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# **Greening at the Grassroots: People's Participation in Sustainable Development**

Discussion Paper No. 22, April 1991  
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## Preface

The following paper reports on issues which have been raised in the preliminary stages of the UNRISD research programme on **Sustainable Development through People's Participation in Resource Management**. This programme explores the dynamics of local level initiatives concerned with environmental degradation, examines and analyzes traditionally sustainable resource management practices, and investigates the factors which facilitate or constrain community participation in externally initiated resource management projects and programmes. The author of this paper is co-ordinating the research programme within UNRISD.

The paper focuses on local level environmental problems in the Third World and the means by which steps can be taken to alleviate them, with evidence drawn from the work undertaken within the UNRISD research programme on participation and sustainable development, as well as from other published and unpublished material. It opens with a discussion of the need for an approach to environmental issues based on the full involvement of communities in the definition of problems and the formulation of solutions, incorporating their perceptions of their own needs, concerns and abilities. It is argued that a more thorough understanding of the ways in which people have traditionally managed their resources, and an increased recognition of the ways in which they react to unsustainable resource exploitation, can contribute to the establishment of a more productive approach to sustainable development.

Different types of "traditional" resource management systems are described, and the importance, in different settings, of cultural identification with the environment, of explicit regulations regarding resource use, and of the development and refinement of local environmental knowledge for the success of such customary systems are discussed. The observation is made that social mechanisms which maintain sustainable levels of resource use within a given society are often not readily perceptible to outsiders. The paper also discusses the factors affecting the sustainability of common property régimes. It is noted that mounting evidence against the accuracy of theoretical models which maintain that all common property systems are unsustainable has not prevented such models from influencing - or at least being used to justify - policies which are designed to weaken or eliminate such systems.

The question of the ability of traditional resource management systems to adapt and remain viable in the face of pressures from within and without the system is addressed, and the argument is made that generalizations regarding the future of such systems are inappropriate. The impact of population pressure on traditionally sustainable resource use is taken as a case in point. It is clear that in many situations the conventional conception of a direct relationship between population growth and increased pressure on the environment holds true; such a relationship, however, is not inevitable. Examples are given of cases in which population decline has resulted in environmental degradation, and of other cases in which growing populations have been able to adapt their methods of resource management in a sustainable manner.

The paper next discusses the types of collective action undertaken by communities which see their livelihood threatened because they have been deprived of their traditional means of resource management, or because of unsustainable resource exploitation on the part of outsiders. It maintains that the ecological knowledge of societies which are based on sustainable environmental management practices enables them to better judge the real effects of ecosystem disturbance than outside evaluators. However, the success of local attempts to intervene in the implementation of policies or projects which adversely affect the environment depends upon a range of factors, including the ability of local organizers to form coalitions with regional, national or international groups with similar interests, and the existence of social, economic and political structures which allow the formation of such alliances, and the expression of their concerns.

The paper closes with a brief discussion of the apparent linkages between poverty and environmental degradation in the Third World, arguing that, although in certain cases poverty clearly aggravates processes of degradation, an analysis positing a simple linkage between these two is incomplete without the inclusion of the concept of empowerment.

Further UNRISD research will attempt to provide a broader empirical basis from which to address the issues raised in this paper. Particular emphasis will be placed on the implications of the UNRISD studies for national and international development policy.

April 1991

Dharam Ghai  
Director

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## Introduction

Much of the action taken by development practitioners to address local level environmental problems in the Third World consists of projects, such as tree planting schemes, soil bunding efforts or improved irrigation management strategies, which seek to establish resource use at sustainable levels for selected target areas. In spite of occasional suggestions that broader-level national or international policies should be formulated with the aim of making natural resource management concerns an integral part of economic and social policy (Warford, 1989), this type of approach remains dominant. It is therefore not surprising that the current discussion of environment and development issues often mentions “people’s participation” as a prerequisite for successful “sustainable development”. Resource management projects, as currently implemented, depend heavily on broad-based co-operation and collaboration because they often rely on the combined actions of individuals which, whether such actions be planting trees or refraining from overfishing, by their nature cannot easily be coerced or enforced. The willingness of people to undertake the required activities – what is commonly understood as their “participation” – is therefore essential for the success of these projects. This paper discusses ways in which a more thorough understanding of the range of activities which constitute true people’s participation in local level environmental activities – from the development of indigenous resource management systems to resistance to destructive external initiatives – can be used to form the basis of a more constructive approach to sustainable development.

The analysis contained in this paper follows from some of the work undertaken within the UNRISD research programme on sustainable development and participation in resource management, which explores, among other things, the dynamics of local level initiatives concerned with environmental degradation, and traditionally sustainable resource management practices. Although definitive findings from this programme are not yet available, the research undertaken to date has indicated a number of areas in which the standard interpretation of the dynamics of the process of localized environmental degradation can usefully be re-examined. This paper explores the issues raised by the research and the insights gained in the process. It opens with a discussion of the prevailing approaches to environmental problems by the development community, suggesting two areas in which a broader understanding of “participation” can contribute toward the formulation of more productive solutions. It then briefly defines “sustainable development” as it is used here, and discusses the utility of this concept. The paper then discusses issues connected with the continued viability of traditional resource management systems, including population pressure, the effect of changing economic structures, common property and human rights issues.

The next section discusses popular initiatives which have affected local level environmental

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