rights to life and security, to personal property, the elements of the rule of law, a certain liberty of consciousness, freedom of association, and the right to emigration (Rawls 1993b: 68). Moreover, Rawls agrees with Shue (1980) that subsistence rights are basic, and that subsistence rights include a certain minimum of economic security: ‘the reasonable and rational exercise of all liberties, of whatever kind, as well as the intelligent use of property, always implies having certain all-purpose economic means’ (Rawls 1993b: 225, fn. 26).

This also corresponds to what Rawls defines as basic needs: ‘By basic needs I mean roughly those that must be met if citizens are to be in a position to take advantage of the rights, liberties, and opportunities of their society. They include economic means as well as institutional rights and freedoms’ (Rawls 1993b: 223, f.15). Rawls’ understanding of basic human rights thus includes the duty of providing the means necessary for meeting basic needs in every society, not only liberal ones. Rawls is quite explicit on this point: ‘basic human rights are to be secured everywhere ... and basic human needs are to be met’ (Rawls 1993b: 76). Rawls’ ideal theory, then, does have distributional implications, and Rawls therefore argues that the egalitarian features in *Justice as fairness* are really ‘not needed for the construction of a reasonable law of peoples’ (Rawls 1993b: 51–2).

*Interpretations of the 'empirical' world.* Rawls (1993a: 44, 46) refers to real societies as 'closed', 'self-sufficient', and 'self-contained'. Barry (1991: 194) seems to agree with Rawls that the world does not 'constitute a co-operative scheme of the relevant kind' for applying the difference principle. Beitz (1979) argues that one can speak of a 'global regulative structure', and the institutions that organise it can be considered as the 'constitutional structure of the world economy' (Beitz 1979: 148–9). While Beitz (1983: 595) regrets making the validity of global justice dependent on the factual question of global interdependence – because it 'would arbitrarily favour the status quo' – he claims that all that is required by interdependence is that it produces benefits and burdens (Beitz 1979). The role of a principle of distributive justice is, therefore, to specify what a fair distribution of the benefits and burdens should be (Beitz 1979: 152).

For Beitz (1979), a global session in the original position would lead to the acceptance of a resource redistribution principle that would give every society a fair chance to develop just political institutions and an economy capable of satisfying basic human needs. This principle would function as a global difference principle, and provide resource-poor societies with the economic means necessary to support just social institutions and to protect human rights (Beitz 1979: 142). But Rawls (1993b) explicitly argues that the *Law of Peoples* 'accepts Beitz's goals for just institutions, securing human rights and meeting basic needs' (Rawls 1993b: 229, fn. 52). As such, it could be argued that even Pogge's (1994) institutional proposal of a global resources tax (GRT), would be a step in the right direction within Rawls' own approach.

Barry (1991) goes one step further along the lines of *Our Common Future*. In his view, justice as reciprocity is only to a limited degree an approach to deal with the problems of justice between nations (and generations). Justice as reciprocity 'can say nothing about the initial control over natural resources' (Barry 1991: 235), and needs to be supplemented (not displaced) with another principle of justice – equal opportunity. The minimal claim of equal opportunity, according to Barry, 'is an equal claim on the earth's natural resources', the maximum claim is 'that the same abilities and efforts should reap the same rewards' (Barry 1991: 238). This leads to the following formulation of this criterion of justice: 'Insofar as redistribution is required by the demands of justice, the criterion of justice is that countries, as collectives, should have their fair share of the world's resources' (Barry 1991: 240).

As a preliminary conclusion, it is obvious that all of the above extensions lead in the same direction, towards an obligation or duty to assist the poor people of the world. It is less clear, however, if this for Rawls is also done in the name of justice (Beitz 1999a). But arguably, all the above extensions are in accordance with the first key concept which, according to the World Commission, sustainable development contains: 'the concept of "needs", in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given' (WCED

1987: 43). In a world where 13,000 million people live on less than US\$1 per day, in what UNEP describes as 'severe poverty' (UNEP 1999), both social and cosmopolitan liberalism seem to demand massive redistribution from wealthier to poorer nations.

But is fulfilling justice in this sense functional for physical sustainability? Will not the satisfaction of human needs and an equalisation of opportunities within our generation jeopardise the interests of future generations and the non-human world? Can it be done without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same?

#### 4. FROM INTRA- TO INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE

If the relationship between social justice (eradicating poverty on a global scale) and environmental improvements (securing physical sustainability) were truly functional, there would be little need for anything more than international justice. Dobson (1998), however, has strong doubts about this functionality, also called the 'poverty-environment-thesis' (Angelsen 1997). The 'intellectual foundation' of sustainable development, according to Dobson (1998), is therefore dependent upon a further clarification of the circumstances 'under which social injustice is a cause of environmental unsustainability' (Dobson 1998: 244). *Our Common Future* gives a number of examples where the above functionality is said to exist (WCED 1987: xii, 1, 3, 5, 8, 11, 22, 27, 29-30, 43-44, 46, 49, 51, 69, 70, 72, 74, 95, 106, 109, 127, 129, 141-2, 152-3, 189-91, 290, 292, 300). Many of these relations, however, where social injustice is seen as a cause of environmental unsustainability, are complex and interrelate with a number of other factors.

