

The Feasibility of Sustainable Development in Latin America

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PSCI 105: Comparative Politics

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April 11, 2006

Many of the industrialized nations of the global North are engaged in an effort to avert ecological disaster and bring the economy back within the limits imposed by natural systems. Global climate change, deforestation, desertification, and overloads of air and water pollution affect increasing numbers of people every day. While global efforts, mostly led by Northern states, have been marginally successful at influencing public opinion and curtailing the worst consequences of the overexploitation of earth's resources and pollution sinks, much remains to be done. Scientists warn that humanity has less than fifty years to make drastic changes before the damage caused by greenhouse gas emissions becomes irreversible.

A paradox lies in the middle of this situation that concerns the global South, which has only begun to industrialize. On the one hand, being at such an early stage in the process of economic development could allow Southern states to avoid repeating the ecological blunders the North has made. On the other, poverty and other social ills plaguing the South pose pressing challenges for governments and civil society, diminishing the time, money and resources available to tackle global environmental problems. Using Latin America as a case study, this paper will attempt to answer the following crucial questions surrounding the achievement of sustainability on a global scale given the disparate economic, social and political conditions of the world's regions. First, is sustainability more feasible from a sociopolitical standpoint in Latin America than in Europe and Anglo-America? Second, is the increasing attention given to sustainability issues by Latin American governments a result of the North's influence or a direct response to the homegrown concerns of the region's people? The answers should guide governments in both spheres, as well as international organizations, towards addressing global concerns sensitively to both sides.

The commonly accepted definition of sustainable development as that which meets present needs without hampering future generations' ability to meet their own needs encompasses two controversial topics. One is the concept of needs, in which case there is debate over by whose standards to measure needs and whose needs are more

important when various needs are in conflict. Some argue that we are morally obligated to prioritize the present needs of the poor, even at the expense of future generations and ecosystems. Another controversy surrounds the definition of development, which is subject to varying normative constructs. Development is generally measured using crude indicators of economic welfare, such as gross national product (GNP), but also includes health, education, housing and other quality-of-life indicators. An increase in GNP might actually reflect an increase in the social and environmental costs of economic prosperity.¹

Latin Americans still do not widely embrace conservation as a personal or political end. For those who are poor by global standards (the vast majority of the Latin American population), economic opportunity, even by the most exploitative and unsustainable means, will always override ecological concern. “Bad economic performance increases poverty, which accelerates environmental degradation.”² Latin American governments have a history of setting aside national parks and wilderness areas as well as enacting sweeping conservation measures, but their overall effectiveness is increasingly questionable. Over 70 percent of Latin Americans live in cities with air pollution, poor water quality and an overabundance of solid wastes.³

Silva provides the following fairly accurate generalization about political battles over sustainable development in Latin America. Two opposing ideas, both of which wave the politically positive banner of sustainability, duke it out, with government officials often taking sides. One is the market-friendly approach, which is generally favored by Northern countries, particularly the United States. Market advocates warn against government dictating to the private sector how it is to behave, but believe that government can use tools such as tax incentives and interest rate adjustments to signal

¹ Phillip J. O'Brien, "Debt and sustainable development in Latin America," in David Goodman and Michael Redclift, eds, *Environment and development in Latin America: The politics of sustainability*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1991: 24-25.

² Eduardo Silva, "The Politics of Sustainable Development: Native Forest Policy in Chile, Venezuela, Costa Rica and Mexico," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 29.2 (May 1997): 463.

³ Marie Price, "Ecopolitics and Environmental Nongovernmental Organizations in Latin America," *Geographical Review* 84.1 (January 1994): 45.

³ *Op cit.* Silva: 457.

its desires to the market. They base their theory on the liberal idea that expanding world trade leads to greater and more efficient economic output, which raises standards of living to the point where people have sufficient leisure time to develop environmental awareness.⁴

On the other end of the spectrum, the grassroots approach is based on the desires of the communities affected by development proposals, which do not necessarily align with the interests of business, government officials or even multinational environmentally-oriented nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Grassroots partisans hold that people should have direct control over what affects their lives and communities, regardless of any wider vision held by outside forces. They posit that the livelihoods of workers are best served by small-scale enterprises that manage harvests so that more income stays in the community.⁵ Most environmental NGOs lack a long-term vision of a sustainable society, but wish to see their communities' environments improve in the short term.

