

# National Environmental Planning in the Third World: Sustaining the Myths?

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**Abstract:** *The argument presented in this article is that current environmental planning perpetuates the myth that we can control the environment. Based on a number of empirical evaluations of the design, formulation and implementation of contemporary environmental plans, the article shows how these myths are perpetuated and presents, more conceptually, some recent critical discourses on the concept of planning. Fundamentally, such plans are instruments serving particular interests within aid organizations and recipient governments alike, and may as such be interpreted as discourses of power. They can succeed in setting the agenda and in tapping resources while continuing in the old mould of what is "planning" and show very few results on the ground.*

**Key words:** Environmental planning, environmental discourses, environment & development, aid and aid impact.

## 1. Introduction

Two issues in particular have influenced the way in which environmental planning has been conceptualised and hence defined in current discourse and analytical contexts.

*The first is that* the perception of nature and man-nature relationship has shifted from being one of an external relation, where nature is considered an exploitable domain, of real or potential benefit to capital (and man), but a domain in itself. The perception has shifted to an internal relationship, where nature is capital, and where capital *is* taking on a form which – in Escobar's phrase (1996, p. 47) – enters its "ecological phase". Entering this phase has certain implications, as nature *per se* is substituted for the "environment", as a particular construction of the natural world:

"Nature, when she becomes the object of politics and planning, turns into "environment".(...) It is misleading to use the two concepts interchangeably for it impedes the recognition of "environment" as a particular construction of "nature" specific to our epoch" (Sachs, 1992, p. 32).

Nature has become environment and nature, or the natural world has seen its inherent qualities fade away, opening arenas and space to numerous experts and aid organizations wishing to manage, control or plan for improved - possibly "sustainable" - natural resource management practices.

At the same time, "nature" has been subjected to a cognitive shift in which the image of the "global" has gained in importance, with its problems and threats. This requires global action to be taken, remedying the serious problems facing "planet Earth", whether in the form of loss of biodiversity,

industrial pollution, the effects of greenhouse gases or the general overexploitation of resources.

The response - globally, nationally and locally - to issues of ecological threats, misuse and overexploitation of natural resources has been to advocate the improved management of natural resources. Such management should minimize problems, hopefully restore lost equilibria and reinstate harmonious relations between man and nature that are believed to have existed in the past.

In this process, nature as an external and independently existing domain has been transformed into an overarching environmental problem that may have local causes but has global effects. In the quest for "sustainable development" the international imagination of the global has been the uniting element. With tremendous force and urgency this "global sustainable development" has called for the urgent need to establish improved *management practices*. Formulating national environmental action plans are, in this era of managerialism, seen as important instruments for achieving this.

*The second important issue* in shaping the concept of environmental planning has been the prominent role played by "planned intervention" - whether in the form of aid projects, sector support or other forms of intervention. The instrument for mediating between donors and receivers in what has been called "the development interface" is often nearly exclusively "planned intervention", whether in the form of a physical project, a programme, a policy - or a plan.

Together, the two issues of improved *management* of natural resources and *rational planning* have merged into a powerful concept that, through the daily practices of donor agencies and recipient governments alike, seeks to transform conditions of production and survival. The backcloth to this conception is a number of Western ideals and technocratic solutions. While development planning in general has faded, given its largely dubious results, national environmental planning has in recent decades come to the fore, taking the lead (and financial resources) in setting the targets and outlining the strategies for countering environmental problems in the developing world.

The next section will illustrate these problems by discussing the Tropical Forestry Action Plan, the National Environmental Action Plan as well as the Action Plan Concept contained in the United Nations International Convention to Combat Desertification. It is argued that, in their actual implementation, none of the environmental planning exercises live up to their stated ambitions and "best practices" - particularly in relation to ownership, participatory approaches, and involvement of non-State actors and stakeholders. The analysis is taken a step further. This involves assessing how environmental planning in content and substance portrays certain myths and reiterates conventional wisdom (disregarding newer results from research), thereby sustaining particular notions of the "environment" that, in turn, helps perpetuate a particular epistemology.

## 2. The Concept of Planning

Perhaps no other concept has been so closely associated with the "modernist" project than planning. To plan for, to control, to direct and to "assist" the developing world in its ambitious drive towards modernity are integral elements of this process which, since the second World War, has been one of the major transformation projects of our age. It builds on a combination of normative theory and positivism and has inherited the technocratic ideas according to which technical solutions to problems identified are available, or will have to be invented if unavailable.

