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NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONS IN CONDUCTING THE CONCEPT OF 'SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT'

Yin Shao Loong

Abstract

This paper traces the debate over sustainable development between North countries and the Southern ones. Each side has its own interest regarding the issue of development, therefore conflicts are common among them. The Northern, along with its past achievement in development, is considered the lucky side. The idea of development is derived from their centuries-long experience. Thus, development is a bias term used to adopt the way of the Northern thinking regarding progress. The Southern is at the unfortunate side to follow the path considered righteous but at the same time forced to deal with dualist attitude of the North when it comes with the later’s exclusively domestic interest. In the face of sustainable development, the Northern countries can be a very pressing actor for the Southern to obey with its principles. Their centuries-late way of production is the target of environmentalist argument from the North related to the waste it creates. But these lucky countries can swing fast when their national industries are challenged by environmentalist argument from the South.

Sustainable development emerged as a policy concept with the 1987 publication of Our Common Future, the Brundtland Commission’s response to the environmental crisis precipitated by a practice of development that had hitherto excluded its serious ecological consequences. It was with the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro that sustainable development and the North-South struggle over it came to worldwide attention.

Broadly speaking the politicization of the environment in the North had galvanized a demand for a summit-level conference at which heads of state would attempt to address the issue. The countries of the South, who as a whole were struggling with both ecological and socio-economic crises, feared that they could end up gazetted as the North’s ecological and resource reserve whilst it kept its overconsuming lifestyle (a fear underlined by George Bush Sr.’s ultimatum, “Our lifestyles are not up for negotiation.”). Thus, the South’s development concerns were incorporated into the agenda which made Rio the first instance since the discussions over the New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974 where the development agenda would become a sub-
ject of negotiations and international commitments.¹

However, it was more than a matter of reconciling environment and development within policy or the rich-poor divide between North and South. The battles between North and South at Rio and after were also about the historical legacy of colonialism in the present crisis, the narrowness and ethnocentricity of historical paradigms of development (normatively Western), the structural constitution of the global order that preserves a rift between North and South, and whether the South could begin to better define the terms of its future.

This article examines the struggles between Northern and Southern nation-states over the concept of sustainable development. At the same time it engages in some deconstruction of sustainable development and the terms North and South as a necessary ethical complement to the first task. As will be clear in the course of the article I do not write from an academic distance but as someone engaged in a movement that is also struggling over the definition of sustainable development.

North and South

The North broadly defined includes the First and Second Worlds of the Cold War/‘hot peace’ era. Previously the Third World had some strategic options by playing First World against Second. With the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989 the First World component has become the dominant figure whilst the ex-Se-

cond World has been largely quiet in North-South relations, preoccupied as it is with economic, political and military integration with the First World. When one says “North” the principal reference is to those countries who hold prime geopolitical power and – despite conflicts and mercantilist rivalries between each other – can operate to frustrate efforts for substantive Southern advancement, particularly on economic issues (trade and debt) but also on environment (export of toxic waste); thus, we refer to the US, the EU, Canada, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. On the issues of sustainable development some countries may “break ranks” and take a more progressive position such as Norway and various Red/Green elements within the EU bloc although coercion by the US to toe the line can surface.² Finland, Norway and Denmark are also sympathetic to the cause of indigenous peoples. In practice, greater mutuality of interest can emerge in North-South “development cooperation” than over negotiations although this is not necessary guaranteed as aid can be used to achieve quite conventional foreign policy objectives or subsidise Northern business in the South.

South refers to the Third World, primarily former colonies of Northern powers and those countries who now find themselves dependent on the North. Important conferences such as Bandung (1955) saw the launch of the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Group of 77 and


² At the Bali Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Norway had vocally championed positions on trade and the environment during negotiations that were more progressive than other Northern countries. It was later alleged that Washington had subsequently telephoned the Norwegian Ambassador to the US to complain about his delegation’s intrusiveness.
China emerged from the NIEO (1974). Both have remained loci of organization that have fallen short of their potential. The G77 and China is the usual body of Southern organization in United Nations deliberations on sustainable development unless other interests win out. Sub-groupings within it are often marked by (voluntary or coercive) relationships to the North and can serve to splinter unity. For so-called Newly Industrialised Countries (NICs) such as Mexico and South Korea who have strong trade relationships with the North their positioning is often more along the lines of their membership in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Small island developing states (SIDS) share a common ecological, economic and political situation in relation to large powers and climate change. Latin America and the Caribbean sometimes speak as GRULAC. OPEC has considerable geopolitical power but this in practice has always revolved around the needs of its principal customers, Venezuela's recent attempts to strengthen OPEC have led to the US identifying President Chavez as an explicit threat. The Africa Group has voiced a very strong position on matters of biosafety (regulating genetically-modified organisms) and macroeconomic reform.

