The Second Colloquium on the Governance of Sustainable Development

Innovations in Governance for Sustainable Development

Summary of the second conference
December 14, 2004

The Civil Society in the Decision-making Process: the Canadian Example

Guest speaker: Elizabeth May
Executive Director of the Sierra Club of Canada

Summary prepared by Elisabeth Marsollier
Dr. Elizabeth May emphasized the concept of sustainable development and the critical role that the Canadian government and civil society played in the concept’s initial translation into global and national priorities and key decisions. She also outlined the diminishing role of civil society in the decision-making process in Canada during the last decade and the subsequent degradation of the Canadian environment. She considered that Canada was now more a “case” than an “example.” However, she noted the encouraging changes announced by the Canadian government and some provinces in the last few months. She identified the potential environmental, economic and social costs of inaction and highlighted the dangerous impacts of climate change in the near future if a major change in political attitude of most countries (including Canada) does not happen soon.

**How and when the concept of sustainable development emerged**


The term “sustainable development” has its origins in the 1980 World Conservation Strategy report of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). At the time, sustainable development was defined as “the integration of conservation and development to ensure that modification to the planet do indeed secure the survival and well-being of all people.”

In 1983, the UN General Assembly set up the World Commission on the Environment and Development, to be chaired by Gro Harlem Bruntland. Initially, the government of Norway was quite reluctant to see Ms. Bruntland to become so involved in the work of the Commission. However, even with her appointment as Prime Minister of Norway, she kept her initial role in the Commission. It was in 1987 that the term “sustainable development” entered into the political arena, once comprehensively used by Gro Harlem Brundtland, and publicized by the Commission in the report "Our Common Future ", commonly known as "the Bruntland Report." Sustainable development was then “invented or re-invented” by the Commission, as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The Commission’s goal was to tackle a multiple crisis, involving development, the environment and militarism, as a matter of urgency.

Dr. May outlined the fact that, in 1987, roughly 20% of the population was consuming 80% of the resources of the world. Several issues were and still are related to this: the consumption levels of renewable and non-renewable resources were/are too high; there was/is a problem of equity between the ones-who-have and the ones-who-have-not; there was/is also an unfortunate issue of commitment to war and armament. Her major focus was the climate change issue, related to the too high level of consumption of fossil fuels, and the related issue of the increasing number of natural disasters.

She noted that in 1987, because of population pressure, environmental disasters related to industrial development, the production of toxic chemicals, pollution, poverty and militarism, the systems were already breaking. A sustainable development of the planet was already possible only by addressing these issues and cutting back on stresses on ecosystems. Consequently the Commission focused on needs, i.e. enough for all human beings without sacrificing the needs of future generations – therefore addressing the issue of intergeneration equity. Gro Harlem Bruntland is a medical doctor by training; she gave a prescription to the world. The prescription was ignored.

The Commission created the process which led to the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and, later on, to the Conference of Johannesburg. UNCED – also called the "Earth Summit" - took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (20 years after the Stockholm summit). Rio was the result of an initiative orchestrated by Maurice Strong involving former politicians and “a few smart people.” UNCED agreed on a Declaration setting out 27 principles supporting sustainable development. The Conference also agreed on a plan of action, “Agenda 21,” and recommended that all countries produce national sustainable development strategies. A special UN Commission on Sustainable Development was also created.

Elizabeth May argues that the challenge of sustainable development was not met in Rio. Efforts to come up with a Forest Convention, dear to several Canadian representatives (such as Dr. Jag Maini), were unsuccessful. Efforts to address climate change were efficient and led to the Kyoto Protocol. However, the key issue is the “implementation gap” between the rhetoric (what was decided at the Earth Summit) and the reality (what has been done since then), at the global and national levels. The Sierra Club of Canada is in complete agreement with the Canadian Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable development on that question.
Canadian support for the goal of sustainable development

The Canadian government and leading Canadians, such as Jim McNeal and Maurice Strong, supported the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development, and played a critical role in the worldwide definition and promotion of the concept of sustainable development.

However, Elizabeth May feels that the Canadian government has not yet implemented the principles of sustainable development in its programs – even as major efforts and initiatives took place before the Rio Conference.

One of the reasons for Canada’s inefficiency in the implementation of the decisions of the Rio Summit is that senior civil servants in the federal government generally do not stay long enough in a specific post to make a difference and/or to maximize the use of the considerable knowledge they develop on the job. For example, the federal government sent to the Rio Conference a fantastic team made of representatives from each department. However, most of the individuals who attended the Conference were in very different jobs 3 years later. Consequently, one of the NGO concerns is that nobody who was involved in the files negotiation of Earth Summit was readily available to explain to new ministers what Rio was all about. The picture was drastically different in Canadian NGOs, such as the Sierra Club of Canada, where most of the leaders kept their positions for longer periods.