To plan is to choose a development path and presupposes that change can be subjected to some control. To plan is to mobilize and economize resources to meet objectives formulated by societies and their representatives (Sachs, 1984, p. 13). The planning concept is based on the idea of rationality whereby reality can be structured and controlled, changed at will (with some external help or force) and the outcome predicted. Planning, and the application of planning techniques, is older than the current developmental era in which we find ourselves. It was part and parcel of the idea of "science-based" development of the previous centuries in the process of the industrialisation of the West. But it has also become one of the very characteristic modes of development philosophy of our age. Indeed, the concepts of planning and

management are, in the words of Escobar (1996), among the most persistent of our age:

“The concept of planning and management embody the belief that social change can be engineered and directed, produced at will. The idea that poor countries could move more or less smoothly along the path of progress through planning has always been held to be an indubitable truth by development experts. Perhaps no other concept has been so insidious, no other idea has gone so unchallenged as modern planning. The narratives of planning and management, always presented as “rational”, are essential to developers” (p. 50).

In addition, development planning - in its “modernist” ambition - has an in-built contention that it is different from what went before. It views the past as a constraining and outdated condition, of no value in itself that impedes the necessary transformation of societies towards an unquestionably better future. Together with current development discourses, the national development plan will demonstrate contemporary development’s almost overwhelming need to reinvent or erase the past. Most plans contain a curtsey to the previous plan period, a technocratic assessment of its failings as a prelude to the conclusion that this time ‘it’ll go much better’ (Crush, 1995, p. 9). And Crush continues:

“Because development is prospective, forward-looking, gazing towards the achievement of as yet unrealized states, there seems to be little point in looking back. The technocratic language of contemporary plan writing – the models, the forecasts, the projections – all laud the idea of an unmade future which can be manipulated, with the right mix of inputs and indicators, into preordained ends” (Ibid.).

Yet in Africa, as elsewhere in the developing world, the preparation of national plans is still regarded as necessary, feasible, and as a sign of modernity and sophistication. But under the influence of structural adjustment lending the focus of planning efforts has shifted away from macro-economic planning which now plays a negligible role. Instead, macro-economic planning

has been replaced by sectorial plans and strategies of which planning for the environment is a prime example.

There have been numerous exposures of failed attempts at planning. Pronounced criticism of current and past development planning efforts has given rise to remarks such as “a rather widespread disillusionment among economists, perhaps among governments, with utility of development planning” (Killick, 1981, p. 61), or the “crisis in planning” (Faber & Seers, 1972). However, planning is still with us, still regarded as an important, indeed indispensable tool for providing rational decision-making.

Criticism from within has primarily focused on increasing efforts to perfect the tools of planning, adopting participatory approaches and trying to learn from the critiques of hitherto predominant top-down approaches. While such recommendations for improving the approach to development planning are perfectly valid, most often they do not question the fundamental nature of planning as a basic tool for modernization. And, basically, they do not question the “ideal” world in which most planning efforts are conceived and designed to be implemented. Nor do they question the complexities of reality. In this line of thought, rational planning is both needed and possible if only the tools and the approaches are refined and perfected.

### 3. Current Thinking within Planning Theory

Increasingly, this approach to planning has also come under fire in the West. Neither in the West, nor in the South, is planning an uncomplicated and straightforward operation. Planning is, as mentioned above, an effort to supply structured rationality. But according to Mintzberg (1994, p. 17), this rationality is based on an illusion since it is not possible to plan for the future, to prepare for the inevitable, to preempt the undesirable nor to control the uncontrollable:

“Planning is not really defended for what it does but for what it symbolizes. Planning, identified with reason, is conceived to be the way in which intelligence is applied to social

problems. The efforts of planners are presumably better than other peoples' because they result in policy proposals that are systematic, efficient, coordinated, consistent, and rational. It is words like these that convey the superiority of planning. The virtue of planning is that it embodies universal norms or rational choice" (Ibid. p. 18-19).

Hence, for Mintzberg, planning is primarily a symbolic structure that signals the virtues of modernity but which has limited practical value. Referring to the numerous failures of planning, Mintzberg even suggests, "that the failures of planning are not peripheral or accidental but integral to its very nature" (Ibid. p. 221).