In practice it has been difficult to forge an effective collective Southern consciousness consonant with their objective interests vis-à-vis the North; political and economic independence. Ghanaian independence leader Kwame Nkrumah lamented that although formal political independence had been achieved for his country, there could be no political independence without economic independence. The challenge for the South is the collective pursuit of independence after independence. The most urgent area of organization is required in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) where the South is splintered on lines of economic self-interest and thus fail to respond collectively to the far greater threat posed by a North that is seeking to subsume Southern economies by fair means or foul. Sustainable development will be impossible from a position of political and economic dependency.

The History of North-South Relations over Development

Let us first recognize that the term ‘development’ is pregnant with certain connotations related to theories of progressive change and identity emerging from Europe of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These ideas also coincided with the colonial conquest of Southern lands and the production of a Third World. What was then conceived of as a civilizing mission (a justification which emerged after the fact of conquest) finds its modern expression in present discourses of “good governance” and “sound macroeconomic policy” whereby the North restructures the South in accordance with the former’s economic ambitions under the cover of tutelage. Development in its early days, like the civilizing process, was something done to Third

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World peoples. Secondly, we should recognize that the meaning of development has not remained static; it is constantly being reworked, fought over and contested. Important efforts during national liberation struggles, post-independence theorists of dependency and underdevelopment, and more recently the efforts of non-governmental actors have made important advances in reworking development and sustainable development into a vehicle for the needs of Third World peoples. Third, that development even with the appendage of 'sustainable' is something of an imperative object of desire, one cannot not want it; all those facing with global policy making, whether national governments or non-governmental actors, are committed to the use of the term. However, sustainable development promises considerably greater flexibility for communities, civil society actors and those nations who fall foul of the international power divide to address their needs, priorities and alternatives whilst remaining communicable to those who hold the reins of power. This communicability is necessary not just for dialogue (which is important but often over-romanticised through the foreclosure of power inequalities) but allows political struggle in important policy-setting fora where the costs of not engaging may outweigh objections of principle.4

Development as a concept of progressive change was applied by the Europeans first to their fellows in the upheavals of the revolutions, wars and emergence of industrial capitalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It informs the perspectives of both Adam Smith and Karl Marx. It was seen as part of the necessary advance of society into secular rationality and the full development of its productive forces. However, whilst political economists watched breathlessly as industrialization swept over Europe and declared that such progress was inevitable, even necessary and good, others noticed darker consequences. In a pioneering sociological study Emile Durkheim noted that during this period of unprecedented socio-economic upheaval suicide rose rapidly and emerged as a mass phenomenon.5

This period in Europe also coincided with renewed colonial expansion into the South (the New World had already succumbed some time before). The peoples of the South were not considered subject to the same standards of progress of Europe. The reasons for this are manifold but are generally related to the schools of thought that gave birth to the

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4 Here I part company from post-development theorists whose deconstruction of 'development' suggests abandoning it as a political project entirely and focusing on minority politics. The weakness of such otherwise stimulating analysis is that in order to sustain its critique it must continually cast development monolithically as principally an instrument of Northern domination. This forecloses discussion of successful attempts to rework or subvert development to the benefit of the Southern subaltern.

Enlightenment, Europe's so-called secular revolution. European colonisation, despite its brutality, was seen as bringing the peoples of the South "into history." Our societies and cultures were seen as static or backward such that even Marx made the controversial claim that 'whatever may have been the crimes of England [in India] she was the unconscious tool of history'.

England's crimes in India were many, including the mutilation of textile workers in Bengal so that they would not out-compete the business of Manchester's textile mills (with no hands they could not weave). Later, the cheap prices of Indian textiles produced under British rule were used to break the Chinese textile industry (an early example of dumping) as an accompaniment to England's forced drug trade to China that culminated in the Opium Wars.

Mike Davis has recently produced an excellent study of how the British Raj presided over some of the most terrible famines in history; from 1876-1902 following severe sequential El Nino droughts as many as an estimated 30 million Indians died as Victorian administrators clung doggedly to laissez-faire policies whilst orchestrating India's integration into the world market, then centered in London. In 1877 Lord Lytton, Viceroy of India, justified governmental non-intervention by arguing that the Indian population 'has a tendency to increase more rapidly than the food it raises from the soil,' a belief drawn from the teachings of Thomas Malthus, first chair of Political Economy at the East India Company's college in Haileybury and author of *An Essay on the Principle of Population.* The railroads which Marx hailed as a sign of progress were used to ship grain to ports for delivery to London rather than feed the starving of India. The benefits of technological advancement were unevenly distributed according to political power.