Maybe the most prominent functionality is seen to exist between population growth and social justice: 'Poverty breeds high rates of population growth' (WCED 1987: 106; Thompson 1992). It is argued that almost 'any activity that increases well-being and security lessens people's desires to have more children than they and national ecosystems can support' (WCED 1987: 98). 'Sustainable economic growth and equitable access to resources' are therefore seen as 'two of the more certain routes towards lower fertility rates' (WCED 1987: 96). The Commission's treatment of population growth is also instructive concerning what is seen as the goal(s) of development: 'It is misleading and an injustice to the human condition to see people merely as consumers. Their well-being and security – old age security, declining child mortality, health care, and so on – are the goal of development' (WCED 1987: 98).

Again, the question of functionality turns up. Are these goals of development functional for sustainable development? For population growth, maybe, but what about other environmental problems? Dobson (1998) argues that 'poverty is not always linked to unsustainable practices'. Its relief, therefore, 'may not result in environmental improvements, and ... in any case, the poor pursue some

of the most environmentally sustainable lives on earth' (Dobson 1998: 136). Eradicating poverty may therefore sometimes be dysfunctional for physical sustainability. This awareness, however, that meeting the needs of the present and expanding the opportunities for a better life to all may also have environmental costs is fundamental for the whole conception of sustainable development:

Given expected population growth, a five- to tenfold increase in world industrial output can be anticipated by the time world population stabilises sometime in the next century. *Such growth has serious implications for the future of the world's ecosystems and its natural resource base.* (WCED 1987: 213)<sup>7</sup>

This was, according to MacNeill (1990: 109), *ex officio* for the World Commission, precisely the challenge the World Commission had to struggle with: 'Is there any way to meet the needs and aspirations of the five billion people now living on the earth without compromising the ability of tomorrow's eight to 10 billion to meet theirs?'<sup>8</sup> The answer was, according to MacNeill, yes, 'providing there are fundamental changes in the way nations manage the world economy' (MacNeill 1990: 111). The growth needed to meet human needs and aspirations, however, 'translates into a colossal new burden on the ecosphere' (MacNeill, Winsemius and Yakushiji 1991: 27). Therefore, meeting needs and aspirations is *not* necessarily functional for physical sustainability, but essentially what makes up the challenge of sustainable development.

Moreover, the 'economic' concept of sustainable development – with its focus solely on intertemporal equity, capital accumulation and sustainability (IPCC 1996: 40) – can in this perspective be seen as a 'way of translating present injustices into the future' (Holland 1999). Besides offering an extremely bad bargain for the world's poor, it conceals the fact that living conditions to a large extent determine both individual life-chances and the very composition of future generations (Langhelle 1999a). Why bother about inter-generational equity if your own children have very poor chances of reaching adulthood? The priority given to the world's poor is thus a moral constraint on possible alternative development trajectories. More precisely, it is an attempt to rule out the very premise underlying Hardin's (1977) 'Lifeboat Ethics' (Langhelle 1999a), and to avoid present injustices being translated into the future.<sup>9</sup>

The question still remains, however, how to do this without compromising future generations. The World Commission's initial answer to this question was physical sustainability defined as 'the minimum requirement for sustainable development: 'At a minimum, sustainable development must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth: the atmosphere, the waters, the soils, and the living beings' (WCED 1987: 44-45). Physical sustainability is thus, as seen by Barry (1999), a necessary *condition* for justice between generations. With Barry as an exception, however, these questions have only to a limited extent been addressed within liberal theories of justice. But as we shall see, parts of the liberal approaches to intergenerational justice raise problems very similar to that of sustainable development.

## 5. LIBERAL ANSWERS TO INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE

The problem of intergenerational justice 'subjects any ethical theory to severe if not impossible tests' (Rawls 1973: 284). Much energy has been devoted to the problems of intergenerational justice.<sup>10</sup> Without it, however, 'justice as fairness would be incomplete' (Rawls 1973: 284), and so would sustainable development. According to Rawls (1973: 285), intergenerational justice implies that each generation 'must not only preserve the gains of culture and civilisation, and maintain intact those just institutions that have been established, but must also put aside in each period of time a suitable amount of real capital accumulation.' This is Rawls' well known 'just savings principle'. It implies that 'each generation passes on to the next a fair equivalent in real capital' (Rawls 1973: 288).

While Rawls (1993a) has changed his defence for the just savings principle,<sup>11</sup> the content of the principle remains the same. The important question, in our context, is what constraints the just savings principle actually imposes on possible development trajectories. Rawls (1993b) actually includes sustainability among the 'important roles of a people's government'. Governments representing their people should 'take responsibility for their territory and the size of their population, as well as for maintaining its environmental integrity and its capacity to sustain them' (Rawls 1993b: 56). Rawls does not, however, follow up on the implications of this 'important role'. Nor does he stipulate any relations between sustainability and the just savings principle on the global scale.

