

From an aspiration for progress to the notion of sustainable development

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Objektyp: **Preface**

Zeitschrift: **Geographica Helvetica : schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geographie = Swiss journal of geography = revue suisse de géographie = rivista svizzera di geografia**

Band (Jahr): **54 (1999)**

Heft 2: **From an aspiration for progress to the notion of "sustainable development" = De l'aspiration au progrès à la notion de "développement durable" = Vom Streben nach Fortschritt zur Idee der "Nachhaltigen Entwicklung"**

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

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Introduction

From an Aspiration for Progress to the Notion of Sustainable Development

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1 Progress, Growth and Sustainable Development

The notion of «sustainable development» was defined in 1987 by the BRUNDTLAND report as «development that meets the goals of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs». This notion led to a general revision of many local and global policies that focussed on progress and growth. «Progress» meant a promise of «Paradise» for future generations; in the long run, «Heaven» should be reached. The concept of «growth» modified this notion just a little: In the short term, negative growth rates, for example, were considered possible and acceptable because future generations would certainly experience sustained growth.

The notion of «sustainable development» includes both long-term prospects and uncertainty. «Sustainability» implies taking care of future generations without denying risks and uncertainties. «Sustainability», then, does not limit itself to taking a long-term perspective only as is done in contemporary macroeconomic studies of sustained growth. Here, economists have come to understand that long-term growth is more important than short-term fluctuations, because of their relatively minor impact on economic well-being. The macroeconomic concept of «sustained growth», however, includes just one component of «sustainability», that is the long-term perspective without seriously taking *risks* and *uncertainties* into account. «Sustained growth», then, is very different from «sustainable development». Most ambiguous in the semantics of «progress» and «development» is the term «development» itself. This results from the gap between two standard definitions: «development» may mean «planning» of large-scale infrastructure or of industrialisation. Development may also be defined by «improvements of liberties and well-being» based on the progressive dissolution of patriarchal order or diminishing social disparities in society.

«Sustainable development» shares with the latter definition a somewhat more critical view of progress and development. This, however, is not enough to fully define «sustainable» development. Early proponents of the theory of growth like V. PARETO and other economists from the school of Lausanne also took a critical look at the positivist conceptualisation of progress and development. Moved by the food shortage that occurred

in the South of Italy at the end of the Nineteenth Century despite general progress PARETO raised the question of governmental responsibility. Henceforth, the theory of growth implied political responsibility of governments in steering growth, whereas the myth of «Progress» did not. The theory of growth, then, was already a counterpoint to «Progress».

Nevertheless, historians of technology (PETROVSKI H., *Design Paradigms. Cases histories of Error and Judgment in Engineering*, Cambridge, 1994) call the eighty years between the emergence of economic growth theories around 1900 and the BRUNDTLAND report in 1987 «the golden age of error in design paradigms». During this period, major technological disasters took place which clearly showed the limits to growth and development planning.

In the conceptualisation of sustainable development, environments and ecosystems have *uncertain dynamics* that manifest themselves in all areas. «Sustainable development» introduces risk and uncertainty in human interaction with space. In the Keynesian tradition, risk refers to short-term fluctuations and in the common interpretation of Keynesian economics and the welfare state risk avoidance means the maximisation of human and natural resources primarily to the benefit of present, not future generations. «Sustainable development» goes beyond this mid-century conception of development.

2 «Europe of Risk»

The theme of risk is at the heart of the problems of the European public and the socio-political arenas. When Europe undertakes to create regulatory principles such as the Treaty of Maastricht it promotes prudence in many domains such as the environment, health and economics. Social sciences, too, have been mobilised around accepting and dealing with risk, and there has been systematic questioning of political decisions regarding technology.

The «Europe of risk» network aims to study new cultures of risk and the new treatments of collective risks in Europe. Interdisciplinary seminars help to establish a synthesis of results from new studies on risk in social sciences. Each seminar is held in a European city in order to renew links between researchers. The organisation of each seminar is based on local participation during the meetings. The seminar «From an Aspiration for Progress to the Notion of Sustainable Development» was organised by the University Center of Human Ecology and the Department of Geography of the University of Geneva, with assistance from the Laboratory of Sociology of European Culture of Strasbourg and generous financial help from the Fonds National Suisse de la Recherche Scientifique, the Faculté des Sciences Economiques et Sociales and the Commission Administrative of University of Geneva, and the program «Risques

Collectifs et Situations de Crise» of the French CNRS. Based on interdisciplinary studies of risk theories, modifications of «risk cultures» and the treatment of collective risks in Europe this seminar took a critical perspective on progress, growth and development. Main emphases were: changes in development policy and practice in response to «sustainable development», the concern with and critical views on sustainable development and regional applications of the concept of sustainable development.

3 An Overview of the Special Issue

The special issue «*From an Aspiration for Progress to the Notion of Sustainable Development*» compiles several papers that were presented at this seminar. First, E. ZACCAÏ shows the spectrum of interpretations of «sustainable development» on an international level. Then, R. KELLER studies how sustainable development was received in Germany, particularly by the school of sociology around U. BECK who characterises modern societies as «societies of risk» (*Risikogesellschaft*). KELLER discusses both the ideal of risk under complete monitoring and the notion of sustainable development stemming from uncertain dynamics of interactions between society and the environment.

Incorrect uses of the term «sustainable» are numerous. Therefore, the concept of sustainable development runs the risk of being misunderstood. S. LATOUCHES' radical essay gives a clear warning to those who rashly use the label «sustainable». He argues that sustainable practices must be different from earlier policy, particularly classic development planning. This, however, requires a new ethic that no longer adopts the myths of progress, growth, and development. S. LATOUCHE suggests that sustainable development may be the last cover up of

classic progress and development-oriented policy.

After this iconoclastic point of view, B. KALAORA and L. CHABASON demonstrate the strength and usefulness of the notion of sustainable development. Implementation of sustainability requires adjusting indicators, re-defining the role of experts, and that of regional diplomacy. Because of its shared rejection of classic development, «sustained development» can serve as a useful regulatory principle for a new era of international relations.

We would especially like to thank the people who assisted us in putting this special issue together: R. SCARIATI, J. FALL, D. CHASSOT and G. MÉTRAL.

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Manuskripteingang/received/reentrée du manuscrit:
5. Januar 1999

Annahme zum Druck/Accepted for publication/
acceptation à l'impression: 4. August 1999