

Sustainable development

For the economist Catherine Aubertin, sustainable development is the "normative ambition of ecologising and humanising the economy", that is to say of reconciling economic growth with social and above all environmental concerns, thus preserving the future and implementing forms of "development" that respect natural "resources" and ecosystems. Thus sustainable development guarantees economic efficiency by justifying it on the basis of social finalities, while at the same time ensuring its durability by refusing negative externalities.

As early as the 1970s, at a time of peak demographic growth in developing countries and the loss of momentum of the "glorious thirty", the first concerns appeared on the subject of what is still known as eco-development. UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) was set up in 1972, the year in which the first Earth Summit was held in Stockholm.

The first occurrence of the phrase "sustainable development" is to be found in a report published in 1980 on the initiative of UNEP by IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature, created in 1947, and the WWF (World Wildlife Fund, the largest environmental NGO, created in 1961), and entitled "World Conservation Strategy & Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development". In 1984 the United Nations set up an international Commission in charge of reflection on the impact of human activities on the planet. Industrial disasters appeared to be on the increase; the wreck of the Amoco Cadiz in Brittany in 1978, dioxin leaks in Seveso in Italy in 1979, the explosion of the Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal in 1984 and that of the Chernobyl nuclear generator in 1986. Conservationist organisations were also denouncing the rapid deforestation of Amazonia, acid rains in northern Europe, the hole in the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, advancing deserts and the massive pollution generated by industrial activities in the "South" where economic development was taking precedence over environmental standards.

The advent of a universal ideology

This Commission culminated in 1987 with the Brundtland Report, named after a former Norwegian prime minister. It provides the first official definition of sustainable development: sustainable development is development that aims to respond to the needs of the present without compromising the ability to satisfy those of future generations. While the Brundtland Report states the need to share world growth with the most underprivileged and to reduce inequalities, it above all stresses the fact that human activities are a threat to the planet: the main enemies for the future of the planet pinpointed by the Report are climatic changes resulting from what came to be known as "greenhouse gases", and damage to the ozone layer attributed to CFCs (chlorofluorocarbon compounds). In 1988 the United Nations set up the IPCC (Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change) whose mandate was to study the share of responsibility of humans in climate change.

With the Brundtland Report, two dominant notions in the area of ecology and conservation make their appearance officially on the international scene:

- 1) the first priority should be to preserve the planet, and thus to adopt modes of production that preserve the environment
- 2) the consumer lifestyle of the West cannot be extended to the rest of the world without seriously compromising the future of the planet.

In the following decade this conviction became established. The Commission recommended that every year an "Earth Summit" should be held, where sustainable development concerns could be expressed officially, on the scale of the nations of the world. The Rio Summit in 1992 on environment and development was the first major summit after the end of the Cold War.

A new world view and new agents

Alongside the classic diplomatic agents, States and institutions, for the first time movements arising from civilian society began to play a central part. The recent arrival of Internet enabled NGOs to form networks and launch federative appeals. In Rio, the environmental NGOs placed the issues of global warming and greenhouse gases at the centre of negotiations and discussions, arousing anger among the developing nations.

At the end of the Conference, 173 heads of State adopted Agenda 21 (21 for the 21st century), a collection of 27 undertakings for sustainable development, to be implemented at territorial level in the form of local Agendas 21 (LA21). All the countries undertook to adopt a national strategy for sustainable development before 1995. Global warming, biodiversity and desertification (which actually

appeared later but was considered to have emerged from Rio) were the subject of international conventions. A statement concerning forests was also adopted. These environmental orientations explain the extreme reluctance of developing countries towards sustainable development, which they viewed as a war machine directed against their economic growth.

Yet sustainable development aims to reconcile the economy (producing more but for greater numbers), the social sphere (better distribution and sharing, reduction of poverty) and respect for the «environment» (preserving the future living conditions of coming generations). A fourth component, cutting across the others, is that of solidarity between generations, present and future. Participative democracy, the implementation of precautionary measures, and the increasing importance attached to environmental issues in territorial development policies are the main characteristics of sustainable development, which has become an international watchword, even for the countries of the South, who now see the means to require countries in the North, who have gone before them in industrial development, to pay off an ecological debt.

Environmental priorities, but one obsession: economic growth

At the time of the fourth Earth Summit in Rio in 2012 it is possible to say that the main fields of reflection on sustainable development as defined by the international community are as follows:

-the issue of world governance. Since the 1970s and the view of the Earth from the Moon, the notion of a finite space has taken over: the measures taken at local level are necessarily reflected at world level. France pleaded for an international environmental organisation.

-the issue of climate change. In Durban the international community undertook (although without any specific constraints) to restrict the increase in terrestrial temperature to 2° , via drastic action against greenhouse gases, aiming to maintain the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere below 450 ppm (380 today and 280 one century ago), but in reality the renegotiation of the Kyoto protocol was at a standstill. Beyond action on the causes of climatic change, the need to act on its consequences became increasingly prominent, strengthening resistance by way of adaptive strategies.

-the issue of the loss of biodiversity, with the decision in the Nagoya Conference in 2010 to increase the proportion of protected terrestrial zones from 13% today to 17% by 2020, and that of marine protected zones from 1 to 10%.

-the issue of energy, since sustainable development had pinpointed the exhaustion of fossil resources and the need to resort to renewable energies.

-and finally the issue of world public goods, in the areas of the environment (air, water and soil quality, and also landscapes) and the social sphere (reduction of inequalities, social redistribution, labour legislation etc).

To achieve its objectives the international community and nation States can choose to adopt new norms and standards, create an environmental taxation system, or encourage responsible behaviours by way of the establishment of a market (for example for the exchange of carbon credits).

Sustainable development, which has been a powerful movement in the twenty years following the Cold War, seems today to be losing influence, despite the lobbying by the large environmental NGOs, on account of concerns about the economic and financial crisis. It however remains an international watchword in the discourse of countries in the North and in that of the emerging economies, who see in it a means of winning new markets while at the same time reducing their production costs. At the same time, it is becoming a new asset for the poorest countries, who use it to call for international funding and mechanisms for the establishment of sustainable development measures. One can even wonder if this adaptation will not be the development aid of the 21st century. However in reality, for States, economic growth remains the number one priority, in the face of demographic challenges and the need for greater sharing of human development.

Bibliographie