

Ethical Dilemmas

Can Science and Advocacy Coexist? The Ethics of Sustainable Development

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We are at a major turning point in the history of our species and our planet—the growth and development of human society has passed the limits of sustainability. To achieve sustainable development, every cultural group—from Sahelian farmers and rain forest foragers, to suburban Californians and development professionals in Geneva—will have to make choices that seemed impossible to consider a just short while ago.

All anthropology today is really *development* anthropology, and the ethics of anthropology must be the ethics of sustainable development. But how can we chart a course between being advocates for “our people,” working for the development establishment and doing science? We must start by moving beyond arcane academic arguments about ethics that pit materialist against mentalist approaches, or arguments that reject ethics in the name of relativism or expediency. We need to balance scientific research to understand the parameters of sustainability with advocacy for human rights in an effort to define the goals of development.

The Usual Choices

Choosing between science and advocacy is not valid, because it does not serve the goals of either science or advocacy. Yet, we often feel pressured to make this choice.



How should objective data of indigenous knowledge be used for advocacy? John Mbod, the author's assistant in northeast Ghana, collects data on child health and women's fertility.

In addition, anthropologists who see their role in development as advocates must also decide “for whom?” The main choice is usually between the development establishment agency supplying the money and the people who are supposed to benefit from the spending of that money. Anthropologists working for regional development banks, for example, are expected to promote projects such as increased timber harvesting or large dams which are often supported by the national government, but opposed by local communities.

For anthropologists who choose to be advocates for the local people, difficult choices still remain about *what* should be advocated: the anthropologist's idea of what is best for the people, often based on privileged information of modern science or regional politics; the people's own idea, problematic due to the range of individual ideas, questionable representativeness of local authorities and the conflict between tradition and change; some mix of these two; or a “contextual ethic” that abjures rules and implied principles altogether. Our role as advocates, science is unfortunately often precluded, or worse and more common, it is forced into the service of advocacy where it becomes pseudoscience.

Those anthropologists who choose a scientific approach often believe that they have somehow escaped difficult choices. They may feel that the superiority of their “objectivity” is proven by the power of scientific technology to transform the world. Yet in this role we are often advocates for the ideology of the development establishment and our “science” risks becoming pseudoscience in the service of advocacy.

Balancing Science and Advocacy

An ethics of sustainable development must constantly test our understanding of objective reality by framing hypotheses that can be examined experimentally with empirical data. We must also test our understanding of subjective reality—values—by posing questions that can be examined through the widest possible discussion with a view to reaching consensus.

If we accept that as anthropologists it is not possible to escape our cultural values or to be completely “objective,” we are in fact *always* advocates—by not making active choices, we are passive advocates for the status quo.

To be effective advocates, anthropologists must understand—within both cultural and technological limits—the objective reality of our universe. Science—as theory building and hypothesis testing—is the most powerful means of understanding, and therefore

predicting the results of our actions. Science, however, cannot answer such difficult and important questions as “What is right and wrong?” We can only answer these questions subjectively through cultural and social processes involving individual and group values.

The challenge is to keep up a dialogue between science and advocacy, keeping the two as distinct as possible without separating them completely. Although a metaphysical value is not testable as a hypothesis with empirical data, whenever our understanding of objective reality changes, our values can also change. The time-honored tension in anthropology between materialist and mentalist approaches should equip us well for this task.

Sustainable Development

Both indigenous and modern sciences provide abundant evidence of the intricate interrelationships in nature and human societies that support fairly stable ecosystems. These sciences also document the loss of both ecological and cultural diversity, as local groups, their environment and indigenous knowledge are absorbed into industrial modernization. Some data show that the human toll on the planet has already pushed beyond its “carrying capacity,” such that consumption levels and population numbers will have to be reduced to achieve sustainability.

Yet, there is nothing objectively “true” about either environmental or social sustainability as human goals. Both rest on the desire to maintain human life and the Earth's ecosystem without causing drastic change—a

position *not* subject to scientific verification.

Environmental sustainability is commonly defined as resource management that does not degrade the environment for future generations. The social side of sustainability is more difficult to define, but must include a social system that does not destroy the natural world or our own species. Social values such as a human right to be free of hunger or political repression cannot be tested with empirical data for validity, but can be accepted by global consensus as desirable values.

To effectively advocate sustainable development as a human goal we must move beyond the cultural hegemony and relativity that plague most current thinking.