Will the just savings principle (if actually followed) prevent one generation from using up natural resources and destroying the environment at the expense of future generations? Beitz (1979: 142) raises this problem as a complicating factor in his account of the global resource principle. The appropriation of scarce resources requires a justification against the competing claims of others, *and* the needs of future generations. The dilemma Beitz (1979: 142) stipulates is the following: the veil of ignorance prevents the parties in the global original position from knowing their generation. Therefore, they would be concerned about minimising the risk that they would find themselves living in a world where resources by and large had been depleted. The resource redistribution principle would set some standard for conservation against this possibility, but he does not seem to think that it addresses the problem adequately (Beitz 1979: 142).

Beitz (1979) does not follow up the issue, except for pointing out that some provision for conservation as a matter of justice with respect to future generations would be necessary (Beitz 1979: 142). Later, he goes further and argues that with 'greater awareness of the environmental consequences of growth, one sees that things are more complicated' (Beitz 1999b: 294). One must, therefore, 'think of the savings rate as a constraint on current consumption expressed in terms of a complex aggregate of capital amassed, resource use forgone, and

technology developed to conserve and regenerate the biosphere's absorptive capacity' (Beitz 1999b: 294). These questions of course go to the very heart of the sustainable development debate. In fact, the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development can be seen as concepts constructed precisely with the aim of framing these issues in a broad sense.

## 6. FROM LIBERAL JUSTICE TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Dobson (1998) distinguishes between three broad conceptions of environmental sustainability which in a sense give different answers to how the 'complex aggregate' should be constructed. The organising principle in Dobson's typology is the answer they provide to the question 'what is to be sustained?' (Dobson 1998: 40). The answers are 'critical natural capital', 'irreversible nature' and 'natural value'. The two last conceptions include – or rest upon – non-anthropocentric justifications. While 'critical natural capital' is 'radically indeterminate', according to Dobson, it should be understood primarily in terms of 'critical to the production and reproduction of human life' (Dobson 1998: 43). In Dobson's view, the concept of sustainable development falls in this category.

Moreover, Dobson (1998) argues that there are two possible ways of reconciling the just savings principle with the perspective of 'critical natural capital'. The first relates to Manning's (1981: 162) suggestion that just savings must include the passing of natural capital such as clean air, water and land, something Rawls (1993b: 56) no doubt sees as an 'important role of a people's government'. The other option suggested by Dobson (1998) is to 'include critical natural capital in the lists of primary goods'. This partly because critical natural capital 'has the required preconditional characteristics' (Dobson 1998: 126; see also Miller 1999). Seen from the perspective of need satisfaction and equal opportunities, a necessary material base and access to environmental resources also seem like necessary requirements for social justice between generations. From Rawls' argument that basic human needs are to be met (Rawls 1993b: 76), it is a short way to the conclusion that the conditions for meeting human needs in the future should be secured.

Dobson (1998) is thus able to show that Rawlsian justice can accommodate the principle of 'critical natural capital' and thus sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development can in many ways be seen as a 'just savings principle' in the Rawlsian sense. Sustainable development not only implies that each generation preserves the gains of culture and civilisation, but also that they do not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth, and preserve the ecological conditions of life. The reasons for doing so are the same as for upholding the 'just savings principle': to respect, create and maintain just institutions and all that is needed to make just institutions and the fair value of liberty possible.

Dobson (1998: 130), however, argues that 'to say that environmental sustainability is a precondition for distributive justice is to say nothing determinate about the content of justice, and so we are drawn back to the empirical point'. The principle of equal opportunity fares no better in Dobson's view. It is seen as a 'weak and rather unhelpful formulation' (Dobson 1998: 162). There are, no doubt, a number of distributive principles and different theories of justice that produce quite different schemes of justice. But how 'empty' really is physical sustainability as a precondition for distributive justice? What does it entail? And how weak and unhelpful really is the principle of equal opportunity within and between generations seen from an anthropocentric perspective?

## 6. THE CONCEPTION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

It is in the answers provided to the question of how to reconcile physical sustainability and social justice that the World Commission departs from liberal theories of justice. The departure is rooted both in ideal and non-ideal theory, the subject matter, and the interpretations of the 'empirical' world. Sustainable development is ideal theory in the sense that it sets the goals for a possible future world. It is non-ideal in the sense that it is framed for a world dominated by unfavourable conditions. It departs from the subject matter of liberal justice in its attempt to integrate environment and development concerns into one single framework.

In many ways, the 'empirical world', and especially environmental problems, are absent from liberal approaches. Liberal theories neglect a number of empirical assumptions that are fundamental to the conception of sustainable development. The first is the empirical assumption of an accelerating *ecological* interdependence:

We are now forced to concern ourselves with the impacts of ecological stress – degradation of soils, water regimes, atmosphere and forests – upon our economic prospects. We have in the more recent past been forced to face up with a sharp increase in economic interdependence among nations. We are now forced to accustom ourselves to an accelerating ecological interdependence among nations. (WCED 1987: 5)

Rawls' implicit assumption about environmental self-sufficiency is, in this perspective, wrong. Ecological interdependence makes it impossible for one country to maintain its environmental integrity alone.

