The Green State

Sustainability and the power of purchase

Kevin Morgan

Introduction

Nothing has done more to spark new imaginaries of local and regional development in the past generation than the notion of “sustainability”. Despite its fuzziness as a concept, or perhaps because of it, the principle of sustainable development has resonated around the globe, being equally applicable in the global North as it is in the global South. Indeed, if there is one grand narrative that has the scale and scope to compete with neo-liberalism, it is surely sustainable development, which is still a relatively new idea in terms of mainstream politics.

By comparison, the neo-liberal narrative has both a longer lineage and a narrower focus, concerned as it is to substitute the market for the state wherever it is profitable to do so. Whatever its shortcomings, the neo-liberal narrative has dominated the intellectual imagination of elites for many years, shaping the way they viewed and valued the world, be it economy, society or nature.

But with the credit crunch climacteric triggered by a fatal amalgam of financial greed and light touch regulation the political credentials of the neo-liberal narrative have been seriously damaged, at least for the moment, spawning new opportunities for alternative narratives that view and value things differently. Will the sustainable development narrative fill this vacuum or will the neo-liberal narrative reinvent itself after a period of contrition?

The answer will depend on a whole series of imponderables, not least the influence of the Green State – that is, a polity that strives to take sustainability seriously. To explore these issues in more depth the chapter is structured as follows: section two argues that, notwithstanding its fuzziness, sustainability can be regarded as a new developmental narrative because it brings with it a new set of values; section three explores the return of the state, and the prospects for a “green” state; and section four draws on the above arguments to explore the world of public food provisioning, a litmus test of sustainability.

From needs to capabilities: sustainability as a new developmental narrative

As a concept that embraces economy and society as well as the environment, it is worth remembering that sustainable development is a relative newcomer to mainstream political debate. Though it had some currency in the
environmental movement, the concept was introduced to an international audience by the pioneering Brundtland Report in 1987. This is the source of the celebrated definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987: 43).

In the Brundtland conception, this definition contained two key concepts: (1) the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and (2) the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs. While the concepts of social needs, ecological limits and inter-generational equity commanded most attention, the Brundtland Report contained equally strong messages about democratic governance, calling for greater public participation and more devolved decision-making in resource management. But the strongest message of all concerned the “quality of growth” because:

Sustainable development involves more than growth. It requires a change in the content of growth, to make it less material- and energy-intensive and more equitable in its impact. These changes are required in all countries as part of a package of measures to maintain the stock of ecological capital, to improve the distribution of income, and to reduce the degree of vulnerability to economic crises.

(WCED 1987)

A perennial criticism of the Brundtland Report is that its definition of sustainable development is too vague to be of any practical benefit. But this is to miss the point because it is essentially “a normative standard that serves as a meta-objective for policy” (Meadowcroft 2007: 307). Like other normative concepts – democracy and justice, for example – the concept of sustainable development will mean different things in different places because it is the concrete context that will determine the weight given to the social, economic and ecological dimensions of the concept. As a context-dependent concept, sustainable development needs to be understood as a spatial concept because it is grounded in the material circumstances of people and place, which is why local and regional context is so important to the politics of sustainability.

Since the concept was launched, some interpretations have given more weight to the environmental dimension, while others cleaved to the social dimension. Proponents of ecological modernization, for example, claim that capitalism can be rendered ever more sustainable through a progressive ‘greening’ process that helps to secure the twin goals of economic growth and environmental protection, a position that is totally at odds with “the radical green demand for a fundamental restructuring of the market economy and the liberal democratic state” (Carter 2007: 227). More radical schools of thought incline to a post-materialist interpretation of sustainable development, challenging the restless pursuit of consumption for its own sake and asking whether growth is actually necessary for prosperity (Jackson 2009).

However, the most important critique of the Brundtland conception albeit a sympathetic critique came from Amartya Sen, the architect of the capabilities approach to development. Although he welcomed the new prominence given to the idea of sustainable development, Sen asked whether the conception of human beings implicit in it is sufficiently capacious:

Certainly, people have ‘needs’, but they also have values, and, in particular, they cherish their ability to reason, appraise, act and participate. Seeing people in terms only of their needs may give us a rather meagre view of humanity.

(Sen 2004)
Sen's capabilities approach harbours radical implications for development studies, which have a tendency to conflate ends and means, reducing human development to economic growth (Morgan 2004). The capabilities approach enriches our understanding of development, particularly as regards the social dimension, because it defines the expansion of human freedom as both the primary end and the principal means of development. Sen identifies a number of substantive freedoms that are intrinsically significant ends in themselves, and not merely of instrumental significance for economic growth, though they are important in that respect as well. These substantive freedoms include “elementary capabilities like being able to avoid such deprivations as starvation, under-nourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality, as well as the freedoms that are associated with being literate and numerate, enjoying political participation and uncensored speech and so on” (Sen 1999: 36).

