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# 1

## Introduction

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Over the past decade the idiom of sustainable development increasingly has come to frame international debates about environment and development policy-making. Catapulted to prominence by the report of the Brundtland Commission<sup>1</sup> in 1987, sustainable development was formally endorsed as a policy objective by world leaders at the Rio Earth Summit<sup>2</sup> five years later. It has been absorbed into the conceptual lexicon of international organizations such as the World Bank and the OECD; been accorded its own global secretariat in the form of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD); and achieved near-constitutional status in the European Union through its incorporation in the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties. Around the globe political leaders and public administrators now routinely justify policies, projects, and initiatives in terms of the contribution they make to realizing sustainable development.

Yet, while the idea has come to assume a central place in contemporary discussions of environment and development issues, there has been little

<sup>1</sup> 'The Brundtland Commission' is the conventional name for the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The Commission was appointed as an independent body by the UN General Assembly in 1983, with the former Prime Minister (1981) and Minister of the Environment (1974–9) of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, as Chairperson. The Commission was composed of 21 'commissioners', with representation equally divided between developed and developing countries, and with two Canadians as chief administrative officers (Maurice Strong as President, and Jim MacNeill as Secretary General). In the enabling resolution the general Assembly called on the Commission to 'to propose long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development to the year 2000 and beyond' (UNGA 1983).

<sup>2</sup> The official name of the Rio Earth Summit was 'The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development' (UNCED). The conference took place in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992, and has been generally profiled as the largest conference yet assembled by the United Nations. Although the exact number of participants is somewhat unclear, more than 160 governments were represented and more than 100 heads of state attended the proceedings. Representatives from NGOs, business organizations, and expert groups attending the official sessions or the array of parallel meeting and exhibitions, as well as the international press corps, brought the total influx to about 30,000 people (Grubb *et al.* 1993).

serious comparative research on the practical political ramifications of the 'turn' towards sustainable development. Among academics we have seen a great deal of discursive 'smoke'—but little in the way of empirical 'fire'. But what has actually happened with the concept in terms of policy implementation? Where and how has it been taken seriously as a prioritized goal for change; and what differences can be detected in the ways the idea has been interpreted and applied in different national, regional, and cultural contexts?

These are the issues to be addressed in the present volume. More particularly, we aim to explore how the governments of nine highly developed countries—Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States—along with the central institutions of the European Union, have engaged with the idea of sustainable development over the past decade, particularly during the first five years after the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

The study deals, therefore, with the political ideas, policy orientations, and programmes designed to clarify and operationalize the concept, as well as the practical measures adopted to move the idea from goal to reality. It examines how a specifically normative concept, articulated largely through debate in international forums, has been integrated into the policy discussions and political programmes of national political arenas. It tracks the scale and character of the distinctive responses of the various governments, bringing into comparative perspective patterns of convergence and divergence across the jurisdictions under investigation.

## **Sustainable Development in High Consumption Societies**

Recognizing the particular responsibility which both the Brundtland Commission and the Rio Earth Summit have placed on the most highly developed countries for achieving sustainable development, we have defined the objects of this study as 'high-consumption societies'. The selected units for analysis include some of the most highly developed and wealthiest countries in the world. In so far as leading levels of aggregate production and consumption contribute to environmental degradation on a global scale, the units here selected are clearly candidates for scrutiny.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, given their productive, technological, and financial capacity,

<sup>3</sup> At the time of the Earth Summit (1992) the countries in question were ranked as follows in terms of per-capita income (USD): Japan, 3 (29,915); Norway, 4 (28,470); Sweden, 5 (28,360); Germany, 8 (24,490); United States, 9 (23,600); Netherlands, 14 (21,205); Canada, 16 (19,494); Australia, 17 (18,715); United Kingdom, 18 (18,064).

these nations are well placed to undertake remedial efforts. It is important to recognize that the international consensus around sustainable development is based upon a principle of 'differentiated responsibility', with the rich countries having publicly acknowledged an obligation to take action—particularly with respect to climate change, sustainable production and consumption, and the provision of development assistance and environmental technology transfer. To put this differently: if the affluent societies of the North do not demonstrably take sustainable development seriously, it is unlikely that developing countries will do so either. Thus the attitude of developed countries becomes crucial to the viability of the entire international process of engagement with sustainable development.

With respect to the selection of specific countries for comparison, assuming OECD membership as a rough criterion for 'high-consumption', there were some twenty-five countries from which to choose. The aim was a sample including states with different population and geographic sizes, covering European and non-European settings, and reflecting variation in a range of political system characteristics and socio-economic traits that might conceivably influence responses to sustainable development.

The resulting selection includes populous countries (USA, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Japan) and small-scale units (Norway, Netherlands); geographically extensive states (Canada, USA, Australia) and more compact countries (Netherlands, the UK). There are sustainability innovators (Norway, Canada, the Netherlands) and apparent laggards (USA). Different forms of interaction with the global political economy are represented. Four countries are members of the European Union; one is a non-Union European state; two are members of the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA). There are five unitary states and four federal states. Different legislative/executive linkages are represented, as are quite different ('state') traditions of public administration and regulatory culture. The world's three largest economies and five of the G7 countries are included. Thus the sample allows for comparison along a number of different dimensions, at the same time that it establishes a baseline for subsequent comparisons with other types of unit.