The second fundamental assumption where the Commission departs from liberal theories, relates to the circumstances facing developing countries:

... developing countries must operate in a world in which the resources gap between most developing countries and industrial nations is widening, in which

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the industrial world dominates in the rule-making of some key international bodies, and in which the industrial world has already used much of the planet's ecological capital. This inequality is the planet's main 'environmental' problem, it is also its main 'development' problem. (WCED 1987: 5-6)

As such, *Our Common Future* recognises inequality as a problem for international procedural justice, and historical inequality in past resource use as a fundamental circumstance for future politics.

The historical inequality in resource use, however, would not be of much interest if there were no limits to growth. This is the third empirical assumption where sustainable development departs from liberal theories. In contrast to *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972), *Our Common Future* is rather optimistic about the prospects of economic growth and resource use. On the one hand, it is argued that growth has no set limits, because the 'limits' can (as the second key concept in sustainable development indicates) be 'manipulated' by technology and social organisation. On the other hand, the report argues that there are ultimate limits: 'But ultimate limits there are, and sustainability requires that long before these are reached, the world must ensure equitable access to the constrained resource and reorient technological efforts to relieve the pressure' (WCED 1987: 45).

This view seems to fit well with most liberal views on the functioning of liberal societies. McNeill, Winsemius and Yakushiji (1991: 27), however, argue that the 'maxim of sustainable development is not "limits to growth", it is rather "the growth of limits"'. It is the growth of limits in the sense that the 'basic food and energy needs of 5 billion people (with 5 billion more to come in the next five decades) require large appropriations of natural resources, and the most basic aspirations for material consumption, livelihood, and health, require even more' (McNeill, Winsemius and Yakushiji 1991: 27).

Contrary to liberal theories, the World Commission argues that different limits hold for the use of energy, materials, water, and land (WCED 1987: 45). The limits met first are the availability of energy and the biosphere's capacity to absorb the by-products of energy use. These limits may be approached far sooner than the limits imposed by other material resources, because of the depletion of oil reserves and carbon dioxide build-up leading to global warming (WCED 1987: 58-59).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it may already be at hand. Climate change not only 'forces recognition of global interdependence' (IPCC 1996: 118), but constitutes the first limit to global development. Climate change, therefore, is fundamental to sustainable development (Langhelle 1999a), in a way it has yet to be in liberal theories of justice.

Moreover, global ecological interdependence relates to a number of other issues like food security, freshwater scarcity, pollution, land degradation, and not least, biological diversity. Loss of biological diversity is perceived as a global problem that inhabits a conflict between the short-term economic interests of



nations and the long-term interests of sustainable development (WCED 1987: 160). The dilemma is, of course, that given 'population growth rates, a five- to tenfold increase in manufacturing output will be needed just in order to raise developing-world consumption of manufactured goods to industrialised world levels by the time population growth rates level off next century' (WCED 1987: 15).

How is this to be done without compromising the needs and opportunities of future generations when it comes to climate change and biological diversity? How is the conflict between intra- and intergenerational justice to be solved? These questions go to the heart of both the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

## 6. CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Climate change implies the potential for human activities to alter the Earth's climate to an extent unprecedented in human history with severe, but also unpredictable and unknown, consequences for humans and ecosystems. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC 1992) was the first response of the international community to this threat. In December 1997, the Kyoto Protocol to the Convention was adopted, specifying commitments on the emissions of greenhouse gases from industrialised countries. The specific commitments of the Kyoto Protocol, however, will neither 'halt global emissions growth, nor have a discernible impact on economic growth (Grubb, Vrolijk and Brack 1999: xxxiii).

The minimum requirement of sustainable development, not to endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth, is more or less identical to the objective of the Convention: 'stabilisation of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system' (UNFCCC 1992: 9). Moreover, it is argued that such a level 'should be achieved within a time-frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner' (UNFCCC 1992: 9).

While the objective is mainly directed towards intergenerational justice, intragenerational justice is taken into account in a number of ways.<sup>13</sup> It is noted that 'per capita emissions in developing countries are still relatively low, and that the share of global emissions originating in developing countries will grow to meet their social and developmental needs' (UNFCCC 1992: 2). Moreover, it affirms the 'the legitimate priority needs of developing countries for the achievement of sustained economic growth and the eradication of poverty' (UNFCCC 1992: 6). Furthermore, in accordance with the first key concept of sustainable development, it takes into account that 'economic and social devel-

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opment and poverty eradication are the first and overriding priorities of the developing country Parties' (UNFCCC 1992: 14). The Framework Convention thus acknowledges the 'specific needs and special circumstances' of developing countries. As stated in Article 3.1:

The Parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common and differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. Accordingly, the developed country Parties should take the lead of combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof' (UNFCCC 1992: 9).

By differentiating obligations and including foregoing factors, IPCC (1996: 91) argues that the Convention 'appears to have dealt comprehensively with the equity concerns'. The implementation of the Convention on an equitable basis, however, requires 'further agreement about the significance of these factors, the relative weight to be given to each in particular situations, and the precise meaning of commitments undertaken by each of them. This, in turn, will require agreement about the meaning of principles ...' (IPCC 1996: 91). Among them, the principle that the Parties 'have the right to, and should, promote sustainable development' (UNFCCC 192: IPCC 1996: 91).

