

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO “ECODEVELOPMENT”?

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The word “ecodevelopment” (1) was first coined in 1972 around the time of the first international environmental UN Conference in Stockholm. In those days, it was a matter of emphasising the need to protect nature against the impact of human activity, e.g. pollution, resource overuse, etc.

Environmental degradation was still predominantly a local problem although it soon was to become a global challenge.

This change of scale marked the end of the blind right to “use and abuse” perpetuated since the emergence of agriculture and sedentary living. Early on humans didn’t see themselves as separate from Nature: people were part of their environment and being dependent on it, had to live in harmony with its cycles and resources. Humankind lived in usufructal (2) economies, which is still the case in some very isolated but disappearing civilisations.

With the development of agriculture came land cultivation and a sedentary lifestyle, which over time brought about land ownership, the development of laws to protect owners, the rise of “modern” technology and the beginning of manufacture, industry, trade and commerce. Numerous civilisations thus developed and prospered. Many disappeared, either as a result of a catastrophe, being conquered or having exhausted nature’s bounty. With the advent of colonisation, mining and the Industrial Revolution, a new page of development was irremediably turned as humankind became ever more efficient at exploiting natural resources and other human beings. Material and financial capital were given prominence over other forms of capital: natural, human and social, and developed at the expense of these other forms. Under the banner of globalisation, social, natural and human capital have been neglected leading to enormous prosperity for some, increased misery and poverty for the majority of others.

How could this detrimental evolution occur? The present unbalance between the environment, social and economic development pillars (3) has been triggered by at least three major “disconnects” between them.

The arrival of the first Europeans in the New World exemplifies **the disconnect between the relationship of nature and humankind**. When signing treaties, the Europeans thought that they were gran-

ted the right to own the land by the native populations when in fact they were only granted the right to use it: in most early civilisations the right to ownership didn’t exist, people simply used the gifts of nature, e.g., the usufruct. Thinking that they owned these lands, Europeans used methods and technologies that were anything but usufructal. The result was that nature was critically affected to the point of not only exhausting natural resources, but also progressively disturbing the planet’s natural mechanisms such as carbon and water cycles.

A second **disconnect has occurred between the role of the market and human well-being**. In textbooks, the market is supposed to be free, fair and to serve society. But the free market has not developed this way. If it had, there would be less disparity between rich and poor people and the income gap would be decreasing not increasing as we witnessed today. Markets are largely shaped by banks and other financial institutions which are tightly held and are anything but transparent. Currently the whole finance establishment lives and breathes with its eyes on the US Federal Reserve that sets the lending rates for the world. But how many people do realize that the “Fed”, as it is called in the US, is not a public institution accountable to the nation? Knowing that it is owned by a handful of powerful private US banking families (4), is it surprising that the market is skewed to benefit some at the expense of many? To be equitable, the market needs to respect the equilibrium between supply and demand requirements. True governance is participatory, giving all actors equal rights and capacities (Aarhus Convention 1998) and allowing for what is called “co-development”. Not surprisingly the present unbalance in energy markets is largely responsible for the climate destabilisation we are experiencing today.

Third, and most importantly, **we have a semantic disconnect**. The word “ecodevelopment” was banned by the USA (5) from UN fora around 1972. In 1987, the Brundtland Commission came up with “sustainable development” as a replacement. The term “sustainable development” is misconstrued and open to abuse. Everyone is “for sustainability”, especially if it is one’s own sustainability; hence the success of the term in

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business circles. What should have signaled a long-term vision and a solution to the world’s development problems became a term for business-as-usual practices keen on “durability”. The concept allowed itself to be hijacked largely because the expression “sustainable development” does not evoke any specific content and people can shape the term to reflect what they want to be sustainable. By contrast, the original word of “ecodevelopment” clearly means social and economic development respecting the environment.

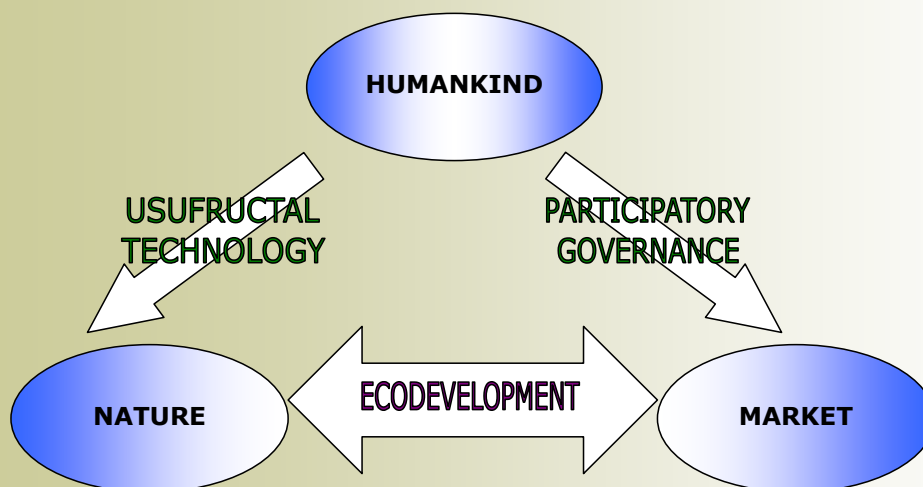
What we need to achieve is a form of co-development with a fair balance of the three pillars, using only usufructal technologies and guided by participatory governance, therefore re-focusing growth (6) so that it is based on the use of renewables and non-material goods. Ecodevelopment removes humans from having overall control. Instead there is harmony between nature, humankind and the marketplace. Usufructal technology and participatory governance provide the mechanisms to ensure that a fair balance is maintained. This major change of values is already on the horizon, we only have to make sure that it doesn’t just stay there...



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ENDNOTES

1. See: <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=710>
2. Usufruct refers to the right of enjoying all the advantages derivable from the use of something that belongs to another, provided that the substance of the thing is not altered or damaged (Webster Dictionary).
3. As identified by the Brundtland UNCED Report (1987)
4. Nowhere is this dominance more obvious than in the energy sector. Here “governance” is managed almost exclusively by energy suppliers while representatives of the demand-side part of energy issues are completely ignored. This is particularly clear on major energy development decisions.
5. Consult Ygnacy Sachs’ writings. At that time, it seemed impossible to some that nature could be as important as the economy, which is implied by the word “ecodevelopment”.
6. Growth that is fueled by clean renewable energy and built on the efficient closed-cycle use of resources.



Humans, utilising usufructal technologies use natural resources; through participatory governance, markets are controlled and regulated. It is through these processes and interactions that ecodevelopment is achieved.

Source: HELIO International