

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

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Summary:

This paper considers the role of subcentral governments, at the local and regional levels, in the pursuit of sustainable development. It begins by seeking to clarify the concept of sustainable development and to identify those aspects of sustainable development which are likely to require systematic intervention by some state agency. In discussing the role of the state, it is often assumed that the appropriate agency is national government or some supranational body such as the European Union or the United Nations. However, there is also a role for local and regional governments. The argument for involving local and regional governments is that they may be better able to recognise the problems of sustainable development and better placed to formulate, implement and enforce appropriate policy responses. One of the most common examples in urban areas relates to car use and the development of the urban transport system. In rural areas, local and regional governments may be able to influence a whole variety of factors relevant to sustainable development including rural land use, crop mix, the choice of agricultural technologies, marketing, air and water pollution, soil erosion, energy usage, and rural infrastructure.

Anotace:

Článek se zabývá úlohou mimo-centrálního řízení činností souvisejících s problematikou trvale udržitelného rozvoje na místních a regionálních úrovních. Argument pro jejich začlenění je ten, že mohou lépe rozpoznat konkrétní problémy trvale udržitelného rozvoje a lépe na ně reagovat. V městských oblastech jde o používání aut a vývoj městských dopravních systémů. Ve venkovských oblastech mohou ovlivnit celou řadu závažných faktorů včetně využívání půdy, střídání plodin, výběru technologií, trh, znečišťování vzduchu a vody, půdní erosi, využití energie a venkovskou infrastrukturu.

Key words:

sustainable development, environmental policy, regional and local governments

Klíčová slova:

trvale udržitelný rozvoj, politika životního prostředí, regionální a lokální vlády

1. Introduction

A market system makes it difficult to reconcile economic growth and development with the maintenance of the natural environment. If the two are to be reconciled, in other words if development is to be sustainable, state intervention is necessary. It is often assumed that only supranational or national government will be involved in the pursuit of sustainable development. However, while the most prominent examples of environmental degradation may be large in scale, the majority of cases are much more localised. Accordingly, there is a role for local and regional governments in policies aimed at the achievement of sustainable development.

2. Sustainable development

The first step is to try to clarify the concept of sustainable development. This is very difficult since the term has been subject to so many different interpretations. If there is a common theme to the various definitions, it is that economic change in the present day should not be at the expense of future generations. For example, it has been argued that "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.43).

The environmental component of sustainable development may simply involve giving environmental concerns higher priority than before but without requiring that any particular level of environmental quality is achieved. Thus, the environment could still deteriorate if it was decided that environmental protection was too costly in terms of the other goals of society. A stronger version of sustainable development might specify that a certain minimum level of environmental quality should be achieved prior to consideration of other goals. This interpretation of sustainable development rests on the belief that society cannot let economic activity, however beneficial it may be in delivering high material standards of living, result in a constant decline in the quality of the environment.

An important implication is that neither the weak nor the strong version of sustainable development is incompatible with economic growth. The improvement of environmental quality may of course be to the benefit of economic growth (even if narrowly defined as a sustained rise in per capita income). However, while the concept of sustainable development is not always in contradiction with the enhancement of economic growth, it does generally recognise that there must be some "trade offs" between narrowly construed economic growth and environmental quality.

3. The role of the state in the pursuit of sustainable development

The principal characteristic of the market system is that it consists of many individuals and firms, all making separate decision. They are largely concerned with the private costs and benefits of undertaking certain activities and do not necessarily consider all the social costs and benefits. If such social costs (or, less frequently, benefits) are not taken into account, "externalities" are present. Externalities arise because few environmental impacts are priced. These externalities are a symptom of an inefficient allocation of resources from the viewpoint of society as a whole.

In general, the pursuit of sustainable development will require systematic intervention by some state agency. In discussing the role of the state, it is often assumed that the appropriate agency is national government or some supranational body such as the European Union or the United Nations. The assumption is that environmental impacts are far reaching and that obstacles to the achievement of sustainable development are global or at the very least national in scope. This is true of the most notorious examples of environmental degradation such as global warming or acid rain.

