

Free for all

Jonathan Hobbs

Sustainable Development for a Democratic South Africa. Edited by Ken Cole. *Earthscan/St Martin's Press: 1994. Pp. 247. £16.95 (pbk), \$45.*

As South Africa makes its long-overdue transition from the fatally flawed ideology of separate development to addressing the needs of sustainable development, the creation of a political system that allows for the participation of all citizens in decision-making is crucial. That this is now happening so rapidly means that *Sustainable Development for a Democratic South Africa* is already out of date. But as a contribution to the continuing political process of development, it is valuable.

As with most conference proceedings, theoretical treatises are uncomfortably mixed with descriptive narrative, and some good papers lie alongside poorer ones. One suspects that the rush to have such a title on the bookshelves while South Africa is still front-page news is why some contributions are little more than badly re-formulated lecture notes. But a handful are both coherent and critical.

Ken Cole has brought together a diverse group of academics, mainly from the United Kingdom, and spiced them with a journalist, a trade unionist and an aid worker. They provide insights into expected reforms in agriculture, education, health, economics, employment, energy and so on. The emphasis on the socio-political dimensions of sustainable development heralds a new way of thinking in 'environmentalism', which for too long has been preoccupied with the white élite's worries about nature conservation. A South Africa led by the African National Congress (ANC) will inevitably concentrate on justice and full participation as pre-requisites of a healthy and productive environment. In other words, it will achieve a better balance between the priorities of rhinos and those of people, especially the poor; effective ecological protection will be achieved with a more equitable distribution of power.

The issues that the authors focus on as relevant to environmental protection include economic growth, the informal sector, nongovernment and community-based organizations, land reform, education, health and other social services. Some gaps exist. With a team of exclusively male authors it is not surprising that the role of women receives scant attention.

For the ANC successfully to transform itself from a liberation movement to a democratic government, the considerable economic potential of South Africa will have to be more effectively used to compensate the disadvantaged, otherwise dis-

illusionment will encourage conflict and violence. Colin Stoneman argues that the alleviation of poverty is feasible only with massive job creation. The neo-liberal economic orthodoxy — a dogma enshrined in the structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund — is interpreted as a potentially disastrous remedy for South Africa. Robert Fine, in a further attack on the free market, suggests that an interventionist, social-democratic regime is needed if the coercion and suppression of the disadvantaged, perceived to result from the neo-liberal policies of the World Bank, are to be avoided.

Agriculture is, of course, of upmost importance economically. Lionell Cliffe addresses the special requirements of sustainable agriculture, especially land reform, by drawing comparisons with Zimbabwe's inheritance of similar inequities from the then Rhodesia, where large-scale farms once lay next to semi-arid, overcrowded homelands engaged in subsistence agriculture.

South African business is not about to allow environmental sanctions to replace political and economic sanctions. Phil O'Keefe and John Kirby could have cited examples of trading partners that are already demanding evidence of the environmental credentials of South African businesses. Instead, in a disjointed chapter covering energy, minerals and wildlife management, they postulate that such demands might be made.

With South Africa no longer a pariah, opportunities for regional integration now exist. Barry Munslow's review of current events in Mozambique and Angola is particularly appropriate: people there have paid a heavy price for their support of the liberation struggles in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa — heavier perhaps than South Africans themselves. Both countries are contradictions, being rich in resources yet classified as among the poorest nations in the world. In the recent words of a Maputo-based United Nations official: "nothing describes Mozambique better than the word potential — that's all I ever hear, potential, bloody potential".

Regrettably, Munslow's extrapolation of lessons learnt in these former Portuguese colonies is weak. If nothing else, he describes what could happen to South Africa if it falls into civil war. He concludes that South Africa owes these countries an immense moral debt, with their lands turned into 'killing fields' under South Africa's strategy of regional destabilization.

Historically, environmental policymaking in South Africa has provided little opportunity for public input and paid little recognition to individuals' rights. At best, participation has grudgingly been interpreted as a therapeutic exercise in one-

way information flow. The law can be an effective mechanism for public participation in environmental policy formulation, an issue handled well by François du Bois.

Improved provision of public services to all South Africans is also now a priority. After a discussion on primary health care, the implications of the growing AIDS epidemic are singled out for special attention. Cross-border migration, refugee influx, conflicts, droughts, militarization and the low status of women all serve to make South Africa a high-risk country.

In all of these issues, there is no doubt that a well-informed, educated, participating public will be important. But Benjamin Pogrand's chapter on press freedom, although interesting, fails to make any explicit reference to the main theme of sustainable development.

Arguably the best contribution is Charles Aubgre's review of nongovernment and community-based organizations. These organizations face a critical challenge — how to survive now that they have fulfilled their basic agenda, resistance to apartheid. Aubgre argues that some of them should channel their energies into sustainable development. A sophisticated nongovernmental network, probably unparalleled in Africa, has developed over decades of struggle against oppression; there is much to build on.

The book arose from a course held at the University of East Anglia in 1992 for 11 South African activists. One suspects that the lecturers learnt as much as the students. It is a shame that we are not treated to the first-hand experiences that must have been discussed.

The book does little to advance our understanding of sustainable development. Nor does it offer solutions to how the concept can be made operational (to its credit it is honest about the difficulties of this task). In the final chapter, Cole provides a good overview of the ideologies of sustainable development, but it would have been better if definitional problems were made clear at the start.

The final chapter ideally would summarize the diversity of interests in the issue, establish common themes and revisit the opportunities and constraints that exist in South Africa. Radical reform is implied throughout the book but few authors offer a practical interpretation of this goal. Under apartheid, the common enemy of the black majority was unambiguous; now the priorities are less clear.

Nonetheless, the book provides a useful introduction for students of sustainable development or technical tourists of the aid-and-development set, for whom South Africa is now a legitimate stop-over. □

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