According to Shue (1993), the problem of climate change raises four distributional questions that have to be answered:

(1) What is a fair allocation of the costs of preventing the global warming that is still avoidable? (2) What is a fair allocation of the costs of coping with the social consequences of the global warming that will not in fact be avoided?; (3) What background allocation of wealth would allow international bargaining (about issues like 1 and 2) to be a fair process?; (4) What is a fair allocation of emissions of greenhouse gases (over the long-term and during the transition to the long-term allocation)? (Shue 1993: 39)

These questions are crucial to sustainable development because they are vital for the reconciliation of physical sustainability and social justice. From the perspective of intergenerational justice, the first task is to determine what actually constitutes 'dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system'. As Shue (1993) argues, global warming requires a ceiling, and probably a progressively declining ceiling, upon total net emissions. Bert Brolin, former Chairman of the IPCC, has argued constantly that this is a political issue and not a scientific issue. By the wording of the 'Geneva Ministerial Declaration', however, it seems that the Ministers implicitly accepted 'twice preindustrial levels', or about 550 ppmv, as a rough measure of what constitutes 'dangerous' (Harrison 1997: 89). Still, however, there is no real agreement as to the size of the 'cake' to be distributed.

There are a number of proposed criteria for the distribution of the deponic capacity of the atmosphere (Grubb et al. 1992; Kverndokk 1995; Paterson 1996,

IPCC 1996).<sup>14</sup> Although *Our Common Future* is silent on the actual distribution, the conception of sustainable development nonetheless seems to support what has been called the idea of ‘contraction and convergence’ backed by Africa, India and China. Contraction implies reducing the amount of emissions into the atmosphere to stabilise the climate. Convergence implies moving towards an equal share on a per capita basis in the sustainable use of fossil fuels (Christian Aid 1999: 3).

The World Commission argued strongly for an equitable access to resources (WCED 1987: 39), and the following passage in *Our Common Future* can be seen as an argument for equal shares between nations on a per capita basis.

Living standards that *go beyond* the basic minimum are sustainable only if consumption standards everywhere have regard for long-term sustainability. Yet many of us live beyond the world’s ecological means, for instance in our patterns of energy use. Perceived needs are socially and culturally determined, and sustainable development requires the promotion of values that encourage consumption standards that are within the bounds of the ecological possible and to which all can reasonably aspire. (WCED 1987: 44)<sup>15</sup>

From this conception of sustainable development the task is no longer directed towards defining the minimum level of need satisfaction and equal opportunity, but defining the upper limits, in this case for energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. The passage can be interpreted to contain two distinct principles, which apply to living standards that go beyond the minimum requirement: (i), that consumption standards are to be within the bonds of the ecologically possible. This can be formulated as *the principle of physical sustainability*. And (ii), that consumption standards are to be such that we all (persons and peoples) reasonably can aspire towards them (though not necessarily achieve them). This can be called *the principle of universality* (Lafferty and Langhelle 1999).

Developed countries have in liberal theories no duty towards developing countries beyond basic need satisfaction and equal opportunity (or to create the conditions which make a well-ordered society possible). The above principles impose duties upon developed countries that go beyond liberal principles. Changing production and consumption standards in *developed* countries becomes a necessity in order to reconcile the concern for intra- and intergenerational justice. The alternative would be to prevent developing countries from aspiring, and later attaining, a living standard equivalent to that of developed countries, and to argue that developed countries have an exclusive right to their present standard of living.

But even though the principle of universality may imply an equal share of the available depository capacity for greenhouse gases on a per capita basis, it does not necessarily imply an equal distribution of other environmental resources or resources in general.<sup>16</sup> It does not imply that living standards, lifestyles and consumption will, or should, turn out equal. The principle of universality only

demands an equal or equitable share of the resources that fall under the scope of the principle of physical sustainability. It is doubtful that fresh water, food, and other goods can be distributed equally on a global basis. But it is equally clear that the consumption of some of these goods may make other worse off. The principles, therefore, takes into consideration that what is required by justice is not making successors better off, which, according to Barry (1991: 241), is a nice thing to do but not required by justice, 'and not making them worse off, which is required by justice' (see also Shue 1999).

For this reason, it is more precise to say that *the principle of physical sustainability* – working in tandem with *the principle of universality* – constrain inequality for certain environmental goods by demanding that these are distributed fairly. But the principle of universality would apply only for the distribution of those environmental goods that come in conflict with the principle of physical sustainability. Unlike the 'environmental space' approach (Buitenkamp et al. 1993; Hille 1995), *Our Common Future* does not argue for an equal distribution of timber, metals, minerals, aluminium, copper and so on. On the one hand, it is not viewed as demanded by justice. On the other, resource scarcity is not perceived as a *general* problem. This because of the possibilities of technological progress, changes in social organisation, substitution, and that limits for many environmental resources and contrary to climate change, will 'manifest themselves in the form of rising costs and diminishing returns' (WCED 1987: 45).

