

INTRODUCTION

Eilon Schwartz, Orly Ronen, and Ilana Goldberg

The Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership

Background

Agenda 21 is the seminal document of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the “Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit”. Recognizing the interdependence of economic, social and environmental issues, and the global environmental destruction which has reached unprecedented proportions as a result of the decoupling of the three, Agenda 21 calls for a change in the fundamental direction of development, towards a sustainable policy. Sustainability, the organizing principle of Agenda 21, demands that development decisions be evaluated according to their effects on fellow world citizens, and on future generations. Agenda 21 argues forcefully that present trends are simply not sustainable, and that development can no longer continue without considering its social and environmental effects in the present and future. Agenda 21 outlines a bold strategy for societal change, which recognizes that environmental degradation is embedded in social issues. Distributive justice, improved education, and participatory democracy are all central to Agenda 21’s pioneering approach.

Israel, as one of 178 countries that signed Agenda 21, committed itself to submit a 10-year summary of progress towards a sustainable agenda in Israel, to be prepared for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, to be held in Johannesburg in August 2002. The following pages are a shadow report to that document—a report prepared by Israeli social and environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—monitoring the progress towards sustainability by successive Israeli governments over the last decade. The report itself in many ways exemplifies one of the few positive trends in Israeli society towards sustainability since Rio. There has been unprecedented growth over the last decade in the number and range of non-governmental organizations active in Israeli society. Indicative of this growth

is the fact that whereas in 1992, only one Israeli NGO representative participated in the Rio Earth Summit, this year in Johannesburg a coalition representing 15 NGOs will be present, to contribute their voice to global civil society's demand for progress on implementation of Agenda 21. This development demonstrates not only the dramatic growth of the Israeli environmental movement, but also the move to an environmentalism based on a sustainable frame of thought, rather than simply nature preservation, or the public health paradigm.

This report represents a unique coalition of social and environmental NGOs, who came together to fulfill the role, in the spirit of Agenda 21, of full partner in advocating for sustainable policies in Israel. Each chapter is written by one or more representatives of a particular NGO, and each chapter reflects only that organization's views. Not all subjects are represented in the NGO report. Forestry, agriculture, pollution of sea water, lakes and desertification, while issues of concern to several environmental groups, are not, by and large, the most urgent priorities on the agenda of the environmental NGOs participating in this effort. Conversely, a number of topics are found in the NGO report, which can't be found in the government report. The government's omission, for example, of a significant discussion of environmental justice, or of population and consumption trends, is certainly reflective of a narrower field of vision, which isolates the issue of environmental quality from its social and economic contexts. Especially disconcerting is the governmental report's lack of attention to the distress of Israel's socio-economic periphery, including Israel's Arab ethnic minority. The rationale for the NGO report, in contrast, is premised on addressing these multiple dimensions of sustainability in its analysis of progress.

This report is pluralistic in its structure and content, often using different methodologies and reflecting different points of view. Chapters for the most part follow a similar format of looking back on trends over the last decade, critically discussing the government's report on similar issues, and offering concrete policy recommendations. All contributions are united by a common goal of building a sustainable and equitable future for Israeli society, and the necessity of a vibrant civic society to achieve that goal.

Israel: A Decade of Unsustainable Development

Writing a report on a decade of Israeli progress towards sustainability is, put bluntly, a misnomer. Virtually all major indicators have moved substantially in unsustainable directions. The list is rather formidable. Greenhouse gas

emissions have doubled; air pollution levels in cities have increased, and are now recognized as a serious public health hazard; mismanagement of water resources has brought all the country's reservoirs to dangerously low levels, and water quality has severely deteriorated; biodiversity is imperiled by habitat loss and fragmentation; land-use practices and policies have devoured open spaces, in disregard of environmental planning and intelligent land-use principles; both per capita and overall solid waste generation has risen substantially. These trends have all accelerated over the past decade, due to both population growth and an overall rise in standard of living. Israel is possibly the only country in the world today with population growth rates similar to developing countries and developed country consumption rates—this in a small geographical area. Population growth in the last decade, somewhat paradoxically, was due both to mass immigration (of one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union) and a relatively high birth rate, two factors that don't often coexist in most countries. It should further be pointed out that the rise in living standard has been distributed far from equally in the population. The gap between rich and poor in Israel, a key sustainability index, has grown over the decade to one of the largest among developed nations. Environmental goods and bads are distributed unequally among different Israeli ethnic groups, with, for example, Israeli Arabs clearly suffering from environmental injustice.