A further twist of irony is that many founders of the Enlightenment, especially in Germany, used the logics of Indian religious texts such as the *Bhagavad-Gita* in their attacks upon the "irrationality" of organised Christianity. They considered themselves heirs to the "high" culture of India's past, the "lowly" India of their present was a degenerate, child-like and fallen civilization. From such a position it was relatively easy for Europeans to justify aesthetically and morally a position of superiority, even historical agency, vis-à-vis the South. Europe was not alone in this.

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7 Davis, Mike (2001). *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino famines and the making of the Third World,* London: Verso, p. 32. Malthus, Thomas (1798: 1985). *An Essay on the Principle of Population.* Harmondsworth: Penguin. Malthus's thesis that population tends to grow geometrically (at a constant rate) while the means of subsistence only increase arithmetically (by a constant amount) and therefore poverty and famine are inevitable had a major influence on Northern studies of the Third World and prescriptions for population policy in the twentieth century. Despite assaults by Amartya Sen, Michael Watts and others some conservative development agencies still cling to this model.

8 Edward Said and others after him (including his critics) have developed this position which launched the field of post-colonial studies. Said, Edward W. (1978) *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient,* Harmondsworth: Penguin. See also Bhatt, Chetan (2000). 'Primordial Being: Enlightenment, Schopenhauer and the Indian subject of postcolonial
similar positions were taken by America in its conquest of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines (often illustrated in cartoons of the time as children or compliant women next to Uncle Sam) and Japan (who during their imperial period produced “scientific” studies of the relation of height to intelligence in order to compose a hierarchy of races).

One final point, Toussaint L’Ouverture an ex-slave taking inspiration from the French Revolution’s universal promise – liberty, equality, fraternity for all – abolished the slave trade and led an uprising against the French on Haiti in 1791. Napoleon, who saw a free black nation as a dangerous obstacle to French interests in the New World, lured L’Ouverture into a trap and had him imprisoned in 1800. The country which gave birth to modern democracy was quite happy to brush it aside. The countries of the North today who preach democracy for all nations do not themselves practice democracy at the international level; Northern countries dominate the boards of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank and hold the chains of debt which are crushing many Southern nations; Northern countries and their agenda also dominate the WTO through manipulation and intimidation; the North also dominates the UN Security Council and due to the consensus-basis of UN negotiations are able to water down many agreements that could favour the South (sustainable development included).

I have taken this route to demonstrate, in part, how the South - as the Third World - was produced, both materially by deliberate and destructive colonial policy and as an object of theory, as a “thing” to be worked upon. It is no singular crime of Europe or the North to be ethnocentric, all cultures are, but no others feel obliged to deliver a scientific discourse on their superiority. Development, and sustainable development, do not spring forth newly made but operate on the historical terrain sketched thus far. Their meaning has been built upon a history of political domination and territorial appropriation which did not end with the success of independence struggles.

It is an ongoing effort from peoples of both North and South to lay to rest these ghosts: a belief in the universal necessity of progressive industrialisation drawn from an experience particular to Europe; a willful disregard of the costs of such change for the North and its Southern Other; a belief in cultural superiority combined with moral and historical duty to reshape other cultures; a conviction that what is a product of Western science is solely rational, universal and universally applicable; universal values are used where convenient in power struggles and dismissed when it does not suit political or economic interests; that the Third World is poor because it is overpopulated and it is starving because of both, and that this, not colonialism and the parent development model of the North is the principal environmental and development problem.  

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10 By way of example see John Kenneth Galbraith (1987. A History of Economics, the past as the present,
The intention here is not to engage in carica
ture but to tease out key themes that are still active in present North-South relations, particularly around sustainable development. Development in its early form preserved the vertical hierarchy between the North and South but deceptively suggested that it was also a linear spectrum with the North occupying the position of ‘developed’ nations and the South by inference ‘developing’. The proliferation of indices such as are found in the World Bank’s World Development Report based upon quantitative economic data such as gross domestic product helped (and continue to help) reinforce this understanding. Developing countries have but to apply a formula or programme supplied by international financial institutions such as the IMF or World Bank Group (based upon a selected set of quantitative economic data) in order to ascend the linear scale. The bitter experiences of African states, countries hit by the Asian Crisis (in particular Indonesia and Thailand), Russia and Latin America testify that such a formula and approach to development does not work.

