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### Actor Dynamics and Sustainable Development: Emerging Roles of Researchers

*La dynamique actorielle et le développement durable : les nouveaux rôles des chercheurs*

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#### Abstract:

The challenges facing sustainable development are essentially human-based; human society has mainly created or exacerbated many human problems such as poverty and food security as well as natural environment problems, such as climate change and climate extremes. In addition, the eventual solutions must be elaborated and put into place by various actors. Thus it is essential to have a thorough understanding of actor dynamics ... the interests of different actors, interactions between them and the initiatives that they engage in. A framework is presented to help any observer and researcher in any cultural or territorial context to understand the challenges facing the involvement of actors and human society in general in any search for sustainable development, and this is so for the countries of the North and the South. We then explore how a better understanding of actor dynamics support those researchers who wish to make a substantial contribution to resolving these challenges and helping populations move closer towards a sustainable future for their communities and environments. It is argued that one of the most pertinent ways for researchers to do this is through the various research approaches termed action research; it is argued that with patience and playing out the roles of counselor, facilitator, and provider of strategic information, action research, particularly Participatory Action Research (PAR) can achieve significant progress towards a sustainable future.

#### Résumé:

Les défis du développement durable sont essentiellement humains à la base; la société humaine a principalement créé ou accentué de nombreux problèmes humains comme la pauvreté et la sécurité alimentaire ainsi que certains problèmes liés à l'environnement tels que le changement climatique et les phénomènes climatiques extrêmes. En outre, les solutions éventuelles se doivent d'être élaborées et mises en place par les différents acteurs humains. Ainsi, il est essentiel d'avoir une compréhension approfondie de la dynamique des acteurs... les intérêts des différents acteurs, les interactions entre eux et les initiatives qu'ils mettent en place et poursuivent. Un cadre conceptuel est présenté pour aider tout observateur et chercheur dans n'importe quel contexte culturel ou territorial à mieux comprendre les défis face à la participation des acteurs et de la société humaine en général dans toute recherche d'un développement durable. Cette situation se rencontre aussi bien dans les pays du Nord comme du Sud. Nous explorons ensuite comment une meilleure compréhension de la dynamique des acteurs soutient les chercheurs qui souhaitent apporter une contribution importante à la résolution de ces défis et aider les populations à appréhender de façon significative un avenir plus durable pour leurs communautés et environnements. Nous mettons ainsi l'accent sur les moyens les plus pertinents pour les chercheurs de le réaliser par le biais des différentes approches de recherche, plus particulièrement à travers la recherche-action. Nous raisonnons qu'avec de la patience et par l'entremise des rôles de conseiller, de facilitateur et de fournisseur de l'information stratégique, la recherche-action, notamment la recherche-action participative (RAP) peut dans les meilleurs des cas, aboutir à des progrès significatifs, en l'occurrence ici, un avenir plus durable, pour les générations futures.

#### Keywords / Mots clés

*Sustainable development; actor dynamics; new roles for researchers; action research  
Développement durable ; dynamique actorielle ; nouveaux rôles pour les chercheurs ; recherche-action*

### INTRODUCTION

The challenges facing sustainable development are essentially human-based because the issues have been mainly created or exacerbated by human society and their collective actors and citizens (e.g. climate change, poverty, development patterns with many unforeseen negative consequences on the environment, society and economy) and also because the eventual solutions must be elaborated and put

into place by various actors. Environmental challenges require much more than research on physical processes and development challenges require a great deal more than simply observation of what has been happening. How can sustainable development help? And what is the role of research?

The argument in this short article is that it is important to understand any natural environmental processes at work but it is even more important to understand: 1) how solutions require the identification of appropriate strategies, actions and initiatives to respond to environmental challenges (e.g. conservation of different dimensions of the environment) and development challenges (e.g. how to integrate the knowledge of citizens in fighting food security issues or in the location and profiles of different development projects); 2) that this requires a better understanding of the dynamics or interplay of actors who have partly, at least, created the challenges and problems that human society must face, implying the need to understand actors' interests and motivations, how they make decisions and how they interact with other actors; and 3) the roles of researchers and their position in relation to these societal challenges and the development of solutions, for instance how can researchers help or guide stakeholders in their decision making?

We note from the outset that the various environmental and development challenges are not perceived in the same way in different countries and socio-cultural contexts, so that both the actors in each country, region or municipality as well as the researchers must take into account the national, political and socio-cultural contexts in order to better understand how the challenges have been created and what constitutes sustainable solutions including equitable solutions for each society.