Finally, we have also included the European Union as a unit in its own right. The evolution of the European Union represents a serious complicating factor for comparative research based around national polities affected by the Union. Today European central institutions play a significant role in environmental policy-making within the European Union (Lévêque 1996, Andersen and Liefferink 1997). On the other hand, the continued vitality of national political structures and processes, and the still limited powers of the overall Union framework, mean that the EU cannot simply be treated as a

(new) single country (within which constituent states are subsumed as subordinate entities). To reflect this emerging reality, we have supplemented the country studies with a separate analysis of the response of central EU institutions to sustainable development.

## **Implementing Sustainable Development**

The implementation of sustainable development could in principle be related to an immense array of governmental activities; to policy formation and subsidiary implementation in distinct sectors (transport, health care, regional regeneration, and so on); and to initiatives undertaken by all tiers of government (national, regional, local). Such complexity is rooted in the synthetic ambitions of sustainable development as an orienting concept for governance, and is reflected in the wide-ranging character of the issues and recommendations included in Agenda 21. Several important choices were, therefore, necessary at the outset.

Perhaps most important, was the decision to concentrate on *central* government, rather than to try also to monitor local and regional administrations. One reason for this was the obvious problem of scope, i.e. that it would have been impossible to cover implementation activities across the entire spectrum of relevant domains and levels of government. Another key reason, however, was the issue of political responsibility. While it is obvious that activities related to sustainable development are being undertaken by local and regional governments (particularly in countries with federal regimes), we none the less made the decision to concentrate on national responsibility, since it is the state (and the European Union) which are signatories to the Rio accords. Local and regional initiatives will, therefore, only be considered insofar as they are part of the strategies of national governments, or contribute to characterizing and possibly explaining actions at the national level.

A second vital choice involved selecting particular dimensions of central government activity for detailed analysis. This has been addressed by, on the one hand, marking out what we understand to be the essential 'core' of the governmental response to sustainable development, while, on the other hand, identifying two specific policy domains for closer attention: climate change and biodiversity. Governments may (or may not) be doing many different things in relation to sustainable development, but our primary interest is with the main 'story' characterizing governmental reaction. Examination of the parameters of the debate around sustainable development,

and knowledge of broader political and administrative processes gained in early phases of the project, led us to focus on six components of the core response. These components were formulated as a baseline 'protocol' for initial reporting for the country studies:

1. *Basic governmental understanding.* How sustainable development has been conceptualized in the national context, what it is believed to entail, and the main contours of the government's overall reaction. Of importance here is the vision of how sustainable development is to be achieved given the country's particular ecological, economic, social, political, and cultural circumstances.
2. *The pattern of institutional engagement.* Whether sustainable development has been accorded a constitutional or legal base. Whether new organizations have been established to undertake sustainable development related initiatives, and the levels of commitment displayed by existing ministries and agencies. The underlying assumption is that structures and resources matter.
3. *Measurement and monitoring.* This concerns the difficulty of 'fixing' the meaning of sustainable development and establishing benchmarks to assess implementation. Has progress been made in defining indicators to evaluate existing practices and to monitor policy innovation? How are measures of environmental condition, economic activity, and life quality to be interrelated?
4. *Involvement of other domestic actors.* How seriously have governments taken the participatory/collaborative dimension of sustainable development; in particular, how have central governments understood their initiatives in relation to other layers of government and non-governmental actors. What approach has been adopted toward the mobilization of 'major stakeholders'?
5. *Internationally oriented initiatives.* Sustainable development is both a domestic and an international policy objective, and the UNCED agreements call upon national actors to co-operate in unprecedented ways to achieve its realization. Thus the integration of national and international action is an essential dimension of sustainable development implementation. Of particular significance is the attitude adopted towards the specific responsibilities of the developed states spelled out at Rio.
6. *Sustainable production and consumption.* This relates to one of the more innovative themes to emerge from the UNCED process—the challenge of modifying existing patterns of production and consumption so that they become compatible with environmentally sustainable development.

While all sorts of environmental initiatives (from energy conservation to product labelling) can be included under this item, we were particularly concerned with issues and programmes taken up explicitly under this heading.

Together these six elements provide a well-grounded impression of the main lines of governmental interaction with the notion of sustainable development. In addition, we have focused on the policy domains of climate change and biodiversity. These areas relate to the major treaty regimes initiated at Rio, and both issues are treated by chapters in Agenda 21: chapters 9, 'Protecting the Atmosphere', and 15, 'Conservation of Biological Diversity'.

Climate change was one of the key themes which first motivated international concern with sustainable development (WCED 1987). It is an issue which indirectly raises complex problems of production–consumption and life-style change in the developed countries, at the same time that it has increasingly come to focus North/South tensions. Biodiversity is perhaps a less obvious choice, although it links into many established conservation and habitat-protection issues, and can also be interpreted as posing complex questions about the proportion of global 'ecological space' to be appropriated for human ends. But precisely because it is so often thought about in terms of what the less developed countries should be doing to protect their ecosystems and resources, it forms an attractive counterpoint for a study focusing on governmental behaviour in the developed states.

Activity in these two policy domains has expanded rapidly over the past few years. Climate change in particular has been the subject of widespread debate and media attention (particularly up to and immediately after the signing of the Kyoto Protocol), with both national positions and the implications for North/South relations evolving rapidly. Despite the increasing sophistication of the specialist literature on climate change and biodiversity (reflecting the inherent complexity of the two policy domains), their integration into the UNCED process and goals, as well as their intrinsic importance for sustainable development, justify the emphasis accorded to them here.