The whole government of Canada should be implementing sustainable development, not just Environment Canada

Even the department of Environment is not doing well. Sheila Copps, when minister of Environment, killed the state-of-the-environment reporting system that had been developed in the 1980s; she closed research stations (particularly in the high Arctic) as well as significant components of inland waters research. Research programmes in the federal government are in a perpetual state of review, particularly those related to the environment.

The new management culture of the federal government has not helped the implementation of sustainable development. Civil society organizations strongly believe that the Canadian government should not be run like a business, while the new management attitude is that the government should be run like a business.

The department of Finance seems to have a hard time in creating economic instruments to implement sustainable development.

It is not understood why Canada keeps providing significant subsidies to the nuclear industry.

All the Cabinet documents were supposed to have an environmental impact assessment, according to the Red Book of the Liberal Party. This did not happen.

The sustainable development strategy approach in each department did not make a radical change and was not a challenge to do new things or to do things differently.

What has the federal government done regarding the sustainable development of the country?

- The National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy;
- The provincial Round tables on the Environment and the Economy; and
- The Office of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development (created under Jean Chrétien’s government);

Two Canadians contributed considerably to the sustainable development of the planet: Jim McNeal and Maurice Strong:

- Jim McNeal, as Secretary General of the World Commission on the Environment and Development, made a critical contribution to sustainable development.
- Because of time constraints, Elizabeth May briefly mentioned Maurice Strong’s considerable contribution to the definition and the application of the concept of sustainable development but insisted on the main aspects. Maurice Strong, a former head of the Canadian International Development Agency, impressed by his work the UN Secretary General of the time (U Thant) and was asked by him to organize the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. The next year, he became first director of the new UN Environment Programme, created as a result of the Stockholm Conference. Maurice Strong continued the international networking on which his influence still rests and became a member of the World Commission on Environment and Development. In 1989, he was appointed Secretary General of UNCED (the Earth Summit). As outlined by Elizabeth May, as well as other speakers and writers, it is instructive to read Maurice Strong's 1972 Stockholm speech and compare it with the issues of Earth
Summit 1992. In 1972 and in 1992, Maurice Strong warned urgently about global warming, the devastation of forests, the loss of biodiversity, polluted oceans, the population time bomb. He invited to the conference the environmental NGOs, provided them with money to come, and invited them to become influential in the decision-making process and to continue informing the general public. After Stockholm, environment issues became part of the administrative framework in Canada, the U.S., and Europe.

Maurice Strong is also behind the Commission on Global Governance (CGG) whose goal is to strengthen "global civil society," which, it explains, "is best expressed in the global non-governmental movement." Today, many NGOs have consultative status with the UN's Economic and Social Council. The CGG proposed that NGOs be brought formally into the UN system, be accredited to the General Assembly as "Civil Society Organizations" and convened in an annual forum of civil society.

The role of Canadian Civil Society:

Six major groups of Canadian civil society were and are involved in the promotion and support of the concept of sustainable development and its implementation. They are the following: environmental groups, development groups, women’s groups, youth, indigenous people’s organizations and labour unions.

There are five categories of actions by Canadian NGOs in support of sustainable development since Rio:

1. Pressing for change through advocacy, based on research by grassroots organizations: The Sierra Club of Canada, for example, coordinated a Rio Watch process, engaging the support of 80 other groups in the ongoing tracking of progress by governments.

   “Following the Earth Summit of 1992 - at which Canada made a series of commitments to sustainable development - the Sierra Club of Canada initiated an annual Report Card process. For thirteen years, the SCC has published a report covering key Rio commitments and progress of federal, territorial, and provincial governments across Canada. The Rio Report Card was acknowledged in the recent OECD Report Card on Canada as an important contribution of Canadian NGOs to monitoring progress.”

The World Wildlife Fund of Canada led a decade-long campaign to increase the number of protected areas in Canada. A Green Budget Coalition, consisting of 15 leading national environmental groups, has been pressing for ecological fiscal reform by making detailed proposals for inclusion in the federal government’s annual budget. A broad coalition of Canadian NGOs led the opposition to the OECD’s proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment.

2. Increasing public awareness: NGOs have initiated and contributed to programs to increase public awareness of environmental and social issues, to implement energy and water efficiency, to improve urban transit, to protect local landscapes, and to change consumer attitudes.

3. Participating in the ongoing U.N. negotiating processes developed to implement “Agenda 21:” Canadian NGOs have been involved in the international negotiation and implementation processes on climate change, biodiversity conservation, persistent organic pollutants (POPs), women’s and children’s rights, and social development.

