EDITORIAL

SUSTAINABILITY

The nature of human organization is defined by both stable and unstable change over time. The twentieth century was a sustained period of continuing change: in the structure of communities and of nations, in the distribution of wealth and poverty, in the creation of new and discard of old technology, in the devolution of power and performance, in the subjugation and liberation of peoples, in the unrelenting imposition of unacceptable stress upon the environment.

This period saw the rise and rise of economic development, defined according to a veritable plethora of terms of comparison, generally but not universally deemed to be a goal for which to strive, if not an *el dorado*. The period witnessed continuing change in the modus operation of investment capital and with this the spreading of influence, often pervasive. In some cases, *eg* Japan, the capital that spawned the economic expansion came largely from domestic savings, but more often it came from international public or private sources. In the first case control remained essentially in national hands, in the second, more prevalent case, control passed partially or totally into foreign hands or into the realms of international institutional hegemony.

Temporary positive outcomes were often followed swiftly by mounting debt repayments which led eventually to the subsidy of rich donor nations of the North by poor recipient nations of the South, leaving the net result of increasing impoverishment of the latter. Optimistically crafted infrastructural, educational, health programs gathered short-term viability but long-term dust as initial bursts of enthusiastic planning gave way to stagnation: Unsustainability became the *real politik*.

Part of the problem perhaps is that expectation has so often been greater than fiscal responsibility permits. But the problem also arises from the goodwill of donors: their inputs are most often in a limited time frame, without planning beyond the initial period, so that infrastructural change is left empty of the necessary replenishment in the longer term. Thus an international bank loan, for example, buys several years of drugs for control of a major prevalent disease, then the loan finishes, replacement finance for continuation of the program represents an immediate challenge, repayment of the loan becomes a superimposed burden, inadequately planned for. The initial encouraging downward disease curve gives way to an upward trend and eventual failure of the program. Sustainability becomes a forgotten goal in the process.

The same often pertains to non-repayable but limited term grants from non-profit foundations or other benevolent bodies. Often these may take the form of seed funding for *pilot programs*, which carry the obligation, or at least expectation of finding other sources of follow-up finance. Or they may be directed to a short-term, high profile disease control effort on one side of an international border, thereby in hopeless pursuit of an unattainable goal. Where the terms of the grant require leadership to be exercised by *experts* from the North over and above those responsible for the routine base program the transitional nature of the program is compounded. Paired *collaboration* between South and North carries an additional burden of pretense of equity. Realistic expertise of the South will always be subject to veto from the North, since money overrides wisdom of experience. Sustainability falls by the wayside.

Health does not simply represent disease control. A major element surely is food access for the basics of survival. A catch-cry of the twentieth century was the glory of the Green Revolution. In retrospect the glory was transient at best: the over-dependence on synthetic fertilizers, insecticides led to exhausted land, off-setting the temporarily increased cereal yields, with an uncertain future. Worse, in a sense, this presumptive achievement set the scene for euphoria concerning the potential of bio-engineering, per genetically modified crops, to provide the next leap forward in global food supply. This illusion (Ho, 1998) is still with us, as we await the looming battle in the World Trade Organization between the European Union and the United States. On the sidelines sit the small farmers of the poor nations of the South, whose freedom to grow traditional plant species is threatened by the seed company giants. From boom to bust is not a concept limited to big business finance: the takeover and reduction of biodiverse food plant species threatens the billions. Food sustainability is under threat and with it the essence of survival.

Much of the South depends on traditional medicines for treatment of both simple and complex diseases. These are derived from biodiverse medicinal plant species. As the pharmaceutical company giants grab these species and do a bit of simple chemistry to identify the active compounds, their product and process patents seek to outlaw the herbal remedies which gave them the clues in the first place. The World Trade Organization sets the scene via its TRIPS legislation, to suppress the herbal medicines and enrich the corporations. Sustainability of the traditional medicine industry is gone.

Another example: The advent of rapid immunodiagnostic tests for a range of communicable diseases, in the form of dipsticks that can give on-spot diagnoses in the hands of community health workers at village level gives hope of greater effectiveness of disease control programs based on case identification and specific chemotherapy. Malaria is a current example, where several options are in the exploratory market. Some studies suggest good cost-effectiveness, especially where these are used in sites that lack rapid access to microscopy and where drug resistance is accentuated by inappropriate drug use. The incentive to implement this advance is high, but the question is difficult: if dipsticks become part of disease control programs, will the companies concerned be able to guarantee supply into the indefinite future? Or, will company takeovers or rationalization lead to market dictated closure of supply? Will sustainability be feasible?

Health research itself is subject to the uncertainty of sustainability. Where countries of the South have ploughed substantial resources into research focused on ultimate applicability to practical programs, the hope often is to make national contributions to the solution of common problems of high local importance. Often a qualification for continuing national grants is the proven ability to attract international funding and vice versa. International funding often requires "partnership" between South and North institutions, with consequent dominance by the North of priorities dictated by funding mechanism. Dependence on such external funding limits sustainability of personnel and programs, so that as a consequence relevance to reality is often compromised. Demands by the funders for open access to databases in the recipient countries often lead to what is effectively pirated publications: the more complete the databases the greater the probability of usurpation.

Sustainability is an elusive entity that depends both on money and determination, above all perhaps it is dependent upon long-term planning, integral to the establishment of any program focusing on substantial improvement of conditions of living. It reflects on the ability of communities and nations to assess their own capacity to cope over time without going cap in hand to others. This view stands in contrast to the philosophy of many international agencies that seek to impose standardized solutions to problems with important local variations, solutions that often are antithetic to sustained capacity to cope. This view contrasts also with some international agency views about growth and the poor (Dollar and Kraay, 2000; Madley, 1999; Chossudovsky, 1998; Cohen, 1998). Inclusion of realistic long-term intranational capacity predictions need to be part and parcel of shorter term planning, as opposed to hand-out expectations.

Unless there is acceptance of the criticality of planning for long-term sustainability of health and other programs, resource wastage is inevitable. Such planning needs to be based on sound cost-effectiveness analysis as well as on technical feasibility assessment and social acceptability at all levels of society. These are tough requirements that should be met locally and nationally rather that being left to international agencies with their inherent Northern bias.

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