The research on which this volume is based was for most part conducted over a two-year period between September 1996 and September 1998. The decision to base the analysis on case-studies prepared by specialists in each of the target jurisdictions was dictated by the complex and inchoate nature of the subject matter, as well as the detailed contextual knowledge required to interpret the results. Although each contributor assumed primary responsibility for preparing the chapters which bear their name, the project

was a collaborative endeavour in which team members learned from each other's insights and developed a common approach.

The work has been organized as an iterative process, with researchers conducting successive forays into the material and progressively assembling more elaborate drafts of their contributions. The entire research team met at regular intervals to discuss findings and to adjust the orientation of the next phase of the enquiry. To assure comparability of the analysis across cases, the protocol mentioned above was applied during the initial phase of jurisdictional reporting. In the preparation of the final reports, however, authors were encouraged to take as much latitude as necessary to tell the distinctive 'story' of each government's response to sustainable development. These jurisdictional case studies have been prepared so that they may stand on their own; but they also provide the principal foundation for the comparative analysis presented in later chapters. The precise configuration of sources consulted varies somewhat from study to study, but includes official publications and academic assessments, supplemented by interviews with key officials and other participants. A full list of printed sources is included in the consolidated bibliography. We also circulated draft reports to independent assessors drawn from government, academia, and the non-governmental sector.

Given the exploratory nature of the project, we have not attempted to structure the presentation within any one theoretical orientation. We have conducted a running dialogue within the project on the relevance of different possible approaches (discourse analysis, implementation research, comparative politics, public-policy perspectives, eco-modernization theory, and so on), yet we have chosen not to use any one of these as a single analytical framework. A major reason for this is the very particular nature of the empirical focus: a global 'programme' which has largely emerged external to normal national political processes, and which has, particularly since the Earth Summit, been pursued through a unique combination of, on the one hand, international incentives and obligations, and, on the other, highly diverse national interpretations and strategic initiatives. We are not, in other words, just talking about 'traditional politics'—either in a policy-implementation or comparative-politics frame.

Another major consideration, however, has been the applied nature of the knowledge task. The volume is intended for practitioners as well as for academic political scientists and sociologists. We hope to engage the attention of those, whether in governmental or international bodies, business or non-governmental organizations, who have responsibility for making decisions on crucial environment-and-development issues. Indeed, we hope that the study will interest broader publics and diverse collective actors in both the

developed and developing countries, who are concerned with understanding and debating just what the governments of high-consumption societies actually have done over the past decade to engage with the challenge of sustainable development.

In terms of political science literatures, the work which relates most obviously to this study is that on comparative environmental politics and policy. Recent years have witnessed what might be described as a 'third wave' of comparative studies<sup>4</sup> as researchers have attempted to provide more synthetic perspectives on approaches to environmental governance (Christiansen 1996; Jänicke and Weidner 1997; Hanf and Jansen 1998); to assess the overall parameters of national environmental performance (Jänicke 1992; Jahn 1998); to explore the political impacts of emergent policy domains such as climate change (O'Riordan and Jager 1996; Collier and Löfstedt 1997); and to review national experience with innovative policy 'instruments' (Dente 1995) such as environmental taxation (Andersen 1994), 'green plans' (Dalal-Clayton 1996; Jänicke *et al.* 1997; Jänicke and Jörgens 1999) and environmental agreements (Glasbergen 1998).

Despite contrasting historical and cultural traditions, varied legal and constitutional structures, and alternative constellations of political actors, there are remarkable similarities in institutional forms, policy outputs, and environmental-quality indicators across the developed world (Knoepfel *et al.* 1987). In part this can be explained by parallels of underlying economic and political structure, by a shared social trajectory, and pressures of productive dynamism, technological change, and competitive interaction. But there has also been conscious cross-national imitation and learning in the environmental policy domain, and practices initiated in one jurisdiction have spread to other states (Jänicke and Weidner 1997*b*). The increasing activity of transnational actors—whether corporate, non-governmental, or official—has maintained momentum towards convergence in environmental governance. Yet a fine-grained analysis reveals profound differences in the environmental priorities of publics in different countries, contrasting forms

<sup>4</sup> Early comparative work which explored the emergence of environmental issues onto the political agenda (Lundqvist 1973; Enloe 1975; Solesbury 1976), which compared the institutions and practices of pollution control (Mangun 1979; Sabatier and Mazmanian 1980; Downing and Hanf 1983) and assessed the activity of environmental groups (O'Riordan 1979) gradually gave way to a second wave of more detailed and comprehensive studies (Vogel and Kun 1987). These tended to focus on specific policy fields or arenas of interaction, offering in-depth analysis of paired jurisdictions (Lundqvist 1980; Vogel 1986; Boehmer-Christiansen and Skea 1991), or making broader cross national comparisons (Haigh and Irwin 1990, Knoepfel and Weidner 1990). The range of environmental themes which preoccupied scholars grew (reflecting the greater political salience and diversity of environmental debate in the 1980s), giving rise to significant comparative work on green parties (Muller Rommel 1982; Kitschelt 1988; Hoffmann-Martinot 1991), environmental public opinion (Gillroy and Shapiro 1986; Rohrschneider 1988) and regulatory processes (Badaracco 1985).

of political articulation of environmental issues (consider the fortunes of Green parties in various systems), and differing regulatory styles, policy mixes, and sets of preferred instruments. Perhaps the clearest observation is the ceaseless change and dynamism in the environmental policy field over the past thirty years—as issues and approaches have continued to evolve, and a more substantial proportion of social resources have been devoted to the environmental domain (Glasbergen 1996; Weale 1992).