The capabilities perspective, with its stress on the social dimension of sustainability, is also a good antidote to partial definitions of sustainable development – as when human beings are considered to be no more than their living standards or when sustainability is reduced to mere environmentalism. When the partial view of Brundtland is supplemented with the broader perspective of Sen, we have the makings of a more capacious, more judicious conception of sustainable development – a conception that requires human beings to be actively involved in shaping their own destiny, a process that can be fostered by a state that takes sustainability seriously.

**The return of the state?**

The ‘return of the state’ was perhaps the only predictable aspect of the credit crunch crisis of 2008/09. Having been defined as part of the problem for so many years by the architects of neo-liberalism, the state was suddenly enrolled for crisis management duties, especially to bail out the banks and socialize their losses. But this is wholly consistent with the neo-liberal narrative, where the state is allotted a limited ‘nightwatchman’ role other than in times of crisis, when it is called upon to restore order. The neo-liberal state, in other words, tends to be much more active in practice than it is in theory (Harvey 2005).

The ‘return of the state’ has to be qualified in one important respect because, in many ways, it never really disappeared – at least not in practice. Even in the US, where anti-state ideology is most rife, the actual role of the state – federal, state and local – has always been greater than neo-liberal ideology is prepared to acknowledge.

If neo-liberalism failed to roll-back the state as much as it might have desired, it was spectacularly successful in devaluing the state and demeaning the public realm. As a result it created the impression that the national state has been rendered relatively powerless by globalization, which would penalize states that stepped outside the narrow parameters of the neo-liberal consensus. These (alleged) external pressures on the state were paralleled by very real internal pressures, particularly when the public sector was subjected to the narrow commercial logic of marketization, what one critic described as a Kulturkampf against the very notion of service and citizenship, the hallmarks of the public realm (Marquand 2004).

This is the political context in which the ‘return of the state’ is taking place, a process that began not with the credit crunch crisis but, rather, with the climate change crisis. As the greatest market failure of all time, the climate change crisis created a new ecological vocation for the state (Stern 2006). Where neo-liberals want to shrink the state, ecologists want to transform it into a Green State. Only the state, they argue, has the systemic capacity to induce more sustainable forms of production, consumption and regulation; and only states, especially when acting in concert,
can counter the ecological damage wrought by globalization (Eckersley 2004). Like sustainable development, the Green State is a normative concept because it is essential, in this view, to have a conception of what the state ought to be doing: it is, in other words, “a green ideal or vision of what a ‘good state’ might look like” (Eckersley 2005: 160).

This normative turn in state theory chimes with the compelling philosophical argument of Martha Nussbaum, who argues that states should be held responsible for furnishing the social basis for key human capabilities, and she identifies ten universally applicable capabilities to which all men and women have a right “by virtue of being human” (Nussbaum 2000: 100). This normative-based capability approach rejects the utilitarian preference-based approach of neo-classical economic theory because of its desiccated conception of human beings. As Nussbaum says, “we have to grapple with the sad fact that contemporary economics has not yet put itself onto the map of conceptually respectable theories of human action” (Nussbaum 2000: 122).

As the state plays such a big role in these ecological and capability theories, it is surprising that so little attention is paid to its skills and powers. All the evidence suggests that the state’s political capacity – to regulate the economy, deliver public services and procure goods and services, for example – needs to be substantially enhanced if it is to fashion more sustainable forms of development. The following section explores this theme of state capacity with respect to public food provisioning, a theme that is germane to the concerns of this chapter in two ways. First, the prosaic world of public food provisioning – in schools, hospitals, care homes, prisons and the like – is an intrinsically significant end in itself from a capability perspective. Second, the barriers to public food provisioning are a microcosm of a larger political paradox, which is that states often fail to deploy one of the greatest powers at their disposal – the power of purchase.

**Public food provisioning: promoting sustainability through the power of purchase**

States have a number of powers at their disposal to promote sustainable development, the most important of which are the powers of taxation, regulation and procurement. Of these, the power of purchase tends to be the most neglected, not least because it is often perceived as a lowly ‘back office’ function, which is truly paradoxical since public procurement is potentially one of the most powerful levers for effecting behavioural change among its private sector suppliers. The public sector constitutes an enormous market in virtually every country, accounting for up to 16 per cent of GDP in developed countries and as much as 20 per cent of GDP in developing countries. Although the power of purchase has been deployed for strategic ends usually for military purposes the story of public procurement is largely a tale of untapped potential (Morgan 2008a).