Beyond Cultural Hegemony

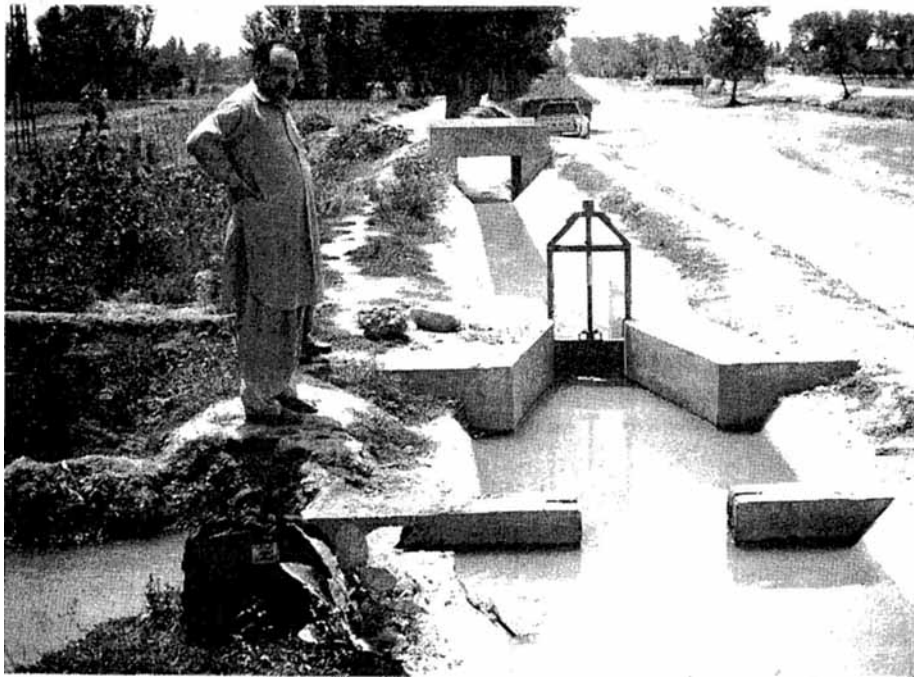
Anthropologists working on conventional development projects are not usually expected to question the assumptions used by technical experts and economists to base the project design. Our role is to facilitate the local peoples' acquiescence and perhaps help them make some unimportant choices that make the project look like “participatory” development. As a member of a team evaluating a proposal for a large-scale conventional irrigation project, I wrote a report critical of the claims for social benefits. The project director responded that the best evaluation is “the one that gets the project.” Moving beyond cultural hegemony for development anthropologists often means escaping from the ideological servitude demanded by many of our employers.

On the other hand, anthropologists who support the development establishment's vision sometimes spurn their colleagues who question the orthodoxy as too theoretical and impractical. The implication is that the

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Advocacy for future generations is part of the ethics of sustainable development. Young Kusasi boys in northeast Ghana hoeing their own small farm plot given to them by their father.



Questioning the assumptions of the development establishment—part of the ethics of sustainable development? Officials inspect part of a large-scale irrigation project in northern Pakistan.

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orthodoxy cannot be challenged because it is too powerful and that one should work within the system if "serious" about development. If the economic orthodoxy often leads to unsustainable policies, however, doing development within the establishment may only be helping drive the bus off the cliff.

Important tenets of conventional economics, if treated as a religion, would include the belief that (1) there exist no natural limits to growth that cannot be overcome by human inventiveness and technology and (2) markets and private property are the best means to distribute resources for optimizing social benefits by providing a mechanism for the interaction of individual consumers' self-interest. Scientific evidence offers little empirical data to support these tenets. Moreover the values they embody are not universally shared. Nevertheless, those receiving the bulk of the (short-term) benefits from the current economic system seem to have convinced most of the world that achieving sustainable development means achieving sustainable growth—witness the recent NAFTA and GATT "agreements."

The ethics of sustainable development involves scrutinizing the hegemonic development establishment on the same basis as any cultural system—a task to which anthropologists can, and have, made important contributions.

Beyond Cultural Relativism

Evidence that indigenous groups have survived over the millennia, whereas our industrial society threatens the whole planet after just a few centuries, does not prove the functional adaptability or sustainability of indigenous systems. When local carrying capacity (social or ecological) is exceeded, one of the major strategies of human groups throughout our history has been migration. But this and many other traditional strategies are no longer viable, for the world has changed irrevocably from the one in which indigenous groups evolved.

Cultural relativism is an unaffordable luxury in a crowded world with biophysical and social limits, where every groups' activities affect every other groups' survival. Local beliefs are not sustainable if they encourage destruction of common resources or compromise the viability of neighboring groups. We must move beyond cultural relativism toward building global consensus on values in areas that affect sustainability either positively or negatively and tolerance for cultural diversity in areas that seem not to affect it. Human rights are part of these values, and could include respect for indigenous peoples and their traditional knowledge on an equal basis with industrial societies.

Anthropologists as advocates for indigenous peoples often consider biological and cultural diversity to be inseparable and essential for the survival of our planet. For too many this translates into a new-age functionalism which sees indigenous beliefs, agriculture and resource management as *inherently* sustainable. When we do this we embrace an ideology of indigenous sustainability, and are willing to support scientific documentation of the indigenous system, but not formulating and testing hypotheses about its sustainability. Thus objective reality and science are confused with metaphysical truth and advocacy. The results can be ludicrous, for example when those who ask questions about the sustainability of indigenous societies are accused of denying their human rights.

