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.

In addition, anthropologists who see the 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.

These are the questions that can be examined through an effort to define the goals of development and the ethic of sustainable development.

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 intimate interrelationships in nature and human societies that sustain 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. 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 relativism 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 spur 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.
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, involving the 15 participants and two organizers—Genna Lurie and Stephanie Jolly—on “Anthropological Perspectives on the HGDP.” In attendance at the conference but not contributing papers were the President of the Wenner-Gren, Sydel Silverman, and Jonathan Fielden and John Yellen of the National Science Foundation.

Contributing papers on general theoretical issues were Luca Cavalli-Sforza (Stanford), Michael Blayeey (Howard), Ken Weiss (Penn State), Allen Swineland (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 discussions of such themes 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, ethnologist Robert Duvall, anthropologist Eadie Szathmary and ethnologist Alice Kasakoff, who discussed the possible benefits of the HGDP to their fields, emphasizing the limits of intensive and extensive sampling. Anthropologists in 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 Hakim Greely, a law professor from Stanford, Henry Harpender (Penn State) and Ryk Ward (Utah), with a commentary from Jon Friedlander. From this discussion of permissions, informed consent and access to survey sites, ethical issues seemed to emerge as the most pressing. Ward 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 of the misunderstandings about theoretical, methodological and ethical issues, and that what remained were largely honest differences of opinions. The discussion 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 and Research

This grants program is designed to assist in the professional 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’ travel and living costs for the principal researcher.

Applications may submit research proposals prior to or within one year of returning to their African-based universities. The proposal must be authored by the African initiatives 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 studies, and resumes for the applicant and any professional research team members 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
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