Towards an EU Policy for Sustainable Global Development?

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Introduction

In international fora the European Union has been a proactive supporter of sustainable development; indeed it has aspired to a leadership role in this policy area. Nevertheless the Union’s frequently reiterated commitment to sustainable development and to poverty eradication in the world’s poorest countries faces many challenges. How can promotion of social and economic development be reconciled with the urgent need to address issues of environmental degradation, resource depletion and climate change? How can the differing policy preferences of the member states and the European Commission be reconciled to ensure the coherence and sustainability of EU external development efforts? This chapter uses the external dimensions of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) to critically examine EU efforts to pursue its sustainability agenda. Particular reference is made to the Union’s fisheries agreements with developing countries, which put into sharp focus the tensions between the need to protect the marine environment and conserve fish stocks, the desire to promote economic development in developing countries, and political pressure to protect the interests of the Union’s own fisheries industry. In effect, we have chosen a ‘hard case’ with which to test the notion of the EU as an ‘Enlightened Superpower’ in the making.

For a number of years our concern has been to assess the extent to which the EU can effectively function as an international actor (Bretherton and Vogler, 1999, 2000, 2006, 2009). Examination of the EU as a sustainable development actor, however, required that we move beyond assessment of the Union’s capacity to act, to consider how it acts (Bretherton and Vogler, 2008). In this chapter our concern is with the extent to which the external dimensions of the CFP impact upon the Union’s adherence to its Treaty obligations on sustainability, as enshrined in Article 21(2.d) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). This provides that the Union ‘shall foster the sustainable economic, social and environmental development of developing countries, with the primary aim of eradicating poverty. Here
it is noteworthy that the treaty revisions introduced by the 2009 Lisbon Treaty are considered by some commentators to have strengthened the legal basis of the Union’s commitment to sustainable development (Duke and Blockmans, 2010, p. 6).

This argument notwithstanding, the Union has, in recent years, expended considerable effort in developing strategies to support attainment of its ambitious development goals. Foremost among these is the policy coherence for development (PCD) strategy, which has the ambitious aim of minimising inconsistencies between policy sectors (horizontal coherence) and between development priorities of member states and the Union (vertical coherence). Since an effective PCD strategy is crucial to realisation of the Union’s sustainable development aims we examine below its principles and progress, and assess the potential for the Lisbon Treaty provisions to enhance its performance. We begin, however, with a brief discussion of the evolution of the concept of sustainable development, as a prelude to examining its contemporary use within the EU as a multi-dimensional concept embracing economic, political, social and environmental aspects of development. Its adoption as an overarching objective of the EU thus epitomises the many challenges facing the Union in constructing a coherent external development policy.

**Approaches to sustainable development**

The complex and contested nature of sustainable development as a concept has led some authors to question ‘whether sustainable development can be defined in relatively succinct terms’ (Atkinson, Dietz and Neumeyer, 2007, p. 2). Here, we briefly examine the evolution of its meaning, both generally and in EU discourse and practice.

From the early 1960s issues of development were strongly articulated internationally, not least through the United Nations system. It was not until the end of the decade, however, that environmental issues reached the agenda of international politics. The Swedish government’s (1968) proposal for a UN conference on the environment gave rise to fears among G77 developing countries that environmental issues might be used as a pretext to undermine the development agenda and curtail aid flows (Engfeldt, 1973, p. 398). In an attempt to assuage these fears, the preparatory process for the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) organised a conference, in 1971, in the Swiss village of Founex, where development/environment links were explored. Thus the Founex Report argues that, given the problems, inter alia, of inadequate water supply, poor sanitation and nutrition that beset many developing countries –

It is evident that, in large measure, the kind of environmental problems that are of importance in developing countries are those that can be overcome