4. Advocating changes by working in collaboration with the private sector, as well as with government (such as in the Clean Air Renewable Energy Coalition).

5. Partnering between Canadian and developing country NGOs and institutions to help developing countries address their environmental challenges and to contribute to poverty reduction.

The organizations of Canadian civil society have persistently pressed the federal and provincial governments for a more coherent and efficient implementation of the decisions made in Rio. It is felt by the Sierra Club of Canada that we, as Canadians, are not making any progress.

If we take the recent example of the Mackenzie Valley pipeline, sadly, environmentalists realized that the intent is to use natural gas from the North partly to extract oil out of the Athabaska Tar Sands (bitumen), for export. This would contribute significantly to increase Canada’s emissions of carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and other atmosphere-heating gases.

The new minister of Environment, Stephane Dion, made a great start by acknowledging that we must reduce our world emissions of greenhouse gases by 70% within the next 15 years. However, what is the significance of such a statement if every new development project takes Canada in the opposite direction? Paul Martin recently said (in a speech in Montreal) that to reach the commitments of the Kyoto Protocol would require enormous technical investments – does this mean that it is
too difficult to comply with our commitments? In British Columbia, there are talks about a potential lift of the federal moratorium on oil and gas activities off the Pacific coast.

The remaining agenda:

Elizabeth May considers that Canadians are not getting a sustainable development and that the Canadian environment is not properly protected. The same statements apply to the world.

Sustainable development strategies should be implemented by PMO and PCO. Finance should be also involved since there is a need for some accountability. What we are presently aiming at, as a society, is sustainable profit - not sustainable development.

If we do not take care of the climate change issue, we will be in deep trouble by 2020.

Development groups are upset about the results of the “Rio Bargain”. Developing countries agreed to protect vast ecosystems in exchange of development aid (0.7% of the GNP of the developed countries). This never happened. Brian Mulroney agreed with the deal but did not implement it nor did his successors. The target is now to bring back development aid to the level of 1992, which was then seen as insufficient! After 9/11, the political agenda changed drastically. Funds committed to support poor countries (especially in Africa) went to Afghanistan.

Hopes and fears:

The next wave of progress is probably 18 months away. We do not need more rhetoric, but rather major efforts. The results of the International Arctic Study are inspiring a major move.

Elizabeth May noted that is unfortunate to say that it may take a few more major natural disasters to create a sense of public hazard that could trigger a sense of urgency and consequently a change.

A lively question period followed.

The questions were about where and how to improve the situation, how to mobilize public opinion regarding sustainable development, the inappropriate funding level of the NGOs, the educating role of the environmental NGOs regarding the media, the brain drain in government, and what keeps Elizabeth going despite of the poor funding of NGOs.

Elizabeth May took the time to answer all questions.

She expressed her worries regarding the brain drain in the federal government. The permanent review of scientific programs is creating insecurity among scientists. Many have left the government. Among other concerns, the loss of experts in taxonomy is the source of errors with serious impacts on the environment and the economy. For example, insects may be initially improperly identified and critical time may be lost to react efficiently before a pest invasion. She provided the recent example of the mis-identified longhorn European beetle that infested a major park in Halifax.

Environmental NGOs and civil society are improperly represented on committees and commissions of the federal government, because they are improperly funded. The private sector appears to be over-represented on the same committees and commissions. There is a domination of the private sector in most environmental committees. Bureaucrats are in most cases well-intentioned, but representatives of environmental NGOs are outnumbered by those of the private sector. She gave the example of committees on pesticides.

Lobbyists of the private sector are now very numerous. Politicians want to act in the public interest but are poorly informed.

She reiterated the importance that Finance, PCO, PMO and TB control the implementation of sustainable development in Canada and make sure that there is a full engagement of Canadian society.

Environmental NGOs such as the Sierra Club of Canada are playing critical advocacy and educative roles at the national and at the international levels. For example, they educate media who tend to exaggerate facts. Media, as NGOs, are under-staffed and under-budgeted in their coverage of environmental issues.

The Sierra Club of Canada is the poor relative of the Sierra Club of USA. There is no money transfer from USA to Canada. 60% of the funds come from individuals, 30% from foundations, and 10% from governments.
In order to free its environmental NGOs from financial hardship, the EU has adopted in 2001 a program of funding over a five-year period. By doing so, the EU recognized the key role of the environmental NGOs and of civil society in policy development, implementation and evaluation as well as the essential educational and participatory roles of environmental NGOs at the local, regional and international levels. A similar initiative from the Canadian government would help Canadian environmental NGOs considerably.