The subject matter of the current volume extends beyond ‘environmental policy’—at least in so far as this has been traditionally conceived. And yet existing environmental politics and policy provide the basis from which any attempt to implement sustainable development must proceed. Since sustainable development was formulated to bridge divisions among economic, social and environmental decision-making, and to soften the fire-wall erected between domestic and international obligations, it is hardly surprising that it not only provides an alternative frame for issues that already had been included in the ‘environmental policy’ portfolio, but has implications in areas more traditionally associated with economic, social, and foreign policy decision-making. What is clear is that sustainable development policy and politics are not necessarily coterminous with environmental policy and politics—although the extent of overlap will vary with perspective and context.

Given the centrality of the concept of sustainable development to the study, we feel a need to provide a brief introductory overview of our understanding of the idea. We fully appreciate both the complexity of the concept, and the fact that there is considerable disagreement as to what the idea *should* imply. As will become clear below, we are not interested in promulgating a particular normative position on the issue. The purpose of our project is not to ‘sell’ sustainable development, but to document and analyse how high-consumption societies have interpreted and pursued the idea through their respective political systems. To achieve this, however, it was necessary to establish a baseline understanding of the idea within the research project itself. Only by working from a common understanding of what it was we were jointly monitoring, could we lay the foundation for a consistent research dialogue and cross-national empirical effort.

## **The Emergence of Sustainable Development in International Political Discourse**

The intellectual history of the idea of sustainable development has yet to be written in full, but the publication of *Our Common Future* by the World

Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987) marked a decisive phase in its emergence as a privileged category for conceptualizing environment-and-development interaction in international debate.

The authors of *Our Common Future* were not the first to invoke 'sustainability' or 'sustainable development' (Redclift 1987; Lélé 1991; Pezzy 1992a). The concept of 'sustainable yield' (a yield that can in principle be harvested indefinitely because it does not exceed a natural system's capacity for regeneration) emerged from the resource management literature, but by the early 1970s notions of 'sustainability' were being employed more broadly in environmental debate (Adams 1990; Kidd 1992). 'Sustainable utilization' of natural resource systems (and later of environmental amenities in general) was used in international conservationist circles, while the image of a 'sustainable society' was deployed by environmental activists to denote an ecologically enlightened community—one that repudiated profligate consumerism and lived within the limits of the Earth's carrying capacity (Pirages 1977; Brown 1981).

'Sustainable development' assumed a prominent place in the 1980 *World Conservation Strategy*, issued by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), where it served to link traditional conservationist preoccupations with nature preservation to a basic-needs-oriented strand in development thinking (IUCN/WWF/UNEP 1980). In the early 1980s activities to prepare national conservation strategies and active sponsorship by UNEP further spread awareness of sustainable development, and by the second half of the decade it was appearing in a growing volume of official publications and beginning to attract the attention of academic commentators (Clark and Munn 1986; Redclift 1987).

What the report of the WCED accomplished was to 'relaunch' sustainable development by casting it in a form which could appeal to a wide range of political actors, and which derived legitimacy from the consultative and UN-sponsored process through which it had been formulated. Established in 1983 by the United Nations General Assembly in response to growing concerns about the scale of environmental destruction and the apparent stagnation of economic growth in many of the poorest counties, the WCED was active for nearly four years, soliciting opinions from groups and individuals, analysing submissions from expert bodies, and holding public sessions in a number of countries. Its final report called for urgent action to revive and to reorient growth, while conserving natural resources and protecting the global environment. What was required was 'a new approach in which all nations aim at a type of development that integrates production with resource conservation and enhancement, and that links both to the pro-

vision for all of an adequate livelihood base and equitable access to resources' (WCED 1987: 39–40).<sup>5</sup>

In a now famous passage *Our Common Future* defined 'sustainable development' as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987: 43). The explanation continued: sustainable development '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 organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs'. Thus sustainable development represented a continuing process of societal improvement; a process which should prioritize the requirements of the most disadvantaged, while protecting the environmental support systems and amenities on which the welfare of present and future generations depended.

The conception of sustainable development presented by *Our Common Future* neatly drew together diverse strands of the international discourses of environment and development. The 'environment' versus 'growth' controversy that so polarized debate in the 1970s was partially side-stepped by emphasizing the reorientation of growth to meet the urgent needs of the world's poor and to reduce the impacts of economic activity on the environment. The notion of 'development' which until then had been applied mainly to the poor countries was extended to cover the industrialized regions: thus sustainable development could be understood as a common challenge faced by all nations. And yet it was also a challenge which would

<sup>5</sup> The Commission's approach was summarized by Gro Harlem Brundtland's foreword to the final report: 'When the terms of reference of our Commission were originally being discussed in 1982, there were those who wanted its considerations to be limited to "environmental" issues only. This would have been a grave mistake. The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs, and attempts to defend it in isolation from human concerns have given the very word "environment" a connotation of naiveté in some political circles. The word "development" has also been narrowed by some into a very limited focus, along the lines of "what poor nations should do to become richer", and thus again is automatically dismissed by many in the international arena as being a concern of specialists, of those involved in questions of "development assistance".'