In fact, what the linear conception of develop
des disguises is the disjuncture and discontinuity between North and South, developed and developing. The structural barriers enforcing a power divide between North and South came about in the post-Second World War period as a response to the growing discontent and agitation in the South for independence.

Colonisation involved restructuring the South to suit the needs of the North. Resources flowed to feed the industrial revolution and markets were opened up for Northern companies. Valentin Mudimbe has pointed out that colonisation derives from the Latin colere, ‘meaning to cultivate or design. Indeed the historical colonial experience does not and obviously cannot reflect the peaceful connotations of these words. But it can be admitted that ... the colonialists (those exploiting a territory by dominating a local majority) have all tended to organize and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs.’

In practice it has been very difficult for the South to undo that design. Many Southern knowledge systems and cultural practices were displaced, shunned or derided by colonialism and that perspective coloured many leaders of the post-independence South who were for the most part products of colonial schooling. Notable exceptions were M. K. Gandhi of India and Amilcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau who attempted some reconcilia
tion. It is only recently that Southern prac-

Harmondsworth: Penguin.) an otherwise excellent writer on economics and former US Ambassador to India who asserts in one of his three references to the Third World that ‘the poor with their procreative impulse continue to bear responsibility for their own poverty’ (p. 117). Little change between Lytton of 1877 and Galbraith of 1987. Later, criticising development economics for applying industrial policies and administrative apparatuses to Central America’s ‘feudal political structures that were wholly inimical to development of any kind because they were intractable’ (p. 259), his ethnocentrism elides how Northern development/colonialism operated parasitically on feudalism in the colonies (see Frank, Andre Gunder (1969). Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical studies of Chile and Brazil, New York: Monthly Review Press).

debts promoted by the Bank and Fund, excessive military interference, and secured some policy space in the 1970s. However, the ecological costs began to accrue in the 1980s as forests were felled to feed construction booms in the North (e.g. Japan), Green Revolution agriculture began to exhibit its failures (pesticide poisoning, crop failure), and big dams wiped out habitats and worsened external debt. Countries like Malaysia who were relatively affluent were experiencing a net transfer of surplus to the North from investment, trade, finance and technological dependence. Development was in crisis. The North, with some internal shifts in power (from Britain to the US), had maintained its dominance over the South and was strengthening it.

The concept of colonisation as (re)design is useful, it remains central to the agenda of the very powerful mercantilist lobby that holds sway in Northern approaches to sustainable development. The North has effectively shifted economic policy decision-making away from the UN (where the South holds the majority) to fora it dominates (IMF/World Bank/WTO/G8), this has been matched by a joint effort by those fora to redesign the laws of the South particularly in areas regulating the access and rights of foreign capital and control of resources. In 1998 a proposed multilateral agreement on investment (MAI) for the OECD was defeated via exposé by an international coalition of civil society groups. The MAI proposed to allow corporations the ability to sue governments over investment disagreements such as the loss

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{12}} \text{Khor, Martin and Lim Li Lin (2001). Good Practices and Innovative Experiences in the South, Vols. 1-3, Penang: Third World Network; London and New York: Zed Books; New York: Special Unit for Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries, UNDP.} \]

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{13}} \text{Khor, Martin (1992). The Future of North-South Relations: Conflict or cooperation?, Penang: Third World Network.} \]

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{14}} \text{Khor, Martin (1983). The Malaysian Economy: Structures and dependence, Petaling Jaya: MARICANS/Institut Masyarakat.} \]
of future profits should, for example, a toxic product be banned. Such development by coercion has not disappeared, it is on the negotiating agenda of the WTO and has surfaced in a host-government agreement between a pipeline coalition led by oil giant BP and the governments of Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan. In a very real sense a recolonisation agenda is back on the table.

We can thus see the last few hundred years to the present as periods of fluctuating degrees of colonialism: from overt conquest to civilizing project to independence/development/dependence to recolonisation/sustainable development. Many see the concept of sustainable development as a means, in the international policy arena, to rollback and transform the recolonisation agenda to allow the space for alternatives that are politically, ecologically and economically just. The principles contained within the Rio Declaration offer a framework to work with that has been agreed to by heads of state following protracted negotiation. Although "soft" law all states are nonetheless bound by it.