What Mintzberg fails to see, however, is that even as a symbolic construct with, perhaps, only limited *intended* practical value, planning has its consequences and impact. Plans express not only idealized rationality but also power. By means of the explicit or implicit political agendas (and arenas) introduced in the plans (or by virtue of the plans), they are expected to have obvious bearings on socio-political conflicts over, for instance, access rights to land and natural resources.

From a similar angle, Porter (1995) analyses what he calls "master metaphors" in development. These refer to the way in which metaphors about development establish "authority and provide a device for making sense, creating order and certainty" (p. 65). *Vis-à-vis* planning and project interventions:

"Affirming the master metaphors, and emboldened by the optimism of the post-war years, the classic positivist project began to unfold during the 1950s. Problems were self-evident, reducible to 'elements' and 'components', then capable of reassembly at successive stages comprising projects, comprising sectors, comprising the National Plan, according to known causal relations and manipulated in controlled and predictable ways" (p. 71).

In this way, plans came into being and lived on as not only symbolic constructs, as maintained by Mintzberg. Plans also had important roles to play in reaffirming a language of development, legitim-

ising and reinforcing the views and understandings offered from the outside, based on the rationality of the principle of "planned intervention".

However, a more general trend within planning theory has been to move from such stereotyped versions of rationality, predictability and societal action to emphasizing contextuality, participation and partnership building. Here the outcome is much more uncertain than previously considered and the political dimension is assigned an important role in which power struggles, conflict of interests and politically motivated manoeuvring are in the fore.

In this paradigmatic struggle, Healey (1996) identifies two contemporary theoretical strands. The first strand is the approach that has focused on substantive issues, "moving from material analyses of options for local economies exposed to global capitalism to concerns with culture, consciousness, community, and "placeness"". The second strand is a process-oriented approach that explores "communicative dimensions of collectively debating and deciding on matters of collective concern" (Ibid. p. 235).

Healey subscribes to the latter strand which forms part of a wider theoretical approach, labeled the "communicative turn in planning theory" or, broadly, "communicative planning" (Campbell & Fainstein, 1996; Sager, 1994; Amdam, 1995; Amdam & Veggeland, 1998). In this approach, dialogue and communicative action are closely related, and social relations, processes and values are emphasized. Conflicts are recognized as natural, even integral parts of any change in society. In this approach planning is seen as an instrument that provides opportunities for some, while threatening or eroding established power relations for others. Parallel to the ambitions of communicative planning, Friedman (1987; 1992) has developed a "bottom up" practice that may permit marginalized groups to become involved and through their direct responsibility for their choices and acts create a process of social learning and, thereby, new powerful societal forces.

While there may still be significant reservations about the whole planning concept, whether in its more orthodox or current forms, the approach to planning and its coverage has changed dramatically.

Debates on planning and the paradigmatic changes which planning theory has gone through reflect changes in other parts of development theory. Here conceptuality, ambiguity, reflexivity and diversity play a much more powerful role, replacing previous attempts to search for universal, uniform and generalized explanations of change and development.

The basic problem that will be addressed in the following, is whether current efforts within national environmental planning in developing countries learn from recent debates within planning theory and incorporate elements of the paradigmatic change discussed above. In the following, two issues will be addressed. First, the extent to which recent environmental plans or strategic frameworks, supported by multilateral organizations, have departed from more orthodox views on planning, effectively incorporating issues of participation, ownership and stakeholder analysis as well as institutional assessments. Furthermore, to assess whether plans and strategies have taken a process point of view and view environmental plans less as “products” or blueprints for action. Secondly, whether environmentally related plans and strategies address pertinent environmental themes and thematic problem-issues, which are more contextually based and less borne by notions of causality and generalized rationality.

#### **4. National Environmental Plans and Strategic Frameworks: The First Generation Plans**

In the past decades environmental planning in the developing world has witnessed a tremendous upsurge. Supported, in some cases directly initiated, by a diverse number of multi- and bilateral aid organizations, a plethora of plans and strategic frameworks have surfaced, the one often being replaced by the other without much ado.

