

John Overton and Regina Scheyvens, editors, *Strategies for Sustainable Development: Experiences from the Pacific*. London and New York: Zed Books, 1999. Pp. 306, bib., index. US\$15.50 paper.

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Halving extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education and gender equity, reducing under-five mortality and maternal mortality by two-thirds and three-quarters respectively, reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, halving the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and ensuring environmental sustainability.

—United Nations Development Program, *Millennium Goals*

In September of 2000, world leaders met and established what are now known as the Millennium Goals. This ambitious, holistic development agenda includes progress in the social, economic, health, and environmental arenas. How fitting, then, that the editors of *Strategies for Sustainable Development: Experiences from the Pacific* would assemble a collection of readings that presents sustainable development from ecological, societal, and economic perspectives.

Original conceptions of sustainable development presented the issue as one of reconciling economic benefits with long-term ecological health. More recently, however, issues of social justice and even cultural sustainability have found their way onto the agenda. Though greatly adding to the complexity of the construct, such additions present a more realistic nexus from which to derive policy.

The current offering by Overton and Scheyvens follows in this more recent tradition by arguing that one must have a strong understanding of the broad social, ecological, and economic contexts in which sustainability is being considered. Without that context, they suggest, discussions occur at such a macro level as to have little relevance to policy discussions at the local level. Their objectives for this edited group of readings are to limit the discussion of sustainability to the Pacific Islands states that share similar cultures, environments, and economic needs. In so doing they hope to inform policy debates for the governments, nongovernmental organizations, private businesses, and the peoples that call the Pacific islands their home.

The structure of the book, then, follows this basic agenda. After a brief overview of the concept of sustainable development, the second section presents a series of contextual issues that form the backdrop for discussions of sustainability. These include natural resources, relationships with the rest of the world, Pacific Islands cultural and societal traditions, livelihoods within the region, and some specific cases on land tenure, migration, and the meaning of land within Pacific Islands cultures.

With this background established, the book presents a series of five “bad” cases. These cases are critical of attempts to “develop” Pacific Islands nations using a Western framework. The cases include studies of the logging, mining, fishing, and cash-crop industries as well as a look at urbanization in Samoa and Tonga. In the logging case, for example, Melanesian villagers were paid a very small proportion of the actual market value of the logs. This amount was also just a fraction of the economic value that a healthy forest provides villagers in terms of garden plots, edible nuts, sago palms, and tree products used for housing, canoes, medicine, and food. In exchange for one-time lump-sum payments, villagers forfeited the multiple uses of the forest resources for generations to come. Similar results were found in the other cases, with additional problems including loss of women’s standing in the community, prostitution, and domestic violence.

For the informed reader such terrible results are not an earth-shattering revelation of the damage that is often done when indigenous cultures and international companies meet. The cases, however, do serve as an important reminder of the need to consider the holistic implications of economic activities in developing regions. They also begin to suggest the important role of participatory development, an idea that probably needs to be repeated again and again in light of continued mistakes made by the development industry.

On the other hand, this section and other development experiences also make clear that participation is a tricky issue. Those currently empowered by the local culture frequently attempt to concentrate their power. Such participatory development not infrequently results in societal structures that are even less friendly to women and other disenfranchised members of the society. Unfortunately, the authors of this text prescribe self-determination but present no real responses to this quandary. That they should not do so, however, is unsurprising given that this issue continues to be problematic in other development efforts in other parts of the world as well. It is hard to imagine, for example, that the microfinance industry would have grown as large as it has in Bangladesh if aid organizations asked local communities whether women or men should receive the vast majority of loans.

Although not resolving this fundamental paradox of development work, the book’s next section does present five case histories meant to offer some

hope that development in the Pacific Islands can be sustainable ecologically, economically, and socially. These studies regard national parks in Samoa, sustainable forestry in the Solomon Islands, ecotourism, sustainable agriculture, and sustainable urban areas within the region. Regrettably, severe sustainability problems of their own beset most of these cases. In the first case, for example, two out of the three national parks created in Samoa are largely misunderstood by local villagers and provide little to sustain local livelihoods. The third national park followed a more participatory process with a more equal focus on local livelihoods as well as conservation but, again, the results were not definitively positive.

Given the inconclusiveness of the positive cases, one could be pardoned for feeling pessimistic about the possibilities for sustainable development in the Pacific Islands context. Overton and Scheyvens, however, do try to draw some themes from the chapters that might aid in pushing the sustainability agenda further in this region.

The first theme is that Pacific Islanders not be relegated to a passive position but, rather, take the lead in creating sustainable-development strategies. This is a statement that nobody would disagree with in a public setting. In action, though, we see many development organizations attempting to impose a certain set of universalistic principles on development efforts despite the objections of the "recipients." As mentioned earlier, the microfinance agenda seeks to both eliminate poverty and empower women even when it disrupts traditional culture. It seems, therefore, a bit too easy to simply state that participatory policy making is the rule for effective policy. The balance between prescriptive versus participatory policy is probably, however, too sensitive to be discussed frankly in most development circles. What is clear, though, is that participation is an appropriate antidote to top-down development efforts that have made some really big mistakes.

The second theme this book puts forth is the ability of local participants to derive a livelihood from sustainable-development activities. It is not the global issues that concern those who are living in poverty but rather the local manifestations of those global issues that serve as a point of contact. Progressive environmental organizations like Conservation International (their Ecomaya project in Guatemala serves as a compelling example of the link between local livelihood and conservation) recognize that while conserving resources is important, if environmental efforts are to ever be seen as more than the agenda of the wealthy, the efforts must recognize the need for sustainable livelihoods of those who live in or near the earth's biodiversity hot spots.

Third, the authors argue that sovereignty in terms of land control as well as self-governance are important to sustainable development in the Pacific

Islands region. They recommend that the development effort focus less on specific projects managed by development workers from abroad and more on continued efforts that, while initially facilitated by development workers, are managed and directed by well-trained local people.

Finally, the authors recommend that there is much to be learned by letting go of the modernist approach to development, which views development as a linear progression that excludes learning lessons from the past. In doing so, Overton and Scheyvens do not present themselves as melancholy romantics longing for the “good old days.” Instead, they question the very definition of development as simple increases in material wealth (accepted by many) and suggest that we reexamine what progress has meant to Pacific Islanders in past generations to see if there are not lessons that can and should be applied to current development efforts.

For those interested in international development, it is not clear that the lessons derived from this set of Pacific Islands cases go very far in enhancing the theoretical development framework. What these authors have done, however, is twofold. First, they make a convincing case that localizing the definition of sustainable development matters. And, that it matters a lot! By beginning to probe the social, economic, and environmental context of the Pacific Islands region the authors abundantly demonstrate that all of the vision and skills that allowed these islanders to navigate the currents, winds, and waves of the vast Pacific will again be required if sustainable livelihoods are to continue.

In addition to making the case for localization, this book makes an important contribution by initiating the policy discussion for island nations that have much in common culturally, economically, and environmentally. Such a foundation is an important contribution for all who will be tasked with creating local, national, and regional policy and action initiatives in the Pacific Islands community.