The developments of the last decade coincide with a broader shift, signaling the erosion of Israel as a welfare state, and its incorporation into the global economy, dominated by market considerations. This shift has accentuated and deepened trends that might have been contained under a different system, and mitigated by different policies. Yet, as particular aspects of the burgeoning crisis reached visible proportions over the decade, public and political awareness grew on isolated issues, and changes can be seen in particular policies. The unimpeded coastal development of the 1990s has largely been curbed, due in great part to a concerted campaign by NGOs, subsequent to which the government formulated a more sustainable coastal policy document (albeit without statutory force); awareness of the need to deal more effectively with the water crisis has been achieved, even though there is yet no consensus on the sound ways to do this and no underlying environmental approach guiding these efforts; "Israel 2020," a strategic master plan for the 21st century, exemplifies an integrated approach to transport and land uses (a plan which nevertheless lacks statutory force and which was never implemented); the closure of numerous pirate waste dumps and consolidation of waste sites into a few landfills; the legislation of a beverage container deposit law affords the public a role in recycling.

However, while attempts to deal with acute manifestations of the growing crisis are of course necessary, they are ultimately meaningless without an acknowledgement that there is something fundamentally wrong with our current approach, and the need for a different direction.

Governmental Policies of Unsustainable Development

Monitoring sustainability in Israeli government policy is a misnomer not simply because Israel has had a decade of unsustainable development. More dramatically, it is a misnomer because the very word is not in the lexicon of public policy. Historically, Israeli society has cultivated an ethos of development as a driving passion associated with nation-building. Extensive exploitation of land resources, harvesting all of the water resources to support a large agricultural sector, the building of housings and settlements to absorb successive waves of immigration, and the dispersal of the population throughout the country were universally regarded as foundations for a secure and prosperous future. Despite the current trends of environmental degradation, signaling that a new direction is now required, a revised conception of development has neither challenged, nor been integrated into, the predominant ethos of Israeli society.

With the exception of professionals in the Ministry of the Environment (and even there sustainability is defined as a subtopic in the larger agenda of the ministry) one would be hard-pressed to find decision-makers who are even aware that the Israeli government is committed to sustainability being the prism through which societal progress is to be assessed. Government continues to adhere to a model of environmentalism based on the idea that it is up to the Ministry of the Environment to mitigate the environmental damage done by development, rather than the notion that development needs to be evaluated according to the principles of sustainability. The old model sees the Ministry of the Environment as largely a necessary nuisance, and relates accordingly. The new model, presently being developed particularly in European countries, sees social and environmental interests as defining the direction of economic progress. As the weakest of the government ministries, there is simply no chance that the Ministry of the Environment can hold its weight against the larger ministries, policing enforcement against conflicting governmental and private interests.

The result has led us to where we are today. A series of themes return again and again in the various chapters, demonstrating that unsustainable development is in fact government policy.

Market (dis)incentives. Repeatedly, we see in the Shadow Report that government financially rewards unsustainable policies, and discourages sustainable ones. The designated price of landfilling mixed waste is less than half the price of material recovery; the price of electricity for Israeli residential consumers is less than half the price paid in Denmark, and substantially lower than other Western European countries; car upkeep allowances given by employers to workers encourage and/or subsidize car use; water use in the agricultural and industrial sectors is heavily subsidized and water costs generally do not reflect externalities; diesel fuels are priced at quarter the cost of cleaner petrol fuels. Pricing that reflects the societal and environmental cost of goods and bads is essential for sustainable policy. Green taxes, where damaging environmental behaviors are taxed, rather than productive work, are becoming an important tool in European sustainable policy.

Poor enforcement records of existing laws. Even though Israel has developed a progressive set of environmental laws and regulations, these have not yet been translated into public policy and specific standards. Weak records of enforcement of environmental legislation contribute to the ineffectiveness of environmental policies and the public perception that “pollution pays.”

Short-term thinking. Again and again, short-term interests win out against long-term responsibility. No plans currently exist for phasing out the use of coal in power plants, despite the proven harm of burning coal, and the fact that advanced industrial nations generally are reducing their coal dependency. The red-line of the Kinneret reservoir (Lake of Galilee) is lowered year after year to satisfy current water consumption needs, in disregard of the danger of deterioration in water quality for the entire supply that over-pumping is expected to cause.

Unreflectively adopting unsustainable public works projects. Projects which clearly are the antithesis of sustainable policy are nevertheless adopted, without any significant awareness other than from the Ministry of the Environment that there is something fundamentally wrong with such directions. Plans for a new coal-fired powerplant in Ashkelon are going forward, despite opposition by environmental groups as well as two government ministries; the 8-lane, 300 km long Superhighway #6 (The Trans-Israel Highway) was approved, and parts of it built, without an adequate assessment of environmentally and socially sustainable transport alternatives.

Isolated issues rather than a coherent whole. Because there is no sustainability perspective, issues are seen as isolated from one another. For one example, the water crisis continues to be seen as disconnected from issues of climate change. Desalinization, ostensibly a partial solution to the crisis, demands massive use of electricity. Meanwhile, to keep up with the growing demand for electricity to which desalinization will contribute, a new coal-burning power station is proposed, rather than an investment in sustainable energy sources.