Each of these forces possesses considerable clout. Those who back market-friendly approaches are bolstered by moneyed interests, and in many cases, international organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental. Defenders of the grassroots gain power directly from the people, feeding off a more communitarian and mass-mobilizing culture than exists in the more pluralist Northern states. Neither approach lends itself to conflict more than the other, however. Forest policies in Chile and Mexico both stress market-friendly strategies, but conflict over their formation and implementation was high in Chile and low in Mexico.⁶

The use of Marxist analysis points to a different kind of politics underlying the push for sustainability in Latin America. Many of the region's "new social movements," including the nascent environmental movement, can be seen in terms of class struggle. Local NGOs struggle with liberal governments and corporations over "the ecological,

⁴ Ibid: 460.

⁵ Ibid: 461.

⁶ Ibid: 458.

human and communal conditions of production.”⁷ According to Faber, labor-power, the human condition of production, as well as natural resources and infrastructure are all exploited by capital. The state aids this process by enacting social welfare and resource conservation policies that disadvantage local people. Marxists like Faber see the trend towards sustainable development as an attempt to continue unjust systems of exploitation and view local movements as resisters of these conditions, not as advocates of the liberal concept of sustainability.

One environmental concern that is the subject of much debate across Latin America is the protection of native forests, sources of many of the region’s most valuable export goods. The region’s forests, particularly tropical rain forests, contain an impressive diversity of life forms that is slowly dwindling as both corporations and poor farmers encroach farther onto open space. More native forest survives in Latin America than all other parts of the world due to higher-density agriculture and the lack of sufficient labor and capital to reach the most difficult terrain. As mentioned earlier, government policies concerning the protection or exploitation of native forests can be said to fall into either the market-friendly or grassroots rubric. Chile is an example of a country that strongly favors market-friendly policy, based on its history of authoritarian military rule. Federal incentives are only available to large-scale national and international companies, contributing close to \$1 billion in foreign exchange earnings.⁸ Legislation that would have made the incentives structure more grassroots-friendly failed despite much political conflict and the best efforts of the executive branch.

The situation in Venezuela is demonstrably different. Concern for environmental issues in that country has been active for thirty years, but native forest conservation has only been seriously considered since the late 1980s.⁹ Two regulatory agencies created at that time attempted to balance industrial rights to the native tropical forest, mostly

⁷ Daniel Faber, “The Ecological Crisis of Latin America: A Theoretical Introduction,” *Latin American Perspectives* 19.1 (Winter 1992): 3.

⁸ Op cit. Silva: 468.

⁹ Ibid: 471.

publicly owned land, with conservation and grassroots development. Modest conservation-oriented policy proposals, generated by relatively cohesive groups of experts, deeply angered timber interests, as in Chile. However, Venezuela's system is slightly more pluralistic and, therefore, more adversarial than Chile's. Both sides have lobbyists and the legislature acts as umpire. In this atmosphere, the timber industry is relatively weak due to the strong public preference for measures to protect forestland and the culture of indigenous people.

Debt is an economic factor that has plagued most Latin American countries since the early 1980s, when the region was struck with a depression more acute than that of the 1930s. The creditors of Latin American states, mostly industrialized countries, paid little attention to sustainability, fiscal or otherwise, but demanded their repayments in the form of hastily extracted natural resources. By the 1990s, there were few signs of states emerging from the debt cycle. This has led to a per-capita increase in consumption and absolute poverty, both with disastrous consequences for the natural world.¹⁰ These conditions also engendered the lack of concern for conservation discussed earlier and contributed to the frustration experienced as new laws passed and agencies were created, with little effect on pollution levels.

Many authors, including Goodman and Redclift, point to a food crisis in Latin America, one that affects both urban and rural populations. Despite rapid urbanization over the past century, foodstuffs remain the region's primary export. The urban poor remain in need of cheap sustenance, while ever more intensive agricultural methods wear away at the land's capacity to support plant and animal life. The debt problem discussed earlier takes the energy of both public and private sectors away from the pressing need for the region to get back on track towards sustaining its own food supply. The only ingredient allowing the region to continue to rely on food exports is cheap labor, maintained by domestic price controls, food aid and imports.¹¹ Increasing middle-class

¹⁰ Op cit. O'Brien: 25.

¹¹ Michael Redclift and David Goodman, "The machinery of hunger," in David Goodman and Michael Redclift, eds, *Environment and development in Latin America: The politics of sustainability*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1991: 51.

consumption of a more Western meat and grain-heavy diet exacerbates the ecological unsustainability and social inequity of the current food system.

