Struggling with Sustainability— A Comparative Framework for Evaluating Sustainable Development Programs

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Summary. — "Sustainability" is an inherently dynamic, indefinite and contested concept. "Sustainable development" must, therefore, be seen as an unending process—defined not by fixed goals or the specific means of achieving them, but by an approach to creating change through continuous learning and adaptation. How, then, do we evaluate a development program's contribution to such a process? This paper constructs a framework for evaluating sustainable rural development programs using both process- and outcome-oriented criteria, and demonstrates its application. The SANREM CRSP/SEA research and development program in The Philippines—including ICRAFs efforts to organize communities around agroforestry and environmental conservation—is assessed. © 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF "SUSTAINABILITY"

As pervasive as the term may be in our discourse, "sustainability" is far from having a clear, distinct, or wholly accepted meaning in contemporary development circles (Preto, 1996). "Sustainability" is increasingly cited as an explicit goal of development efforts and remains a widely-touted global concern in spite of the fact that it is an inherently "complex and contested concept... [for which] precise and absolute definitions... are impossible" (Pretty, 1995, p. 1248). [1] This situation raises many questions which remain unanswered despite the popularity of the concept. One pressing question is how to evaluate programs that claim "sustainable development" as an explicit goal. In response, this paper reviews the commonly accepted core characteristics of sustainable development and uses them as the foundation for constructing a framework for the comparative evaluation of sustainable rural development programs. Finally, to demonstrate its application, the framework is used to evaluate a research and development program in the southern Philippines known as the Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resource Management Collaborative Research Support Program/Southeast Asia (SANREM CRSP/SEA). This US Agency for International Development-funded program was selected because its broad, comprehensive goals made it an ideal candidate for an evaluation of this kind.

As others have noted, the concept of sustainability is inherently difficult to pin down because its specific meaning and practical applications are: (a) *highly dynamic*—as a result of constantly seeking balance in the face of shifting background conditions (Angelsen, Fjeldstad, & Sumaila, 1994; Uphoff, Esman, & Krishna, 1998; World Bank, 2003); (b) *largely indefinite*—as a result of being based on necessarily abstract, context-specific, and very long-term goals (Flora, 2001; Harrington, 1995; van Pelt, 1993); and (c) *highly contested*—as a result of the many human values, perceptions and competing political interests evoked by the concept (Bell & Morse, 2003; Pretty, 1995). Of

course, "development" is another normative idea open to considerable interpretation and debate on its own (Kaplan, 2000). Thus, the notion of "sustainable development" has become something of an intellectual quagmire of contested uncertainty. The intention of this article is to help move the debate forward by accepting the concept's inherent uncertainties and establishing some common ground nonetheless.

(a) *Process orientation*

A useful means of breaking through the intellectual gridlock surrounding the idea of sustainable development—and to approach a sensible means of evaluation—is to think of it as an unending *process* characterized by the approach used in guiding change rather than any fixed goal(s) to be achieved through specific technologies, policies, institutions or actions (Flora, 2001; Uphoff *et al.*, 1998). Most evaluation frameworks focus on assessing specific indicators of sustainability without investigating the nature of the processes responsible for such change (OECD, 2000; United Nations, 2001). A sustainable approach must be one based upon continuous learning and adaptation if the participants of development are to have any success in a world where conditions—e.g., environmental health, resource constraints, policies, technologies, markets, etc.—are in constant flux (Lightfoot *et al.*, 2001). Experience with many development projects that have not incorporated learning and adaptation but have, instead, focused on one-time improvements in policy, practices, infrastructure, technology, or public health has demonstrated that such progress can be easily eroded over time (Chambers, 1997; Esman & Herring, 2001; Fujisaka, 1989; Krishna, Uphoff, & Esman, 1997; Oakley, 1991; Stockmann, 1997). While these individual changes are vital to development, they alone are insufficient and hold no promise of sustainability.

Some argue that the most useful way to conceptualize sustainable development is as a process of social change that tackles underlying structural problems and is rooted in learning, continual innovation and "perpetual novelty" (Pretty, 1995, p. 1249). [2] Indeed, a process-oriented conceptualization may be the only way to adequately address the concerns raised above—i.e., that sustainability and development are fundamentally characterized by local variability, dynamic uncertainty and unpredictability (Mosse, 1998; Uphoff, 2002). Accepting this

position, there is little choice but to treat sustainable development programs as flexible, iterative systems in which success is determined by the ability of both the program and the local community to innovate, learn, and adapt (Korten, 1980; Lightfoot *et al.*, 2001; Pretty, 1995, 2002). The obvious question for practitioners is: how do we help create a systemic process of learning and innovation that is focused on the values inherent to sustainability?

(b) *Participatory processes and community organizing*

It is widely held that broad-based community participation is a fundamental element of most effective sustainable development programs (Abaza & Baranzini, 2002; Oakley, 1991; Uphoff, 2002). Indeed, Reading and Soussan (1989) argued early on that "the central tenet of sustainable development is that poor people should be given the opportunity to create their own solutions to the problems they face" (p. 153). To achieve this, and to create a sustainable process of learning and innovation, local people and institutions must be treated not as mere collaborators, but as lead actors in the formal and informal research, trials and experimentation that can help orient them toward identifying and solving the problems they face (Defoer & Budelman, 2000; Mukherjee, 2002; Uphoff *et al.*, 1998).

While immediately influencing, educating, and empowering people is an important goal for a development program, the long-term perspective of sustainability demands that this process continue indefinitely, long after the program has ended. To achieve this, programs need to engage in community organizing to help build locally-controlled institutions which can eventually take over the roles of the program, and to create a sense of local investment in, control over and ownership of the development process to ensure that it is sustained (Deutsch, Busby, Orprecio, Bago-Labis, & Cequiña, 2001; Mercado, Garrity, Stark, & Patindol, 1998; Narayan, 1996). In this way a program can act as a catalyst for long-term social and structural change, including greater democratization and decentralization of authority (Chambers, 1994; Krishna & Bunch, 1997; Saugestad, 2001). [3]

If this is the vision of development derived from sustainability's core characteristics, then what sort of framework can be used to assess the relative success of a program designed to