Ignoring the larger geographical context. Israeli responsibility to the larger global community is not a concern: Israel has not taken any practical or policy measures to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, as part of the global effort to mitigate global warming and climate change; despite its commitment to phasing out production of methyl bromide, an ozone-depleting substance, Israel has failed to ratify the amendment to the Montreal protocol barring trade of methyl-bromide with non-parties to the agreement. It is particularly shocking in this regard that there is no discussion in the Governmental Report of our relationship with our Arab neighbors, in particular the Palestinians. Agenda 21 makes very clear that sustainability needs to be a global agenda, and that our fates are intricately linked.

Trends dictate policy. Israeli policy-makers view consumption patterns and lifestyle choices as inevitabilities that should be anticipated and accommodated, not altered through education, raising awareness or training. While the water crisis has reached such proportions that it is becoming increasingly clear that the public needs to change its habits, no similar conclusions have been reached on the host of other issues that together make our present lifestyle unsustainable. Conservation of energy has not been defined as a goal or priority, despite its potential for curbing greenhouse gas emissions; waste disposal and recycling techniques are outdated and local authorities ignore the potential of public participation in waste management; transport policy treats car-dependency as a given, with little investment or planning for viable mass transit alternatives. In fact, when asked, and given the proper mechanisms, the public has shown great willingness to change its behaviors. Witness the demand for trains, or the voluntary recycling of plastic bottles. There is no education of the public towards more sustainable lifestyles. In the schools, education for sustainability is virtually non-existent as well.

Lack of Public Participation/Lack of Transparency. While sustainability demands heightened citizen involvement, government, continuing to see sustainability through the prism of mitigation of environmental damage, sees public participation largely as a nuisance, slowing down economic growth. A relatively advanced freedom of information law has been passed, but for the large part has yet to be internalized by government workers. The problem is that this law does not place responsibility on the government to inform citizens about the condition of the environment, but merely provides access to citizens who already know what information they are seeking, if such information exists. Because Israel lacks sufficient mechanisms for public involvement in decision-making, information channels to the public remain underutilized and ineffective. In fact, the government, perpetuates a paternalistic attitude toward the citizenry, in the belief that it knows best how to gauge society's needs and how to direct planning. The recent passing of the amendment to the Planning and Building Law, which authorizes a committee whose sole purpose is the rapid approval of plans for National Infrastructures, curtailing the time allowed for objections and environmental impact assessments, epitomizes the unsustainable direction of public policy with regard to citizen participation. Such regressive legislation contributes to the erosion of Israel's planning institutions by circumventing the normal planning process.

Despite the above, some positive developments should be noted. A potentially important innovation in the legislature is the appointment by law of a Commissioner for Future Generations as a parliamentary post who has the discretion to comment on legislation that has implications for sustainability. While it is still too early to judge if the post of Commissioner will become a significant tool for safeguarding the public good and intergenerational rights, the definition of the role is an indicator of the positive directions and fresh thinking Israel must embrace. It should be pointed out, however, that even when public policy is headed in sustainable directions as, for example, in the ambitious strategic masterplan for the 21st century "Israel 2020," short-term economic interests of maximizing profit are quite successful at derailing such efforts, at the expense of the public good. The transformation of Israel's choice public beaches over the past decade into prime real-estate (before the public outcry that helped restrain this trend) is another case in point. Similarly, the forces of economic globalization and market policy create a momentum of their own, mobilizing capital and energies in directions that are contrary to the interests of environmental and social justice, and giving further impetus to the government's policy of unsustainable development.

Where to from here?

Obviously the first step is the true adoption of Agenda 21 as the guiding principle towards societal progress. Without that, government will continue to search for isolated sustainable actions to prove their commitment to sustainability, within the broader context of an unsustainable development policy. Each chapter in the NGO report outlines what a sustainable development policy might look like in their subject area, spelled out in concrete policy recommendations and targets. As Agenda 21 argues, a key component in building public support and resisting narrow interests that undermine the public good, is transparency in information and decision-making, inviting the public to participate actively in the process.

Simultaneous with a change of policy and its process, must come a change in educational policy. A commitment to sustainability is a commitment to future generations. The public, and particularly the young, must be engaged in being critical of the lifestyles that we choose, and their implications for ourselves, our neighbors near and far, and our children. Ultimately, we need to envision a different path to progress, a process which engages our poets and artists no less than our scientists and policy-makers.

The NGOs will continue to play a central role in moving the sustainability agenda forward. We will continue to lobby, to oppose unsustainable paths, and to advocate for sustainable ones. We shall continue to demand participation in decision-making, and to demand access to the information necessary to make informed and responsible decisions. We shall fight narrow interests which often hijack the public good, and we shall demand policy for the benefit of all Israelis, and those of future generations. We shall continue to turn to the public, to build an ever-growing constituency which supports our efforts, and which makes it clear to politicians that sustainability is not only the right thing to do, but also the popular one. And we shall continue to find partners in government, working together for the common good. Local Agenda 21 recognizes the essential need of the third sector—NGOs—for the successful workings of democracy, and we are proud of our role in building a sustainable future for all of us.