In addition to discussion and consensus on indigenous values that support sustainable development, we need more scientific research on what components of traditional resource management, agriculture, and social organization support a sustainable future and how they can work together with "modern" approaches.

Ethics of Sustainable Development

The ethics of sustainable development includes both science and advocacy. However, science, which is bent to serve advocacy, does not sup-

port our goals as advocates for sustainable development because goals will not be based on objective reality. Science informs us about reality, but this information has no intrinsic value. How to interpret and use scientific information is a question of subjective value to be negotiated by society.

This negotiation involves moving beyond cultural hegemony and cultural relativism, and in the process anthropologists become colleagues of the people with whom they work—

they are no longer "informants," "subjects" or "the other."

It is no longer necessary to decide whether we should support a local value ("custom") that is abhorrent to us or the dominant ideology. Rather, anthropologists can help to educate both ourselves and those currently in power, and at the same time help to inform and empower local communities and indigenous peoples to participate with the rest of the world as equals in making decisions for a sustainable future.

Human Genome Diversity Conference

The Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP), an anthropological spin-off from the Human Genome Project, continues to organize itself and clarify its mission and goals. To help encourage this formative process, the Wenner-Gren Foundation sponsored a retreat at the Seven Springs Conference Center in rural New York on November 3-7, organized by John Moore (U Florida). The conference followed the usual Wenner-Gren format by inviting the 15 participants to respond with short papers to an organizer's statement on "Anthropological Perspectives on the HGDP." In attendance at the conference but not contributing papers were the President of Wenner-Gren, Sydel Silverman, and Jonathan Friedlaender and John Yellen of the National Science Foundation.

Contributing papers on general theoretical issues were Luca Cavalli-Sforza (Stanford), Michael Blakey (Howard), Ken Weiss (Penn State), Allen Swedland (Massachusetts-Amherst) and Mark Weiss (Wayne State). These papers stimulated an especially lively discussion on whether there has been a Eurocentric bias in the theories discussed so far in the context of the HGDP, and in the selection of populations and genetic loci to be examined in the proposed research. A consensus emerged that such biases—real, potential or imagined—pose a real danger to the research, and that open discussion of such problems is the best solution.

The session on "Issues and Criticisms from the Four Fields" provided the most valuable information. Leading the discussion in this session were linguist Sarah Thomason, archaeologist Robert Dewar, physical anthropologist Emöke Száthmary and ethnologist Alice Kasakoff, who discussed the possible benefits of the

HGDP to their fields, emphasizing the limitations of their conventional methodologies in interpreting the results of the proposed global genetic survey. Opportunities for collaboration among the fields and with other disciplines were also discussed.

Nuts-and-bolts issues were discussed in a session comprising Hank Greely, a law professor from Stanford, Henry Harpending (Penn State) and Ryk Ward (Utah), with a commentary from Jon Friedlaender. From this discussion of permissions, informed consent and access to survey sites, ethical issues seemed to emerge as the most important. Greely announced that he had accepted an invitation from the participants in the HGDP to form and chair an Ethics Committee to consider such problems at length.

Research design was the focus of the Saturday morning session, with papers by Barbara Mills (Arizona), Ken Kidd (Yale) and Fatimah Jackson (Maryland), with comments from John Yellen (NSF). For those interested in the effect of methods on research design, this was the most interesting session, as Mills discussed intensive and extensive sampling, Kidd described the problems of blood collection and laboratory analysis and Jackson offered an imaginative plan for sampling the African-American population in North America.

The final session of the conference was a free-for-all, open discussion with very frank exchanges of opinions among the participants. All agreed that the conference had swept away many misunderstanding about theoretical, methodological and ethical issues, and that what remained were largely honest differences of opinion. The conference ended with a recapitulation and commentary by the organizer and comments on the relationships among anthropology, the HGDP and the Wenner-Gren Foundation by Sydel Silverman.

Re-Entry Grants for African Scholars Pursuing Education Research

This grants program is designed to assist in the professional re-establishment of talented African scholars who are returning from doctoral or post-doctoral studies abroad and wish to pursue research related to the revitalization and development of education in sub-Saharan Africa. **All proposed projects must include an explicit and substantial focus on female school participation as part of the set of issues to be examined.**

The proposed budget, not to exceed \$25,000, may request funding for items such as a microcomputer and software, books, office supplies, living expenses, personnel assistance and local transportation. The budget may also include subsistence for one research team member of any nationality and a stipend to cover up to six months' transition costs for the principal researcher.

Applicants may submit research proposals prior to or within one year of returning to their Africa-based institutions. The proposal must be endorsed by the African institution where the applicant will be a full-time staff member. Also required are: two letters of recommendation from academic supervisors at the institution where the candidate carried out doctoral or post-doctoral study; doctoral transcripts; and resumes for the applicant and any professional research team member for whom funds are sought.

There are no deadlines for submission of proposals. For a full description of the program, write to:
Scholars on Education Re-Entry Program or **Scholars on Education Re-Entry Program**
The Rockefeller Foundation **The Rockefeller Foundation**
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