Market failure to take full account of the impact of economic activity upon the environment provides a justification for government intervention. However, governments can themselves be responsible for environmental damage. In other words, there can be "government failure" as well as market failure. Within the European Union, the Common Agricultural Policy has led to excess agricultural production, the destruction of natural habitats, and adverse effects upon soil, water and air quality.

4. The role of regional and local governments in the pursuit of sustainable development

While arguments about the scale of environmental effects and the exercise of environmental policies are important, they do not preclude effective action at the regional and local level. Decentralised government is likely to be better informed about the preferences of particular individuals and communities and better able to reflect those preferences. In this way, subcentral governments can use resources more efficiently than either central government or the market (Newlands, 1992). It is important to stress that this is an argument for regional and local *government* rather than *administration*. The democratic process is a means, however imperfect, of revealing local preferences.

Thus, the argument for involving local and regional governments is that they may be better able to recognise the problems of sustainable development and better placed to formulate, implement and enforce appropriate policy responses. This is not to suggest that local and regional authorities can - or should - act independently of national and supranational government. What it does imply is that the higher tiers of government should set frameworks for those (many) environmental impacts which have widespread spatial effects but are subject to considerable local variation in intensity. The role of subcentral government then becomes one of monitoring the extent of local environmental impacts, making sustainable development

locally operational, and interpreting the preferences of local communities for the way in which levels of production should be traded off against environmental quality.

5. Examples of the role of regional and local governments

Regional and local authorities can be an important source of information on the state of the environment and can advise producers on the use of more environmentally sensitive methods or activities. Provision of information can be supplemented by grants and other financial incentives. A further policy instrument concerns direct investment in "environmental infrastructure". Such initiatives as the establishment of combined heat and power networks can provide major economic and environmental benefits. Finally, the purchasing policies of regional and local authorities themselves provide a means of developing more sustainable methods of production.

There are numerous examples of the potential for regional and local government intervention in pursuit of sustainable development, in both urban and regional contexts. One of the most common examples in urban areas relates to car use and the development of the urban transport system. In rural areas, local and regional governments may be able to influence a whole variety of factors relevant to sustainable development including rural land use and crop mix, the choice of agricultural technologies, air and water pollution, soil erosion, energy usage, and rural infrastructure.

Agriculture and other rural economic activities are probably unique in terms of the extent of their interdependence with the natural environment. They rely upon the continued fertility of the soil and the existence of good quality water supplies. However, while farmers and other rural producers have a clear interest in ensuring the wise use of natural resources, their (understandable) priority is to protect their own livelihood. In the absence of an appropriate policy framework, this will often be in conflict with the wider interests of society as a whole or of the environment.

As has been argued above, a central role for regional and local governments in pursuit of sustainable development is in assembling information about the interaction between economic activity and the natural environment at a local level. This is particularly important in rural areas in establishing the limits of ecological resilience. While the waste assimilation capacity of a waterway or micro atmosphere may be considerable, once a particular threshold is crossed the inappropriate use of agro chemicals and fertilisers, overcropping, or the abuse of fragile soil conditions may lead to exponential and catastrophic increases in adverse environmental impacts. This opens up a vitally significant role for local government in terms of monitoring the approach of environmental crisis conditions, the identification of the main causes of environmental damage, and the formulation of appropriate policy responses to counter such damage.

Once again, it is important to stress that the role of subcentral government is to reflect local opinion. There are constraints. It is important that there are no significant spillover effects upon other areas and that the net effect upon the wealth creating infrastructure bequeathed to future generations is not unacceptable. However, assuming these conditions are met, if one community wishes to accept adverse impacts upon the local environment in order to facilitate faster economic growth and development then economic theory suggests that they be allowed to make that choice.

6. Conclusions

There are a whole range of issues relevant to sustainable development, both urban and rural, which regional and local authorities are well placed to tackle. Rather than local initiative being stifled, as unfortunately remains true in many parts of the world, the many enterprising developments at regional and local level which seek to better reconcile economic growth and the maintenance of the natural environment for future generations should be encouraged.

References

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