The problem of climate change, however, is complex, far-reaching, and relates to most human activities. A list linking climate change to its related activities would turn out far from short. Reducing energy consumption and equalising per capita emissions of greenhouse gases would, therefore, effect the production and consumption of a variety of goods. In practice, two countries can have the same level of greenhouse gas emissions on a per capita basis, and still – because of differences in the internal distribution, technology, available national resources, social organisation, culture and so forth – have very unequal living conditions and large inequalities in GDP per capita. This is why the combination of the two principles give rise to what can be called an 'open-ended egalitarianism' or 'constrained inequality'. The egalitarian implications of *the principle of universality* in relation to the limited resources constrain inequality, but only for the resources that fall under the scope of *the principle of physical sustainability*.<sup>17</sup>

The following, however, can be seen as a reflection of these principles. In accordance with the assumption that the deponic capacity of the Earth is the (first) limiting factor for global development, the World Commission recommended a low energy scenario of a 50 per cent reduction in primary energy consumption in industrial countries, to allow for a 30 per cent increase in developing countries within the next 50 years (WCED 1987: 173). This would 'require profound structural changes in socio-economic and institutional arrangements and it is an important challenge to global society' (WCED 1987:

201). Still, this was the preferred option and the Commission believed that 'there is no other realistic option open to the world for the 21st century' (WCED 1987: 174).

## 7. BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Loss of biological diversity, like climate change, entails a conflict between intra- and intergenerational justice. There are nonetheless important differences. First, the relationship to the minimum requirement of sustainable development is not straightforward. How much biological diversity can we do without and still not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth? Second, the assumption of ecological interdependence is not straightforward. To what degree does the loss of a rare species in Africa really affect the rest of the world? And finally, how should the conservation of biological diversity be reconciled with human needs satisfaction?

The Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) reflects this complexity and its objective contains three different goals:

The objectives of this Convention, to be pursued in accordance with its relevant provisions, are the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilisation of genetic resources, including by appropriate access to genetic resources and by appropriate transfer of relevant technologies, taking into account all rights over those resources and to technologies, and by appropriate funding. (CBD 1992)

There is, of course, a tension between the Convention's different goals. Viewed within the conceptual framework of sustainable development, the injunction to conserve plants and animals must initially be understood as a prerequisite for development. It is because the environment is vulnerable to destruction through development itself that the constraint of physical sustainability is placed on the goal of development (WCED 1987: 46; Malnes 1990: 5). Moreover, conservation is first and foremost justified from the perspective of intergenerational justice: 'The loss of plant and animal species can greatly limit the options of future generations; so sustainable development requires the conservation of plant and animal species' (WCED 1987: 46).

Dobson's (1998) main worry, however, is that sustainable development, through the conception of 'critical natural capital' or the principle of equal opportunity, 'will leave too much of nature unprotected' (Dobson 1998: 258). One of the conceptions of environmental sustainability described by Dobson is characterised by its focus 'solely on protection' (Dobson 1998: 53). It ascribes value to nature and calls for the sustaining of (all?) 'units of significance' (Dobson 1998: 51). Literally, it gives priority to present non-human needs over

present human needs (Dobson 1998: 39), an ordering which is not to be understood literally, but that conveys 'the spirit underlying this conception of environmental sustainability, which is to value the non-human world in its own right. None of this does away with the need to make hard policy choices, of course ...' (Dobson 1998: 53).

Dobson's typology, however, does not capture the true nature of the anthropocentric approach, nor the questions of social justice at stake as seen from an anthropocentric perspective, because sustainable development is really not a conception of environmental sustainability. First, the answer to the question 'what is to be sustained?' is, in terms of the concept of sustainable development, *not* critical natural capital, but human need satisfaction and equal opportunities. Physical sustainability is the means, or a necessary condition for, this in the long term between generations. Dixon and Fallon (1989) argue that the usage of sustainability in *Our Common Future* departs from previous usage in the sense that sustainability is used not as physical concept for a single resource or an ecosystem, but is applied in a much broader, socio-economic context. The goal is thus not a sustained level of a physical stock or physical production from an ecosystem, but some sustained increase in the level of societal and individual welfare (Dixon and Fallon 1989: 2-6). Or more in accordance with *Our Common Future*, a sustained level of need satisfaction and equal opportunities.

This, of course, implies that, in order to meet human needs, one can actually reduce the physical stock. As argued in *Our Common Future*, there 'is nothing inherently wrong with clearing forests for farming' (WCED 1987: 127). The crucial task is to balance the need to exploit forests against the need to preserve them: 'Forests perform a variety of functions, and some might be cleared for intensive cultivation, others for livestock; some forest land might be managed for increased timber production or agroforestry use, and some left intact for watershed protection, recreation, or species conservation' (WCED 1987: 136).

As such, the arguments for conservation are the minimum requirement for sustainable development and the principle of equal opportunity (between generations). The arguments against are meeting human needs and equal opportunities (within our generation). According to Barry (1991), balancing these concerns implies that future generations 'are owed compensation in other ways for our reducing their access to easily extracted and conveniently located natural resources. In practice, this entails that the combination of improved technology and increased capital investment should be such as to offset the effects of depletion' (Barry 1991: 259-60).