Common but Differentiated Responsibilities

One Rio Principle in particular addresses the historical ecological and colonial debt owed by the North to the South, principle 7: common but differentiated responsibilities. This underlined that we were on one world ecologically but two worlds otherwise. The North, recognizing this, would undertake to assist the South financially and technologically. Although agreed to at Rio, the US at the WSSD tried to delete reference to this principle and the precautionary principle (see below). Many in the South see common but differentiated responsibilities as the basic framework for global justice. It underpins recent demands for debt cancellation that international civil society has championed. It forms the basic dynamic of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change whereby the North, bearing historical and present responsibility for emitting the lion's share of greenhouse gases, undertakes emission reductions.

The relative contribution of North and South to the ecological crisis stems from the colonial period/industrial revolution, rapacious exploitation and the massive South-North transfer of resources has led some to postulate the concept of an ecological debt owed by the North to the South. The concept of ecological debt also covers those non-colonial Northern countries who nonetheless benefited from the exploitation of the South, exercise power over them or possess the wealth to act.

This principle represents a moment of conciliation between North and South at Rio. The challenge for the world is for the North to dis-

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16 'Oil Companies Colonise Turkey: MAI by the back door?,' Press release from FOEI, CRBM, Cornerhouse, KHRP, PLATFORM, CEE Bankwatch, 30 August 2002.


18 Jubilee South Asia-Pacific and Asia-Pacific Movement on Debt and Development, *Ecological Debt: An Introduction*, Asia-Pacific Ecological Debt Conference, Bali, Indonesia, June 1-3, 2002. WWF’s annual Living Planet reports chart the ecological footprint of each country – the amount of ecological space its consumption depends upon. Unsurprisingly the North’s footprint dwarfs the South.
mantle its design. However, at Rio and since there have been few concrete commitments to make this a reality, the most powerful Northern governments are moving in the opposite direction; a form of mercantilism is replacing sustainable development concerns. Transnational corporations (TNCs) have seized much of the political agenda in the North which has worrying consequences for sustainable development. TNCs represent the largest segment of global economic activity and are responsible for the globalisation of environmentally-damaging technology (including the shipment of hazardous waste to the Third World). In the early 1990s TNCs accounted for approximately half the world's greenhouse gas emissions. They also 'dominate the trade in (and in many cases the extraction and production of) natural resources and commodities, resulting in depletion or degradation of forests, soils, water and marine resources and biodiversity through mining, drilling, logging and large-scale agriculture.'19 UNCED failed to regulate TNCs but this battle was taken up once again at the WSSD in 2002. Narrowly won at the last minute, a commitment was secured for 'the full development and effective implementation of intergovernmental agreements and measures' for corporate accountability and responsibility. At the eleventh hour, the US tried to water down the commitment through manipulation of the official record to state that it was the 'collective understanding' of the negotiating group that the commitment was only for 'existing' agreements. This met with fierce oppo-
sition from Ethiopia and Norway where Ethiopia claimed that this would foreclose future progress and was thus not logical. This sliver of progress was one of the few successes of the WSSD.20

An Example of Conflict: When the North Refuses Sustainable Development for the South

Beneath the surface level debate we find in the global media about the North's commitment to rescue the South from poverty lie the deeper hardline positions that one only glimpses at multilateral negotiations. Negotiations on a plan of action had reached a deadlock around financial issues by the end of the Bali PrepCom of the WSSD in May 2002. The G77 and China put forward a compromise proposal that accepted many demands of the North, damaging as they were for the South's future, which prejudiced the outcomes of ongoing negotiations at the WTO and abdicated reform of the international financial institutions. What the South asked for was more progress on debt relief, support for the diversification of commodity-dependent countries, and the elimination of agricultural subsidies in the North. Additionally both the US and EU had advanced similar text on the WTO-TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreement and public health, which implied that implementation of TRIPS would be a boon for public health. Whereas in fact TRIPS, by enshrining strict intellectual property rights (IPRs) - and therefore royalty pay-


ments – raises the costs for public health care beyond the reach of the poor (witness the feud in South Africa and elsewhere over access to HIV/AIDS drugs). The G77 and China proposal reversed the emphasis by stressing the suspension clauses within TRIPS which parties may exercise as they deem fit as part of a public health first approach rather than an IPR first regime.21

If the developed countries rejected the paper it would be clear that they were against substantive debt forgiveness, sustainable commodity-based economies, fair terms of trade and good public health in developing countries. In spite of high talk by developed nations of combating poverty, ensuring sustainable consumption and protecting human rights and the environment, it would be clear, if the compromise package was rejected, that on matters of substance the North wanted the South to stay locked into its subordinate position within the global economy. There would be no sustainable development without commitment to its implementation. Least developed countries cannot be expected to make inroads into sustainable resource use if they face crushing debts, falling commodity prices and an HIV/AIDS pandemic for which they are unable to purchase medicines or fund policies.