In this short article the intention is to: 1) present some of the challenges of moving towards sustainable development practices and initiatives; 2) introduce a framework (the model of the dynamic of actors) for the analysis of actor dynamics that can be used in any cultural and national context and which is particularly useful for investigating sustainable development practices and initiatives; and 3) identify the roles of researchers in helping actors in a particular country, region or municipality move towards sustainable solutions to the challenges that they face.

## **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES AND INITIATIVES**

Recall that in the three "pillars" of sustainable development, the social dimension occupies a place of its own. Accepting the key basis of the concept of sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Commission Report, 1987), it is evident that human rights in general and the whole range of different actors, including corporate actors, must play an important role in the planning and implementation of policies and initiatives at all scales in order to substantially improve equity between different segments of the population and between different countries, regions and localities. This also means that processes of different kinds involving a range of pertinent actors including citizens (urban citizens, farmers and their families ...) are critical to achieving progress towards sustainable development, as indicated in the top section of Figure 1. Furthermore, over time we can expect that these processes will change as different cultures come to terms with the need to engage all actors in processes aimed at achieving sustainable development.

Since the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988, several reports have emphasized the relationship between increasing human activities and emissions of greenhouse gases and the subsequent increase in average temperatures recorded on earth as well as an increase in climate extremes in many parts of the world. But it is only since the early 1990s that the issue of sustainable development has been on centre stage, following the Brundtland Commission Report, named after the Norwegian Minister who chaired the World Commission on the Environment and Development of the United Nations, in 1987. Consequently, an increasing number of environmental policies and development initiatives in different countries have been developed in order to achieve a more sustainable development; these initiatives have involved different levels of government, citizen groups or associations and in some cases, private sector actors. But we are still far from turning things around.

One way of looking at this situation is to explore the disparities between North and South countries. In many cases, North countries have attempted to develop actions to help countries that are less developed by basing their help on initiatives such as 'equitable commerce' (Agence Française de Développement, 2009; Rolland, 2014).

This initiative however appears to have lost sight of the initial focus. Indeed, several researchers who worked during the last few years on 'equitable commerce' have subsequently noted that these initiatives have tended to re-focus their efforts more towards perspectives that characterize North countries rather than countries from the South. On the one hand, it appears essential that these researchers continue to work on the fundamentals of sustainable development. On the other hand, several researchers have emphasized the perspective that the pursuit of sustainable development in many of these initiatives is not pursued in a very serious fashion. The critical perspectives of these researchers constitute an essential component of moving forwards on sustainable development.

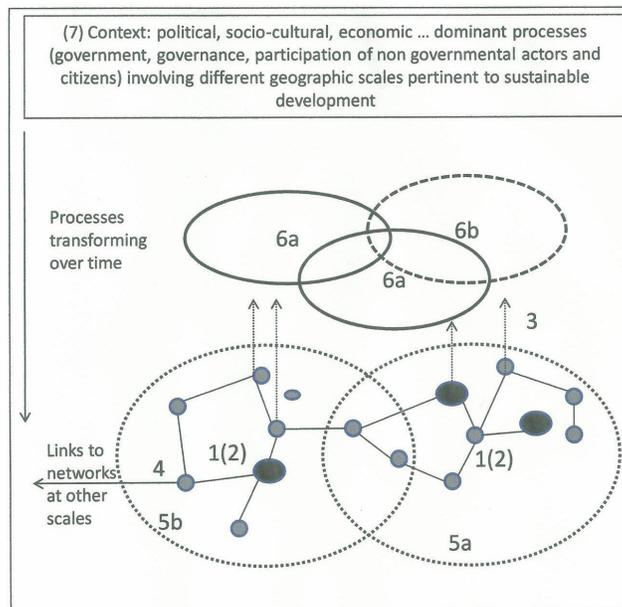
## A MODEL OF THE DYNAMIC OF ACTORS

Notwithstanding this, there has been an increased recognition of sustainable development as something that can be achieved has occurred in many parts of the world. How can this be achieved, at all scales? How can actors, including citizens, come together and elaborate sustainable development policies or ensure that any policy takes account of sustainable development preoccupations, strategies and initiatives. For instance, what are the solutions that can be envisaged regarding the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions or the adaptation of different human activities such as agriculture to climate change and variability? Or what solutions can be envisaged around the world, for instance, in relation to coming to terms with urbanization and the conservation of farmland? This question is directly linked to the problematic of food security, particularly in the countries of the South, even though certain countries of the North are equally preoccupied by this problem and where some real solutions are starting to emerge (Serrano, 2005). What are the lessons to be learned from the 25 years that sustainable development has been 'in vogue' (Zaccai, 2011)? Who makes the decisions? What role can citizens from all types of human activity take on?