But the "environment" is where we all live; and "development" is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable. Further, development issues must be seen as crucial by the political leaders who feel that their countries have reached a plateau towards which other nations must strive. Many of the development paths of the industrialised nations are clearly unsustainable. And the development decisions of these countries, because of their great economic and political power, will have a profound effect upon the ability of all peoples to sustain human progress for generations to come' (WCED 1987: xii).

imply very *different* policies and priorities according to the developmental stage already attained.

Sustainable development engaged directly, therefore, with problems of great international import. It appealed to established notions of progress, equity, prudence, and stewardship, but combined and extended these in novel ways. The basic idea that human societies should continue their quest for a better life, but do so in a manner that gave precedence to the needs of the poor while protecting the basic sustenance capabilities of natural systems on which the livelihoods of future generations depended, was intuitively appealing. So too were the principles of common responsibility, mutual solidarity, and differentiated obligation which emerged as integral parts of the idea. In short, sustainable development was about dynamic balance; about providing a framework within which to reconcile different sorts of interest and consideration: economy and environment, conservation and progress, efficiency and equity, the pre-occupations of North and South (Adams 1990; Meadowcroft 1997; Lafferty and Langhelle 1999).

The political sensitivity with which the WCED report had been prepared was reflected in the generally positive response to its publication. As various national and international bodies reacted to its recommendations, the notion of sustainable development became familiar to a wider range of actors (Reid 1995). Although many of the specific reforms suggested in the report were not carried through, others met with more success. Indeed, proposals to prepare a detailed 'UN Programme of Action on Sustainable Development', and to organize a major conference on the problems of environment and development, helped set in train the process which provided sustainable development with its next major international platform.

The decision to convene the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was formally taken by the General Assembly in December 1989. According to the enabling resolution its purpose was to 'elaborate strategies and measures to halt and reverse the effects of environmental degradation in the context of increased national and international efforts to promote sustainable and environmentally sound development in all countries' (UNGA 1989). Preparations for the meeting lasted two and a half years and involved a complex array of interactions. In addition to four official 'PrepComs' (month-long organizing and negotiating sessions), separate discussions were underway to secure agreement on the draft conventions on climate change and on biodiversity, and UNCED agenda items were also examined by an array of international organizations including the OECD and the G7 summits (Grubb *et al.* 1993). Not only states and international organizations, but also technical and scientific bodies, business associations,

local governments, and voluntary groups took part in the preparatory work.

As previously pointed out, the UNCED meeting itself attracted enormous international attention, and resulted in five major documents (the 'Rio Accords'): the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (a brief statement of principles orienting international action on environment and development issues); the Framework Convention on Climate Change; the Convention on Biodiversity; a Statement of Forest Principles; and Agenda 21 (an elaborate 'Programme of Action for Sustainable Development' which detailed initiatives required to manage environment and development problems into the next century). While the two conventions had the status of legally binding treaties, the three other documents fell into the class of non-legally-binding international agreements (so-called 'soft law'). These were significant in moral and political terms (and over time may acquire weight in judicial determinations), but did not directly give rise to binding legal obligations.

The idea of sustainable development was central to the whole UNCED enterprise. It appears in twelve of the twenty-seven articles of the Rio Declaration, and is explicitly mentioned in the texts of the Climate Change and Biodiversity Conventions,<sup>6</sup> as well as in the Statement of Forest Principles. And of course Agenda 21 itself was designed as 'a blueprint for action for global sustainable development into the 21st century' (UNCED 1992: 13).

Nevertheless, sustainable development was never formally defined in any of the UNCED outputs. Instead its meaning was taken as essentially given (deriving from the Brundtland Report); and the emphasis was placed upon reaffirming its importance, and detailing what sorts of action were required to bring it about. Still the UNCED process can be understood to have further refined the accepted notion of sustainable development, particularly by emphasizing the importance of participation (by local communities and social sectors) in environment-and-development related decision-making—a theme which had been present, though not strongly developed, in the report of the WCED.

The UNCED process clearly imparted further momentum to international engagement with the idea of sustainable development. Its culmination in a highly public global forum where international leaders pledged renewed efforts to deal with acute problems of environment and development focused attention on the master concept that was intended to shape the international response. Moreover in the wake of UNCED the UN system

<sup>6</sup> In fact sustainable development is treated somewhat differently in the various UNCED outputs—no doubt reflecting the different forums in which the texts were negotiated.

moved relatively rapidly to institutionalize the follow-up, with the General Assembly voting in December 1992 to establish a high-level Commission on Sustainable Development under the Economic and Social Council to monitor international progress in managing environmental and development issues and in implementing Agenda 21.

Since its creation, the CSD has pursued an active agenda, exploring thematic issues related to environment and development, reviewing progress on a variety of international negotiating processes, and collating reports on national implementation activities. It also played a key role in preparing the five-year review of Agenda 21 conducted by a Special Session of the UN General Assembly in June of 1997 (UNGASS). This Special Session published a six point 'Statement of Commitment' reaffirming international support for Agenda 21, along with a much longer document assessing the international effort to come to terms with problems of environment and development since Rio, which also fixed priorities for the work of the CSD for the five-year period running up to the next major review of Agenda 21 implementation scheduled for 2002.