It is equally clear, however, that conservation implies *costs* in terms of reduced access to easily extracted and conveniently located natural resources. *Our Common Future* thus argues that in order to 'include much larger areas brought under some degree of protection', 'the cost of conservation will rise – directly and in terms of opportunities for development foregone' (WCED 1987: 13).

The conceptions of ecological sustainability and economic models of sustainability, however, completely ignore the historical inequality in past resource use as relevant for justice. The reason that most biological diversity is located in developing countries is not just due to climatic conditions, but also the fact that developed countries have substantially reduced their biological diversity during the last 250 years. Eighty per cent of the forests that originally covered the Earth have been cleared, fragmented or otherwise degraded (UNEP 1999). Demanding that natural capital must be kept constant may sound as a nice thing when there are no forests left and most people live in affluence. It is something quite different when your country consists of 74 per cent forest and a majority of the population is living in severe poverty.

What then, are the costs of conservation? The Global Environmental Facility (GEF), which is the financing mechanism under the Conventions, pays developing countries the incremental costs of conservation. It is a complicated procedure to get money from GEF,<sup>18</sup> but if you are lucky enough you will get paid for the incremental cost. 'As a general rule', however, 'development-related activities are considered to be a national benefit; more traditional conservation-related-activities ... are considered to be a global benefit' (Griffen 1997: 21). Global benefits are what GEF pays for. The global benefit comes from changing what the country is already undertaking (development) to an alternative scenario (conservation).

GEF pays the money it takes to change the course of action. GEF have also included projects that specifically include 'provision for compensation communities for benefits forgone in conservation of biodiversity: 'In the Ghana Natural Resources Management and Biodiversity Project, approved in July 1997, communities are to be compensated through alternate livelihood activities for the benefits foregone by taking forest reserves out of production' (Porter et al. 1998: 55).

The question is, do alternate livelihood activities actually compensate for the benefits foregone? What has been described as 'probably the most rapid and reckless destruction of forests known to history' (Wright 1999: 8), would illustrate what is at stake here. The citation refers to forest destruction, not in Asia or Latin America, but in the Southern US between 1880 and 1920. The worst destruction occurred in the yellow pine area, where of an initial 115 million acres, less than 24 million acres of old growth pine timber remained in 1920. By the 1980s, the US South had come to dominate not only domestic, but also global, forest products production:

In pulp and paper, the South now accounts for about three-fourths of total U.S. pulpwood production, more than two-thirds of wood pulp capacity, and over half of paper and paperboard production. The South, with less than three percent of world forest area, accounts for a third or more of total world acreage in timber. (Wright 1999: 12)

It is obvious that one of the reasons behind this success was the destruction of the original forests and complete neglect of biological diversity concerns. However, if being compensated for benefits foregone means being compensated for not having the opportunity to develop a forest industry like the one in the US South, the GEF budget of US \$2 billion would soon vanish.

The objective of sustainable use creates similar problems for a focus solely on protection. In their study of GEF's overall performance, Porter et al. (1998) argue that 'Successful examples of sustainable use are rare', and it is 'difficult to differentiate many types of sustainable use activities from regular development activities' (Porter et al. 1998: 80). Furthermore, it is argued that 'in biodiversity there is a serious threat that supporting new uses of biological resources can result in the loss of these values' (Porter et al. 1998: 80). From a sustainable development perspective, however, it is hard to see the problem of differentiating between sustainable use and regular development activities as a problem at all.

There are those who seem to prefer the preservation of biological diversity to meeting human needs. While preservation efforts continue to loose when confronted with further 'development' in developed countries (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000), however, preservation is increasingly being preferred as the option for developing countries. 'Human cleansing' from forests has been conducted in Uganda, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Kongo, Rwanda, and Panama, in order to protect biological diversity (Kothari, Suri and Singh 1995; Wøien 1998). As Léle and Norgaard (1996: 360) points out, 'it is considered rational to convert tropical forests into parks that exclude any human disturbance because rich tourists can pay more for pristineness than local communities can for subsistence use of these forests'.

Moreover, the economic arguments presented to developing countries have not only been related to ecotourism, but also to the economic value of biological diversity itself: 'the economic values inherent in the genetic materials of species are alone to justify species preservation' (WCED 1987: 155). The fair and equitable sharing of these benefits, however, has yet to be worked out under the Convention. But there is no doubt that for these reasons developed countries have a huge interest in conservation (Benton 1999). Whether developing countries will benefit from their biological diversity is yet to be seen (Svarstad 1998).