Politicians are belatedly waking up to this untapped potential because many states are turning to the power of purchase to promote their pet projects, including sustainable development. Although many sectors have a special significance in the sustainability debate – especially high CO₂-emitting sectors like energy and transport, for example – the agri-food sector has a unique status despite the neo-liberal belief that it is just like any other “industry”. Quite apart from its umbilical link with nature, the exceptionalism of the agri-food sector stems from the fact that we ingest its products. Food is therefore vital to human health and well-being in a way that other sectors are not, and this is the reason why every state attaches such profound significance to it. Because of its unique role in human reproduction, food is the ultimate index of our capacity to care for ourselves, for others and for nature (Morgan 2008b).

The agri-food sector looms large in the sustainability debate because green campaigners
believe it has the potential to offer multiple dividends:

- access to nutritious food is vitally important to human health and well-being – a health dividend;
- locally procured food can help to fashion new markets for small farmers, growers and producers – a local economic dividend;
- more sustainable food chains help to contain climate change by reducing the carbon footprint of the agri-food sector – an ecological dividend;
- more localized food chains allow consumers to reconnect with producers – a cultural dividend;
- less intensive and more welfare-conscious agri-food systems promote animal welfare – an ethical dividend;
- more fairly traded food chains enable consumers in the global north to express their solidarity with producers in the global south – a political dividend (Morgan 2008b).

Some or all of these dividends are being sought by local food campaigns in Europe and North America. Although some of these campaigns have attracted criticism for catering exclusively for an elite of high-income, quality-conscious consumers, and for privileging the local/green agenda over the global/fair agenda, these are not irredeemable features of the local food movement (Morgan 2008b). As we will see, public food reformers in Europe have consciously tried to overcome these problems by focusing on better food for all, particularly in school canteens, and by combining locally produced seasonal food with globally sourced, fairly traded food (Morgan and Sonnino 2008).

Local food movements are not confined to the rich countries of the global North, though the latter dominate the “alternative food” debates in the developed countries. To get a more textured understanding of local food movements, let us examine public food reform in four countries which have been at the forefront of the debate.

**Values for money: public food provisioning in Europe**

School food reformers have been in the vanguard of public food reform in Europe largely because a moral panic about childhood obesity focused political attention on the diets of children. One of the key aims of school food reformers has been to persuade local authorities to serve healthier school meals by using fresh, locally produced ingredients. However, this seemingly simple and unpretentious ambition encountered a whole series of regulatory barriers, the most important of which was EU public procurement regulations that prohibited the explicit use of local food clauses in public sector catering contracts. Although these regulations applied equally throughout the EU, member states interpreted them very differently. Perhaps the biggest contrast of all was between Italy and the UK, arguably the opposite ends of the food culture spectrum in Europe. To understand these radically different interpretations of common EU regulations, we have to understand the political values that govern the procurement process as well as the cultural values that attach to food in Italy and the UK.

The quality of school food in the UK declined precipitously after the neo-liberal reforms of the Thatcher governments in the 1980s. These reforms transformed the school food service from a compulsory national subsidized service for all children to a discretionary local service. The most debilitating part of these reforms was the abolition of nutritional standards and the opening up of public contracts to private sector competition under a process called compulsory competitive tendering. While these provisions succeeded in creating a new low-cost catering culture, they also exacted a heavy toll on the quality of the food and the skills of the caterers.
Nothing less than a school food revolution is now underway in the UK, following a popular backlash against the neo-liberal reforms. While new and demanding nutritional standards were introduced by the Labour government in 2006, catering managers are struggling to overcome a public procurement culture in which low cost was allowed to masquerade as best value (Morgan and Sonnino 2008).

If public sector practices are slow to change, the political rhetoric around public procurement has been transformed because of its potential for promoting more sustainable forms of development. Launching a new public sector food procurement initiative, the sponsoring department said:

If we are what we eat, then public sector food purchasers help shape the lives of millions of people. In hospitals, schools, prisons and canteens around the country, good food helps maintain good health, promoting healing rates and improve concentration and behaviour. But sustainable food procurement isn’t just about better nutrition. It’s about where the food comes from, how it’s produced and transported, and where it ends up. It’s about food quality, safety and choice. Most of all, it’s about defining best value in its broadest sense.

(Defra 2003)

As well as illustrating the multi-functional nature of sustainability, this statement also illustrates how far the vision of the state has changed from the neo-liberal heyday of Thatcherism, when lowest cost was the highest goal. The injunction to define ‘best value in its broadest sense’ was a clear indictment of the old procurement culture, where it was defined very narrowly.

