Research Agenda for SDC: Towards a Socially Inclusive Sustainability Development

Large-scale changes, resulting mainly from human activities, are affecting the global environment to an unprecedented extent and threatening the sustainability of ecosystems that are essential to our survival and well-being. However, the problems that are profoundly influencing the global environment and sustainability cannot be resolved in isolation; they must be addressed in the context of the social and economic drivers that will shape future global population composition and consumption patterns. Hence a sustainability research program should emphasize global change, which is broader in concept than global environmental change in that it encompasses human-induced changes to the biophysical environment as well as the evolving social systems and interactions that will determine the future directions of human development.

In 1972, the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi emphasized, at the UN Conference on Human Development at Stockholm, that the removal of poverty is an integral part of the goal of an environmental strategy for the world. The concepts of interrelatedness, of a shared planet, of global citizenship, and of ‘spaceship earth’ cannot be restricted to environmental issues alone. They apply equally well to the shared and interlinked responsibilities of environmental protection and human development. The long-term impact of past industrialization, exploitation and environmental damage cannot be wished away. It is only right that development in this new century be even more conscious of its long-term impact. The problems are complex and the choices difficult. Our common future can only be achieved with a better understanding of our common concerns and shared responsibilities.

Following are some perspectives and approaches towards achieving a sustainable future:

- **Poverty eradication and sustainable livelihoods.** Poverty and a degraded environment are closely inter-related, especially where people depend for their livelihoods primarily on the natural resource base of their immediate environment. Restoring natural systems and improving natural resource management practices at the grassroots level are central to a strategy to eliminate poverty. The survival needs of the poor force them to continue to degrade an already degraded environment. Removal of poverty is therefore a pre-requisite for the protection of the environment.
Diversion of common and marginal lands to ‘economically useful purposes’ deprives the poor of a resource base, which has traditionally met many of their sustenance needs. Market forces also lead to the elimination of crops that have traditionally been integral to the diet of the poor, thereby threatening food security and nutritional status.

While conventional economic development leads to the elimination of several traditional occupations, the process of sustainable development, guided by the need to protect and conserve the environment, leads to the creation of new jobs and of opportunities for the reorientation of traditional skills to new occupations.

Women, while continuing to perform their traditional domestic roles, are increasingly involved in earning livelihoods. In many poor households, they are often the sole breadwinners. A major thrust at the sustainability policy level is, therefore, necessary to ensure equity and justice for them.

- **Changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production.** With increasing purchasing power, wasteful consumption linked to market driven consumerism is stressing the resource base of developing countries further. It is important to counter this through education and public awareness. In several areas, desirable limits and standards for consumption need to be established and applied through appropriate mechanisms including education, incentives and legislation.

Several traditional practices that are sustainable and environment friendly continue to be a regular part of the lives of people in developing countries. These need to be encouraged rather than replaced by more ‘modern’ but unsustainable practices and technologies.

Development decisions regarding technology and infrastructure are a major determinant of consumption patterns. It is, therefore, important to evaluate and make development decisions which structurally lead to a more sustainable society. Technologies exist through which substantial reduction in consumption of resources is possible. Efforts to identify, evaluate, introduce and use these technologies must be made.

- **Protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development.** The integration of agriculture with land and water management, and with ecosystem conservation is essential for both environmental sustainability and agricultural production. An environmental perspective must guide the evaluation of all development projects, recognizing the role of natural resources in local livelihoods. This recognition must be informed by a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and opinions of local people about their stakes in the resource base.

Also, there is need to establish well-defined and enforceable rights (including customary rights) and security of tenure, and to ensure equal access to land, water and other natural
and biological resources. It should be ensured that this applies, in particular, to indigenous communities, women and other disadvantaged groups living in poverty.

Thus the need to balance environmental, social and economic objectives is a prominent and recurring challenge across all areas of government policy. Equally clear, however, are the competing priorities and practical dilemmas that arise from the simultaneous pursuit of economic growth, environmental protection and social progress. How to achieve ‘the balance’ is therefore one of the crucial pre-occupations of policy makers and their public and private sector delivery agents at every level of government. Sustainable development research at SDC can do much to inform these debates: identifying the problems, providing the evidence for what works and what doesn’t; and stretching the parameters of our understanding of what constitutes sustainable development. The SDC’s coordinating role provides a unique opportunity to drive this agenda forward. However, in order to successfully address these challenges, the SDC must ensure that the exploration and analysis of the social dimensions of sustainable development are central to the research activities the SDC promotes.