Just as was shown when discussing the issue of climate change, the above examples show that there is no neat functionality between social justice and physical sustainability when it comes to biological diversity. Sustainable development acknowledges the need for an increase in conservation areas to protect biological diversity for the sake of future generations. But sustainable development also acknowledges the development needs of the 1.3 billion people living in severe poverty. Therefore, the reconciliation of physical sustainability and social justice cannot be secured by a focus 'solely on protection' because doing so would be the same as doing an injustice.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Two arguments have been made in this article. First, social justice constitutes an inherent part of the conception of sustainable development. The fundamental goal of the Commission was to *reconcile* physical sustainability, need satisfaction, and equal opportunities within and between generations, and sustainable development is what defines this reconciliation. The need for this reconciliation is based on a conflict between intra- and intergenerational justice, in the sense that there is no neat and easy functionality between social justice within our generation and physical sustainability as a precondition for intergenerational justice. The cases of climate change and biological diversity have been used to substantiate this claim.

Second, sustainable development is broadly compatible with liberal theories of justice, but sustainable development goes *beyond* liberal theories basically because of three assumptions for the most part ignored in liberal theories: an accelerating *ecological* interdependence, historical inequality in past resource use, and the 'the growth of limits'. These assumptions create a conflict between intra- and intergenerational justice not captured in liberal theories.

The reconciliation of this conflict is what defines sustainable development. It implies additional duties for developing and developed countries, but departs from liberal theories in that it also defines the upper limits for resource use, most notably for energy and greenhouse gas emissions. The two principles that apply for living standards that go beyond the minimum requirement of human need satisfaction, *the principle of physical sustainability* and *the principle of universality*, are justifiable within liberal theories of justice – and also within a Rawlsian framework of global justice. Moreover, the above conception of sustainable development takes into consideration Shue's (1992: 397) argument, that justice does not 'permit that poor nations be told to sell *their* blankets in order that rich nations may keep *their* jewelry'.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Andrew Dobson, Kristian S. Ekeli, Andreas Føllesdal, Thomas W. Pogge and an anonymous reviewer for valuable and constructive comments.

<sup>2</sup> According to Rawls liberal ideas of justice contain three main elements: (1) a list of certain basic rights and liberties and opportunities, (2) a high priority for these fundamental freedoms, and (3) measures assuring for all citizens adequate all-purpose means to make effective use of their freedoms (Rawls 1993b: 51).

<sup>3</sup> The third possible extension Rawls mention is to certain cases of health care that seem to be most relevant for the case of domestic justice (Rawls 1993b: 44). For a review of different attempts to use Rawls as a foundation for environmental ethics, see Thero (1995).

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<sup>4</sup> Beitz distinguishes between different variants of laissez-faire liberals. I shall ignore laissez-faire liberalism in the further discussion. It is worth nothing, however, that *Our Common Future* has been seen as a counterattack on of global neo-liberalism (McManus 1996). For a comparison of environmentalists and libertarians, see Langhelle (1999b).

<sup>5</sup> Ideal theory is ideal in the sense that it assumes strict compliance. That is, that ‘the relevant concepts and principles are strictly complied with by all parties to the agreements made and that the requisite favourable conditions for liberal and hierarchical institutions are on hand’ (Rawls 1993b: 52).

<sup>6</sup> By unfavourable conditions Rawls mean ‘societies that lack the political and cultural traditions, the human capital and know how, and the resources, material and technological, that make well-ordered societies possible’ (Rawls 1993b: 74).

<sup>7</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> This is in MacNeill’s view what the Commission actually was supposed to answer: ‘That, I believe, was the tacit question the United Nations General Assembly sought to answer when in 1983 it called for the establishment of a special, independent commission’ (MacNeill 1990: 109).

<sup>9</sup> See Thompson (1996) for a similar argument.

<sup>10</sup> I shall ignore most of these problems here and simply take for granted that we have obligations towards future generations and instead discuss what these obligations may actually consist in from the perspective of sustainable development.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this change, see Dobson 1998, Wissenburg 1999.

<sup>12</sup> The problem of climate change is addressed throughout *Our Common Future* (WCED 1987: 2, 5, 8, 14, 22, 32, 33, 37, 58–9, 172–6). Leader of the World Commission, Gro Harlem Brundtland (1991: 35) have also stated the following: ‘The most global – and the potentially most serious – of all the issues facing us today is how we should deal with the threats to the world’s atmosphere’.

<sup>13</sup> I say mainly because many people in the present generation may experience the consequences of climate change. Moreover, IPCC argues that the combination of basic needs and risk bearing could have far-reaching implications in relation to the problem of climate change: ‘If we accept that individuals have some right to some basic goods – food, shelter, access to environmental resources – and if emitting greenhouse gases threatens the availability of these basic goods, then those responsible for the emissions should be prepared to protect potential victims against losing the right to basic goods’ (IPCC 1996: 102).

<sup>14</sup> Shue’s (1993) list of distributional questions raised by the problem of climate change is also used by the IPCC (1996) to structure the chapter on ‘Equity and Social Considerations’.

<sup>15</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> The atmosphere has both the characteristics of a pure public good: nonrivalry and nonexcludability. For a definition, see IPCC 1996: 28.

<sup>17</sup> See Dower (1992) for an interesting comparison.

<sup>18</sup> GEF demands, among a lot of other things, that your project is not only socially-, financially-, ecologically-, economically-, but also institutionally sustainable (Griffen 1997: 23).

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