Agricultural, forest and pasture land per capita, measured in hectares per person, declined significantly from 1968 to 1986.¹² Three trends have led to the intensification of land under cultivation: the conversion of land from traditional crops to new crops, the deforestation of land for cattle ranching and the transfer of energy into the agricultural sector.¹³ Urbanization means that Latin America needs a greater increase in food per capita to provide adequate nutrition than does Africa, and that the urban population will demand more meat, bread, fats and oils and fewer traditional staples.¹⁴ All of these statistics point to the causes of the current food shortage, which is unsustainable by any definition. NGOs and community leaders are now seeking to reverse these trends, a task that is becoming more difficult by the day.

Most of Latin America has followed the path of reducing the damage done by existing economic and political structures. Most sizeable cities in the region have become “centers of poverty, unemployment, squalor, disease, illiteracy, inequity, congestion, pollution, corruption and despair.”¹⁵ One notable exception to this rule is the city of Curitiba, Brazil, as examined by American ecological design experts Hawken, Lovins and Lovins. Curitiba has achieved this feat by responding to public concern and implementing several citizen-oriented initiatives. In the process, the physical, fiscal and social networks bolstering the city have been radically transformed into a model that values life, beauty, creativity and longevity above all else. Under the leadership of Mayor Jaime Lerner, the city government encouraged entrepreneurship, as well as transportation and land-use planning that is sensitive to human and ecological needs. For the most part, the transformation was not forced by top-down regulation, but encouraged by various incentives, financial and otherwise, to support grassroots ideas. The city’s bus system

¹² Ibid: 55.

¹³ Ibid: 56.

¹⁴ Ibid: 64.

¹⁵ Paul Hawken et al., *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999: 288.

was revamped, becoming the most efficient and well-patronized public transit network in South America and serving as the locus for future development.

Social welfare funding is spent more effectively in Curitiba than in most cities. The government provides housing, health care and transportation to the poorest and most needy citizens. The city is filled with green space and recycling of a variety of materials, including buildings and other capital, is commonplace. While most locales struggle for efficiency in order to do less harm, Curitiba's integrative design is sustainable in a way that will actually be beneficial to present and future generations. These reforms, combined with a level of transparency atypical of Latin American governments, have engendered a strong sense of civic pride in Curitiba. The city surpassed natural capitalism, which Hawken et al. define as the retooling of capitalism to work with, rather than against, natural processes, and achieved a level of human capitalism, which respects local cultural values and human desires as well as Earth's limits.

The cases illustrated here do not point to a clear answer to the central questions posed in the introduction that can apply across the board. The situation is different in every country, and indeed every locale. For the most part, achieving a truly sustainable economic and social model is as difficult in Latin America as elsewhere, but for different reasons. While less heavily industrialized than the North, Latin America has its own set of obstacles to the entrenchment of ecological sensibility. The cycle of debt that most countries have been trapped in for the past 20-25 years means little public financing is available for eco-friendly initiatives or even the enforcement of environmental laws. The poverty experienced by a majority of Latin Americans also constitutes a barrier to the level of public attention, time and concern needed for an effective sustainability movement. Some beacons in the gloom, like Curitiba, exist because of extreme frustration combined with visionary leadership and commitment, but these qualities are hard to come by in most places.

As far as the second question is concerned, while Northern influence may have led to the protection of wilderness and paltry efficiency gains in terms of the use and

reuse of materials, the greatest successes, like Curitiba, have come thanks to local leadership and grassroots involvement. Citizens' movements, formed in reaction to worsening quality-of-life conditions, have achieved small, but remarkable victories. International organizations and governments interested in promoting sustainability should take a lesson from these examples and work to get the affected communities involved in improving their own backyards. Whether increased standards of living are needed before this can occur on a large scale remains to be seen.

These conclusions pose challenges to all concerned. Business is challenged not only to respect the limits nature imposes on its growth and operation, but also the customs and desires of the myriad of human communities affected by its operation. These shifts are absolutely necessary, however, if business is to remain profitable in the long term and if capitalism is to be made a benign tool for achieving just ends rather than being treated as an end in itself. Institutional reforms are also needed in the government sector. Both corporatism and pluralism have their faults because they both allow the interests with greater resources to mold policy that promotes their agendas. There is still debate over whether the blame lies with citizens and their conceptions of good government or with public officials who flaunt the people's will. Whichever it is, one solution is better civic education, to give the people a greater sense of ownership in their governments and to give officials the training they need to make impartial decisions. Finally, international environmental NGOs, while already well-intentioned, well-informed and well-organized, must be sure that their desires do not conflict with those of the grassroots in Latin America and must form coalitions with community groups in order to mutually empower all concerned to compete more equally with anti-environmental interests. When all three institutional actors begin taking these steps, the quality of life in Latin America and elsewhere will slowly improve.