Thus by the close of the 1990s, the idea of sustainable development had not only become deeply embedded in the international discourse on environment-and-development issues, but had achieved a status of paramount norm with respect to discourses on 'development' in general. Just what has been the response of national governments to the coming of sustainable development—to the normative principles and programmatic intent of the UNCED process—is the issue to be considered here.

### **Sustainable Development as a Political Science Research Theme**

The emergence of sustainable development as a research theme in the social sciences has broadly shadowed its emergence in international political discourse. The occasional references of the 1970s gave way to the pioneering studies of the 1980s, and then to a steady stream of material by the early 1990s. Concern has been uneven across the disciplines, however, with economists (in the development and/or environment sub-fields) showing substantial interest, followed by geographers and sociologists, and latterly by students of politics. Each group has tended to adapt the concept to its favoured categories and preoccupations. Debate among economists, for example, has often focused on understanding sustainability in terms of welfare functions, income flows and capital accounts (Daly 1994; Pezzy

1992b; Costanza 1991); on determining how the concept might be measured and/or reconciled with techniques of environmental valuation (Pearce, Markandya and Barbier 1989; Pearce and Warford 1993); and on deciding whether it adds something substantive to the structure of economic theory (Bergh and Straaten 1994; Beckerman 1994). Geographers have been particularly intrigued with issues of scale and spatial disposition, and with the implications of sustainable development for land-use planning, and for urban and transport policies (Naess 1995; Owens 1994 and 1997; Reed and Slaymaker 1993; Rees 1995).

Until recently political scientists have paid comparatively little attention to sustainable development. Not that there has been a shortage of literature on the conflicts, especially the North/South tensions, associated with debates about sustainable development and the UNCED process; but for the most part such commentary has come from sources outside institutional political science. Some work has been produced by analysts concerned with environment and development issues (Redclift 1987), and by students of 'green' politics or 'green' political movements. Yet much of the politics literature has focused on conceptual, definitional, or programmatic themes—engaging with disputes over different interpretations of sustainability (Dobson 1996; McManus 1996) and about the scale and character of the social transformations sustainable development might be understood to entail (O'Riordan 1996; Dryzek 1997). Only in the last few years has research concerned with the more practical issue of what governments and other actors are already *doing* in the name of sustainable development begun to appear (Meadowcroft 1999). Such work now includes studies of particular jurisdictions and contexts (Collier 1997) as well as attempts to set such perspectives into wider comparative frameworks (Bäckstrand, Kronsell and Söderholm 1996; O'Mahony 1996; Baker *et al.* 1997; O'Riordan and Voisey 1997). There is also a burgeoning literature on local attempts to engage with Agenda 21 (LA 21) (Lafferty and Eckerberg 1997; Lafferty 1999; Voisey *et al.* 1996; Young 1996).

Why it has taken political science (particularly American political science) so long to engage with the concept of sustainable development is difficult to determine. No doubt there is a lingering perception that the idea has more to do with the politics of developing countries than the problems of highly industrialized states. Possibly some of those most closely involved with the analysis of environment or development policy-making suspect that sustainable development represents little more than a fashionable rhetorical flourish—the latest twist to the story that will do little to alter long-established patterns of domestic and international interaction with environment-and-development issues, a fact that may be greeted with dismay or

enthusiasm according to personal proclivities. Certainly analysts in the international relations field seem more drawn to study negotiations surrounding the 'hard' law of treaties and conventions, rather than the more diffuse ideas associated with sustainable development or Agenda 21. And among students of domestic politics, it would often appear to be the case that only when an issue becomes of immediate electoral, legislative or judicial relevance does it begin to attract substantial research attention.

Be this as it may, we clearly believe that there are several reasons why sustainable development should interest political scientists. First, it is obviously an idea with considerable 'staying power'. It has already served in international political interchange for more than a decade and a half, and there is no current indication that its rhetorical relevance is declining. Second, it is also an increasingly cosmopolitan idea. It is not bound to a particular institution, profession, or narrow discursive context, but has been taken up in many forms of argument (diplomatic, political, academic, popular); at different political 'levels' (international, national, regional, local); and by an array of actors within politics, business, and civil society.

Furthermore, sustainable development is not only confined to grand declarations of intent, but is increasingly associated with concrete policy initiatives and programmes. As a concept which weaves together normative ideas of equity, participation, prudence, welfare, and environmental concern in novel ways, sustainable development potentially signals a shift in the manner in which problems are defined. It has, for example, encouraged reframing the relationship between environment-and-development policy-making; sparked cross-sectoral linkages among previously distinct policy domains; favoured policy inputs from new groups and coalitions; and encouraged adjustments in relationships between governments and other social actors.

Sustainable development can thus be understood to engage with many long-standing themes of political enquiry, particularly with respect to conceptual innovation and change, and the way shifts in patterns of ideas are related to modifications of behaviour, process, and outcome. It is relevant to discussion about new forms of state/civil-society interaction, reform of regulatory processes and instruments, decentralized versus centralized decision-making, and the genesis of international regimes. The emergence of sustainable development raises questions about the nature of linkages among local, regional, national and international political processes, and is highly pertinent to the topical issue of 'globalization'. In its widest context, sustainable development can be understood as one of a series of responses to the perception that new sorts of political problems are emerging, related to the expanding scale of human impacts on the natural environment, along

with the increased interdependence of global economic, social, cultural, and political circumstances.