Italian public authorities have always worked with a much broader understanding of ‘best value’ because food is imbued with deep cultural values and strong territorial associations given the fact that Italy, unlike the UK, had maintained the links between products and places. Far from being a symptom of primordial tradition, this food culture has been continuously fashioned by modern state interventions designed to help public bodies to purchase high-quality local food. While the UK was abolishing nutritional standards in the 1980s, Italy was promoting the Mediteranean diet into its public catering system. This was reinforced by Finance Law 488 (1999) which encouraged schools and hospitals to utilize ‘organic, typical and traditional products as well as those from denominated areas’. The City of Rome, one of the leading school food services in Italy, now seeks ‘guaranteed freshness’ from its suppliers, rewarding them for abbreviating the time and space between harvesting and consumption (Morgan and Sonnino 2008).

The interplay between culture and politics has allowed public bodies in Italy to practise local food procurement without falling foul of EU procurement regulations. Although it is illegal to specify local products that can only be supplied by local producers (because this offends the EU principle of non-discrimination), it is possible to use certain quality marks – such as fresh, seasonal, organic, certified – that allow public bodies to purchase local food in all but name. These EU regulations worked to the advantage of Italy, with its strong links between produce and place, and against the UK, with its placeless foodscape.

The fact that Italy and the UK interpreted EU procurement regulations in such different ways clearly reflected their respective food cultures – local and seasonal in the former, placeless and processed in the latter. But contrasting food cultures are only part of the explanation. Equally important was the fact that state power was utilized in Italy to fashion markets, in this case for high-quality certified products; while in the UK it was used to mimic markets, by forcing public sector managers to compete with the private sector on the basis of price. Fashioning markets
through national state action in the Italian case had the effect of creating sub-national economic development opportunities for local and regional producer associations.

Even so, the school food revolution in the UK proves that neither food culture nor public policy is set in aspic; on the contrary, both can be rendered more sustainable if the power of purchase reflects a range of values rather than a single, narrowly conceived economic metric.

**Fome Zero: public food provisioning in Brazil**

Brazil has attracted enormous international attention in recent years for its innovative state policies to reduce hunger and enhance food security. *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger) is the umbrella strategy for more than 30 national programmes designed to combat the symptoms and causes of hunger in the largest economy in Latin America. Launched in 2003, Fome Zero was the social policy flagship of President Lula’s Workers’ Party government, which was elected in 2002. While some programmes were already established, the Lula government improved their quality, extended their reach and added some radically new ones. Three of the most significant programmes are the following (Rocha 2009).

*Bolsa Familia*: created in 2003, the Bolsa Família (Family Grant) programme is a highly targeted, conditional cash-transfer scheme and it is the centre-piece of the government’s social policy in terms of its coverage and its impact on poverty. By 2007 it was reaching all of its target of 11.1 million families, equivalent to 45 million people or a quarter of the total population. With 76 per cent of these transfers devoted to food, the programme helps poor families to improve their diets.

*Programa Nacional de Alimentacao Escolar*: the PNAE (National School Meals Programme) was launched in 1955, giving Brazil one of the first national school food systems in the developing world, and over 36 million children are covered today. As federal funding only covers the cost of the food, this programme relies on partnerships with municipal governments, which have to meet the costs of personnel and infrastructure. Since 2001 a new emphasis has been placed upon basic foods (such as fresh fruits and vegetables) and the promotion of local food as opposed to processed food.

*Programa de Aquisicao de Alimentos*: the PAA (Food Procurement Programme) was launched as a new federal programme in 2003 to assist the poorest farmers by purchasing directly from them. The publicly purchased products help to build food stocks that are utilized in state food programmes, such as school meals or food banks. PAA is present in over 3,500 municipalities throughout the country and in 2006 it helped to maintain the income of more than 11,000 small farmers. The programme also helps to reduce local price fluctuations by building food stocks, providing stability for farmers to form cooperatives and associations, which is one of the requirements of PAA support.

To be effective, these federal programmes require a politically committed local government partner, which is especially important for a successful school meals programme because the council has to share the local delivery costs and animate the service.

There is no better example of a committed local partner than Belo Horizonte, the fourth largest city in Brazil and the capital of Minas Gerais state. With the election of Patrus Ananias as mayor in 1993, the city government declared food to be a right of citizenship, and Belo launched a whole series of food security programmes with citizen groups in civil society, making the city a beacon of urban food security in Brazil (Rocha 2001). In a food-insecure world, Belo is also extolled as a model for other countries, developed as well as developing, because it is seen as “the city that ended hunger” (Lappe 2009). Belo’s pioneering role in promoting urban food security was officially recognized when its mayor, Patrus Ananias, was promoted to the
federal government as Minister for Social Development and Fight Against Hunger.