It appears that a prerequisite to attempting to construct appropriate policies, strategies and initiatives is to have a fundamental understanding of the relationships that exist between the different actors as well as the roles of each actor (including citizens) in a specific cultural context.

Figure 1 is an attempt to create a tool for researchers who are attempting to understand the dynamics of actors in a given area (country, region and locality). It was based initially on the observation of the interrelationships between actors in local development planning and the creation of strategies. It has subsequently been used and further developed to understand the dynamics in the fishing industry (e.g. the Dominican Republic), in agriculture (e.g. in Canada) and Western Europe (e.g. France) as well as more generally in the domain of the adaptation to climate change and variability. In Figure 1, there are seven basic components: 1: Actors (individuals, collective actors, managers and owners of companies, farmers, ..); 2: Interests (of the different actors) which help understand the motivations of different actors; 3: Actions and Initiatives undertaken by different actors (which can also include actions to prevent or undermine the actions of other actors!); 4: Networks (in which most actors function and which are important for organizing support and mobilizing resources necessary for different strategies and initiatives); 5a: Formal organization (e.g. the formal structure of government at all levels, or of any other organization of institution); 5b: Informal organization (which simply reflects, for example, how actors outside of a formal organization or institution can influence what happens within a formal organization or institution); 6a: An observable set of actions and initiatives in a given domain such as adaptation to climate change; 6b: A potential set of actions and initiatives in a given domain that has not yet been identified clearly nor worked with by different actors; 7: The Context, political, socio-cultural and economic dimensions which partly define the parameters in which actions and initiatives are pursued. Part of the context that is related to sustainable development involves governments and governance processes, including the participation of non-government actors including citizens. These processes are particularly important for sustainable development because they raise the issue of what knowledge and whose knowledge should be mobilized in the search for sustainable development solutions and initiatives in different domains (e.g. adaptation to climate change, mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions, sustainable economic development and the reduction of poverty, the improvement of food security ...).

On the one hand, this framework provides a structure for analyzing the dynamic between actors in any cultural context, either in developed or developing countries. On the other hand, this provides important information for researchers who have become committed to contributing directly to the achievement of sustainable development and its underlying strategies and initiatives, through a more active but non imposing research approach, action research, which is introduced and discussed in the final section.



**Figure 1: The Dynamic of Actors: A Research Tool for Organizing Data Collection Relevant to Sustainable Development (Developed from Bryant, 1995)**

## THE ROLES OF RESEARCHERS IN MOVING TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AND INITIATIVES

A particularly useful approach to research in which the researcher is pre-occupied in trying to help other actors achieve objectives of benefit to society (national, regional, local) is the research action approach. This involves the researcher in taking on (not all necessarily at the same time) the roles of counselor, facilitator, and provider of strategic information while working with actors and citizens in a particular domain and/or territory. Depending on the domains in which researchers work, the emphases associated with these different roles will not be the same; the ultimate aim is to help the different actors identify and appropriate pertinent solutions which will be useful to all members of the population. Certain sectors require more investment and greater efforts on the part of actors and members of the communities involved in working together than other domains. This is at the heart of action research, particularly Participatory Action Research (PAR). One must never, however, lose sight of the ultimate objective of any type of action research, which is to advance knowledge and action based in social realities leading therefore towards sustainability.

The key is that the researcher undertakes these roles only when the other actors request them. Action research does not just imply preparing reports based on collection and analysis of data and submitting them to actors such as government agencies. It involves accompanying actors and the researcher must not impose his or her own values or perspectives.

This means that the researcher must remain 'objective' in his or her research process and place mankind at the centre of their research. In this way, the researcher can help society move forwards in substantial ways while always taking account of societal realities.

## CONCLUSION

The sorts of data that can be collected using Figure 1 to organize the data collection can contribute to the researcher's understanding of the reality of actor dynamics, and working with a research action approach can further enhance the understanding of actor dynamics. From this perspective, a researcher following a research action approach can also acquire information that can be analyzed and eventually published so that he or she can help increase the capacity not only of actors in other countries, regions and localities but such a researcher can also contribute to the development of solutions to particular issues through working to support and accompany actors, including citizens and citizen groups and association. In this

way, the plans, strategies and initiatives that might be produced clearly 'belong to' to actors who have been involved and cannot be pushed aside by arguing that the researcher imposed his or her views on the process.

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