### **Bringing Rio Home: The Task of Implementation**

If one is to study the comparative implementation of sustainable development, it is important to specify just what this process is understood to entail. Sustainable development is a complex and contested idea, and the varied ways in which the term has been invoked and the contrasting policy prescriptions with which it has been associated have caused some consternation within the research community. Some investigators have attempted to deal with the proliferation of usages by stipulating their own preferred definitions, and rejecting other interpretations as incomplete, misleading, or deliberate deception. Some analysts have arrayed varieties of sustainability in a hierarchy, with successive steps (or stages) being held to represent a more profound and essential engagement with the underlying logic. Others have suggested that sustainable development is so vague as to be virtually meaningless, pointing out that almost any policy might be justified under its rubric.

These approaches are not helpful for comparative research into national engagement with sustainable development. Here the starting point must be the observed discursive and practical behaviour of political leaders and officials. These decision-makers have agreed publicly to undertake something called 'sustainable development', and the interest is in seeing what this actually implies. Thus this study does not start from an autonomously derived (either logical or philosophical) interpretation of what sustainable development 'really' means; nor do we propose to write-off sustainable development as mere rhetorical trope. Instead, we take sustainable development to be an expression whose sense is given by relevant usage: in this case, *the international discussions and accords through which it has become an accepted goal of international and national policy*. This could be described as the 'official' or 'authorized' usage. As we have seen, it is the product of 'the UNCED process'—that is to say the process of international dialogue and agreement that led from the initial report of the Brundtland Commission, through the UNCED Prepcoms, into the documents and commitments of the Rio Earth Summit.

The essential elements of this understanding have been outlined in the brief description of the historical uptake of sustainable development

presented above. But it is worth pausing to consider core dimensions of the idea a little more closely. One approach is to conceptualize sustainable development as operating on three planes: the economic, the social, and the environmental. Thus achieving sustainable development involves the pursuit of economic, social, and environmental goods to enhance the welfare of current and future generations. In particular this implies reconciling economic advance, social equity, and environmental protection—and neglect of any one of these strands means a drift away from the line of sustainable development (World Bank 1994). This perspective was emphasized in the ‘Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21’ adopted at UNGASS in 1997 which described ‘economic development, social development and environmental protection’ as ‘interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development’.<sup>7</sup>

Alternatively, one can emphasize two sorts of ‘constraints’ on developmental activity embedded within the notion of sustainable development. First, there are physical environmental constraints: beyond a certain point, the erosion of environmental assets will threaten development progress. Thus the maintenance of an adequate environmental base becomes a precondition for making continuing development possible. In other words, there are ultimate limits to the burdens the environment can bear—although the Brundtland Commission emphasized that these limits are mediated through patterns of human social organization and levels of technological development. Second, there are ethical constraints rooted in the imperatives of social justice. It is morally right to have regard for the needs of future persons (inter-generational justice), and to address the pressing needs of the world’s poor (intra-generational justice). These requirements in turn establish limits to the forms of development activity which legitimately can be pursued today (Langhelle 1998; Lafferty and Langhelle 1999).

Another approach to elucidating sustainable development is to focus on the range of component ideas included within the concept. Lafferty (1996), for example, has referred to four normative principles embodied in the UNCED usage of sustainable development. Change which is to be considered sustainable *development* aims: (1) ‘to satisfy basic human needs and reasonable standards of welfare for all living beings’, and (2) ‘to achieve more equitable standards of living both within and among global populations’. To be *sustainable*, such change should: (3) ‘be pursued with great caution’ so as to avoid ‘disruption of biodiversity and the regenerative capacity of nature,

<sup>7</sup> The report on progress since UNCED submitted in January 1997 by the UN Secretary General to the 5th Session of CSD in preparation for UNGASS suggested that: ‘sustainable development may be regarded as the progressive and balanced achievement of sustained economic development, improved social equity and environmental sustainability’ (UNSG 1997).

both locally and globally', and (4) 'be achieved without undermining the possibility for future generations to attain similar standards of living and similar or improved standards of equity'.

Jacobs (1996) has offered a slightly different formulation of the key principles embedded in sustainable development, referring more generally to commitments to: (1) 'environment–economy integration'; (2) the welfare of future generations; (3) 'environmental protection' (resource and amenity conservation, and the acceptance of biospheric limits); (4) equity (meeting the basic needs of the poor and equity across generations); (5) 'quality of life' issues; and (6) 'participation'.

Neither of these lists are presented as formal 'definitions' of sustainable development. Rather they are specifications of the normative dimensions included in the concept, as it has developed in international usage—dimensions around which specific interpretations can be formulated and applied. A recognition that: (1) it is possible to arrive at slightly different formulations of the normative principles embodied in the official understanding of sustainable development; (2) there can be great variation in interpreting what such principles actually imply; or (3) there are those who ignore or reject the received international usage altogether and invoke entirely different meanings of the word 'sustainable development'—has not deterred the aim of our project. It is the fate of all successful and indicative concepts invoked in political life to be subject to contrasting interpretations and to be loaded with different meanings—a feature which has sometimes been described as the 'essential contestability' of widely supported political and social concepts (Gallie 1956; Connolly 1983). Divergence of understanding and usage is especially likely with highly charged normative concepts, such as 'democracy', 'freedom' or 'equality'. The range of understandings hardly prevents, however, the application of such contestable concepts in specific policies and programmes for social and economic change.