These national and local food security strategies suggest one thing above all – that politics matters. Without the Workers’ Party government, federally in Brazil and locally in Belo, the principle of food security would never have received such robust political support. The big question surrounding Fome Zero concerns its political sustainability because President Lula, with whom it is closely associated, has to retire after two terms despite his personal popularity. Food policy experts like Cecilia Rocha believe that the strategy will outlive the Lula government because food citizenship has taken root in civil society and because food security has been institutionalized, rendering it the responsibility of the state rather than of governments (Rocha 2009).

Home grown: public food provisioning in Ghana

Ghana is to Africa what Brazil is to Latin America, which is to say a pioneer of public food provisioning. Despite occasional bouts of political instability since 1957, when it won its independence, Ghana is now considered to be one of the most stable and best governed states in Africa. Political stability furnished the most important condition for the Home Grown School Feeding initiative, a radically new development strategy that aims to secure a double dividend of health and wealth by (1) providing children with nutritious school food, and (2) creating new markets for local producers by purchasing the food locally instead of importing it from developed countries like the US in the form of food aid. However laudable it might seem, imported food aid actually undermines the indigenous agri-food sector in developing countries, making it less likely that they can feed themselves (Morgan and Sonnino 2008).

Launched in 2006 with support from the UN and the Dutch government, the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) had three national objectives: (1) to reduce hunger and malnutrition; (2) to increase school enrolment, attendance and retention, especially of girls; and (3) to boost domestic food production. Although Ghana did extremely well to get such an ambitious programme off the ground – since other African states failed to do so – the GSFP has proved to be a very steep learning curve, especially as regards governance and procurement.

To implement the programme a wholly new multi-level governance system was created at national, regional, district and community levels, a serious mistake because the new bodies had no legal mandate and co-existed with the legally constituted state institutions which kept their distance. The public procurement process has also failed to live up to expectations because it was difficult to calibrate supply and demand at a local level, not least because agriculture is dominated by small subsistence farmers, some of whom have as little as 1.6 hectares of land each. Although the agricultural sector has been growing in Ghana, its development is stymied by a combination of inefficient farming practices and poor marketing outlets for farm produce. A combination of supply-side bottlenecks, weak procurement skills and poor governance has meant that the GSFP has been more challenging than anyone envisaged.

While the UN was correct to say that the home-grown model offers a new and more sustainable development strategy for developing countries, it was wholly wrong to suggest that it could provide “quick wins” in the battle against hunger. The fate of the GSFP ought to be of concern to every developing country because, despite its modest name, it is about so much more than just school food: on the contrary, it embodies the entire drama of development in microcosm. Learning to design a home-grown school feeding system involves a whole series of other learning curves – in governance, procurement and rural development, for example. The home-grown...
model therefore needs to be understood as a learning-by-doing exercise in which the end product, the provision of nutritious food, is just one part of a much larger process (Morgan and Sonnino 2008).

Conclusions

The central argument of this chapter is that food is one of the most important prisms through which to explore local and regional development because of its unique role in human health and well-being. It was also argued that the public provision of food is a litmus test of the state’s commitment to sustainability because, insofar as it addresses human health, social justice and environmental integrity, it embodies the foundational values of sustainable development. Over and above this general point, three more specific conclusions emerge from the analysis.

First, sustainability can be regarded as a new developmental narrative to the extent that it incorporates social and economic as well as environmental values. The capability perspective helps to keep the social and economic dimensions in the frame because it identifies a set of capabilities that are essential for fully human functioning – an approach that focuses on what people are actually able to do and to be, a more compelling metric than the conventional metric of per capita income. However, sustainability will mean different things in different contexts, which is why it is important to understand it in spatial terms. The significance of spatial context–between North and South at the global level and between localities and regions at the national level–helps to explain why different people in different places produce such variable interpretations of what sustainability means for them.

Second, politics matters. State steering played a critical role in each of the country case studies – reinforcing the traditional food system in the case of Italy, reforming it in the others. The influence of the Green State will depend on its organizational capacity, its political values and, above all, the balance of power in civil society – a combination of internal and external factors that will vary from country to country.

Finally, public food provisioning strategies serve different priorities in different countries. If cultural and ecological values are the priorities of provisioning strategies in Europe, food security is the overriding priority in Brazil and Ghana. But in all these cases, the power of purchase is now informed by values that are more capacious than the neo-liberal template, where low cost masquerades as best value.

References


Further reading