In Bali Norway, Mexico and New Zealand accepted the proposal. The EU said that it wished to negotiate further on it. The US and Japan stayed silent but eventually rejected it.22 At the WSSD the only issue redeemed was that of public health and TRIPS.

The Precautionary Principle

Principle 15 outlines the precautionary approach ‘where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.’ During the WSSD itself a conflict arose between the US, UN food agencies and Zimbabwe on the issue of genetically-modified (GM) food aid that has highlighted this principle in the context of a North-South power struggle over sustainable development.

Incredible pressure was brought to bear on Zimbabwe after it rejected “food aid” (in reality credit assistance) from the US on the grounds of health and safety concerns owing to likely contamination with GM crops. Zimbabwe felt that there were as-yet untested safety impacts for humans and were also concerned about genetic pollution of their domestic agriculture which could affect exports to the EU (who have regulations on GM foods). In the absence of national biosafety regulations and adequate capacity to carry out reliable risk assessments Zimbabwe took a decision based on the precautionary principle and consistent with the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which enshrines the sovereign right of countries to be informed of, and to take precautionary measures on, imports of GM organisms.23 Deleting mention of the pre-

21 See ‘Declaration on the TRIPS agreement and public health,’ 14 November 2001, WT/MIN(01)/DEC/2 (www.wto.org/english/tr畏to_e/minist_e/min01_e/mindccb_trips_e.htm)
23 ‘Don’t pressure hungry peoples to accept GM food aid,’ Open letter to the Government of the United States of America, the World Food Programme, the World Health Organisation, and the Food and

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cautionary principle in the WSSD documents (as suggested by the US) would undermine recognition of this right. As a backup measure Zimbabwe requested the US that the grain purchased on credit be milled in order to reduce the likelihood of germination but were told that they would have to pay for the milling costs. Furthermore sources of non-GM food are available in the US despite its claims to the contrary.

Despite knowledge about the risks and uncertainties pertaining to GM crops the UN World Food Programme failed to ask recipient countries whether they would willingly accept GM food. The World Health Organisation and Food and Agriculture Organisation went one step further by assuring Southern African countries that GM food is “not likely to present human health risk” and that “these foods may be eaten.” Both WHO and FAO have previously recognized the need for pre-market safety assessment on GM foods on a case-by-case basis.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell in his plenary address to the WSSD took the opportunity to take a swipe at Southern African countries refusing GM food aid. The global media took a pro-US stance by suggesting that the US was the principal provider of food aid to Zimbabwe and that the Zimbabwe’s government was making an arbitrary gamble on the lives of its people by rejecting GM food aid.

In fact, the Zimbabwe decision had been reached on the basis of popular support following a national consultation process. Furthermore Zimbabwe has sufficient stocks to see it up to the years end, the government had reasonable time in which to make reasonable requests. Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, China and India have all offered to supply Zimbabwe with non-GM maize.

The US has pursued this hardline position due to its existing stance on GM organisms. It does not support segregation of non-GM and GM foods due to claims of “substantial equivalence” which would (it is claimed) obviate the need for additional safety testing on GM foods. The US has also championed the interests of the GM food industry in all available international fora, arguing even that it constitutes sustainable agriculture. Rejection of GM foods at such an international and public level would be seriously damaging for the image of an industry already facing considerable financial pressure and public opposition. The materialization of food aid as credit assistance for direct purchases from US firms is also a form of disguised subsidy.

Once again mercantilist interest conflicts with sustainable development in a North-South conflict. National sovereignty clashes with a commercial propaganda battle.

This sort of struggle characterizes sustainable development. If we are to look at sustainable development from the outside, judge it from its policy documents, the compromise outcomes of UN conferences, and declare it...
dysfunctional because it fails to conform to an ideal, then all resignations are justified in advance. We should refuse to play take it or leave it with sustainable development. It is in contestation that its meaning is lost or won for North or South, rich or poor, mercantilism or equity. UNCED, WSSD and their associated family have played a positive role in opening up space for alternatives in a global policy environment largely hostile to such change. That precious space needs to defended and expanded because, more than the present ultimatum of “no alternative,” it affirms the plurality and needs of the suppressed majority of both North and South. Such is the meaning of our labour.