For the purpose of the present study, it is not necessary to adjudicate among slightly different presentations of the core principles of sustainable development. In our view, it is sufficient to note that, within the conceptual–political range adopted here, sustainable development indicates an interdependent concern with: promoting human welfare; satisfying basic needs; protecting the environment; considering the fate of future generations; achieving equity between rich and poor; and participating on a broad basis in development decision-making. While these points may appear vague, they are not without content: indeed, they are sufficient to mark out many usages of 'development' which do *not* correspond to the Brundtland–UNCED usage. Approaches to development and economic growth which do not consider environmental protection and/or environmental

limits; or which give no place to equity issues; or which ignore popular inputs to environment and development related decision-making—would not be in accord with the broadly accepted understanding applied here.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to (and supporting) this conceptual understanding, is the more specific textual and political context inherent in the UNCED process and its international agreements: particularly the Rio Declaration, the Climate Change and Biodiversity Conventions, and Agenda 21. These reflect a very general political consensus within the international community—at a particular moment in time, at least—as to how the sustainable development agenda should be consolidated as to principle, and moved forward in practice. We do not infer that every state or government endorsed every particular policy recommendation in Agenda 21, or that the Rio Accords are to be etched in stone for all time as the quintessence of sustainable development, but rather that they represent the mainstream view of what sustainable development could reasonably be held to imply at the moment when it was officially endorsed by the world's nation-states as a crucial objective of policy.

These two benchmarks—the normative themes validated through the WCED/UNCED process, and the practical consensus represented by the Rio Accords—provide an anchor for the understanding of sustainable development employed in this study. Our general goal has been to determine empirically the extent to which the normative themes and practical proscriptions have actually been taken up in the sustainable development related initiatives undertaken in the jurisdictions under investigation.

As for the idea of 'implementation', we have understood this in a general sense to denote the process whereby national governments engage explicitly with the idea of sustainable development; integrate it as a norm in public decision-making processes; and ensure the adoption of policies congruent with its orientation.<sup>9</sup> These aspects are clearly reflected in the research 'pro-

<sup>8</sup> There is now a huge profusion of usages of 'sustainable' in adjectival and adverbial contexts ('sustainable growth', 'sustainable sales', 'sustainable agriculture', 'sustainable communities', and so on) as well as of 'sustainability' *tout court*. Throughout this study we take sustainable development to be the internationally legitimated master concept, and we will approach other 'sustainabilities' from the perspective of the extent to which they are (or are not) compatible with sustainable development.

<sup>9</sup> The 'implementation' considered here is somewhat different from that which has typically preoccupied political researchers, which concerns a particular programme located within a determinate policy sector, 'authoritatively formulated' by government, and applied within a national or sub-national matrix (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983; Goggin 1990; Palumbo and Calista 1990). As we have seen, sustainable development is not an individual 'programme', but a normative frame associated with a wide set of policy proscriptions, which requires 'translation' into national priorities and measures, and which cuts across established sectoral domains. Although legitimised by international agreement, most commitments are not in the form of legally binding accords. Furthermore, analysis of national engagement

tocol' listed above. There are, however, two additional features of the approach which warrant further comment: (1) the emphasis on *political processes* rather than ultimate developmental outcomes, and (2) the primary focus on the actions of *government* rather than on the behaviour of the full spectrum of social actors.

Since sustainable development refers to a particular pattern of social change, 'implementing' sustainable development might in the broadest sense be thought to refer to the actual achievement of substantive results—that is, specific outcomes of sustainable development initiatives. Making comprehensive judgements about developmental trajectories presents fundamental conceptual and practical difficulties, and at a point when even the most enthusiastic states have only recently accepted sustainable development as a macro policy objective—and when international discussions over indicator sets to assess progress are far from resolved—such judgements are beyond the comparative intentions of the study. We are, in short, more interested in political *process* rather than developmental *substance*.

With respect to actors, one could also argue that 'implementation' in a broad sense denotes not just action by governments, but also that undertaken by other societal groups. Here again we adopt the more restrictive connotation, defining implementation in terms of government initiatives, rather than with respect to the autonomous sustainable development related activities of non-governmental actors. This accords with the formal delimitation of responsibilities for ensuring national implementation established in the Earth Summit agreements, and confines the enquiry to manageable proportions.

In sum, our position is that the concept of sustainable development was given a *relatively* distinct formulation as a particular type, or path, of development by the Brundtland Commission; that the essence of this formulation created a common implicit 'platform' for the Rio Earth Summit; and that the concept's greatest strength as a focus for implementation analysis, is the combination of relative conceptual distinctness and relative political consensus attaching to the UNCED process. In the following, we first present the individual country reports and analyses, allowing each 'storyline' to emerge as the individual authors have deemed most appropriate. We then provide (in Chapter 12) a comprehensive comparative overview of the ten cases, focusing on a number of key dimensions derived from the research protocol—dimensions which we believe provide an initial empirical basis for more theoretical explanatory approaches. We conclude the comparative

with sustainable development necessitates reference to both domestic and extra-national dimensions of the countries' responses—for the UNCED process anticipates that compliance will entail national initiatives in both domestic and international policy.

analysis with a general comparative evaluation, where we group the different cases with respect to the degree of political 'enthusiasm' indicated for sustainable development within each jurisdiction, but where we also try to grasp the distinctness and particular nature of the different national responses. Finally, in Chapter 13, we draw out some of the conclusions of the analysis in terms we believe to be of central importance for further developments and practical applications.