In the 1980s, action plans against desertification were prepared with the assistance of the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), whereas National Conservation Strategies were supported by the World Conser-

vation Union (IUCN) and Tropical Forestry Action Plans were drafted with the backing of the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), the UNDP, and initially the World Bank. A recent trend has been the preparation of National Environmental Action Plans (NEAPs), in which the World Bank has played a key role. Since the signing of the International Desertification Convention in 1994, the preparation of another series of Action Plans to tackle global desertification and land degradation has started and in a number of countries is still in the preparatory stage. Yet another set of National Action Plans is currently being prepared as a follow-up to the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, where the Clean Development Mechanism projects require the formulation of national strategies and plans. In addition, a number of environmental strategies have been initiated and funded by bilateral aid organizations, such as USAID (Natural Resource Management Strategies), DFID (formerly ODA), DANIDA, GTZ and others.

The *Tropical Forestry Action Plans* were among the first to be introduced (conceived 1985 and initiated in 1987), in which FAO attempted to halt the deforestation process worldwide through the adoption of national action programmes (FAO, 1985; WRI, 1985; Humphreys, 1996). Drafted by foresters, the TFAPs had a very technical focus, emphasizing foresters' views on how to regenerate tropical forests. The programme used a top-down approach and, it was claimed by a number of international NGOs, mainly served the interests of multinational logging companies. The World Resources Institute continuously stressed the importance of involving local stakeholders in the process and of using participatory approaches in trying to foster local ownership. In particular the role of NGOs was stressed.

In 1991, the TFAP experienced severe difficulties in securing continued funding as several donors opted out. Behind these decisions was an important review carried out by the World Rainforest Movement and The Ecologist (Colchester & Lohmann, 1990), with funding from various sources, including the WRI. The review had scrutinized nine TFAP documents, which they had acquired with the assistance of local NGO, despite

persistent resistance from FAO itself.<sup>1</sup> The review concluded that, “on balance deforestation seems likely to accelerate under TFAP”, as “massive increases in logging” had been proposed in many national TFAPs (Colchester & Lohmann, 1990, p. 84). As to the process itself, the report claimed that the TFAP remained “a plan by foresters for promoting forestry”, using a traditional – one could add orthodox (re. the above discussion on the concept of planning) – top-down approach to planning with only marginal involvement of grassroots and NGOs.

A number of other assessments of the TFAP followed. Cort (1991), for instance, looked into how NGO involvement in TFAPs had fared. Although NGO involvement at this point had been endorsed by both FAO and the TFAP Forestry Advisers Group (driving the TFAPs), the study concluded that on a survey of 25 countries, “progress has been very modest toward participatory TFAP planning processes” (Ibid. p. 18). However, as mentioned by Cort, another problem seemed to be that:

“Overall, participation of local people and NGOs is conceived largely as a means of carrying out successful projects designed by the government with the possible assistance of donor agencies. The role of the public and NGOs in the planning process is essentially unexplored. Planning and policy analysis (...) appears to be the exclusive domain of the government where public input has little relevance” (Ibid. p. 5).

Another assessment by the WRI (Winterbottom, 1990) concluded that the TFAP programme had produced “very mixed results” and generally did not live up to expectations. At that point in time (March 1990), “seventy countries that together possess roughly 60% of the world’s remaining tropical forests have completed or started to prepare national action plans for the forestry sector...In a number of countries, the TFAP planning process has clearly lost momentum. Of the 27 countries that had initiated TFAPs as of 1986/87, only eight have formally

adopted their plans and subsequently presented them to potential donors” (Ibid., p. 9).

Currently, ten years later, the TFAPs are almost totally forgotten, shelved. They had very little impact. In his conclusion, Winterbottom summarized the experience from this first generation of environmental planning as follows:

“to date the planning process has essentially been an extension of the development assistance planning and negotiation, in which the only legitimate players are aid agencies and national governments.(...)The TFAP was intended to focus on strategies and priority actions. However, in many cases, national TFAPs quickly ballooned into a large collection of project proposals, without sufficient reference to a coherent strategy and to priorities” (p. 25).

It could be added, however, that efforts to perfect the tools of environmental planning, a common characteristic of aid or “planned intervention” generally, risk achieving little. The adoption, at a more profound level, of the elements of “communicative planning” risk achieving little as long as the more fundamental issues related to the paradigmatic changes and challenges described above are not fully realized, conceptualized and incorporated into planning thinking. The TFAP exercise has shown that certain interests are favoured at the expense of others – in this case the alleged advantage of logging firms over target beneficiary groups living off the forest resources. Yet power and conflict are not seen as natural elements of environmental planning. The way that TAP environmental planning opens up new arenas and is enmeshed in political conflicts is not regarded as a constitutive element of planning. Instead, planning continues to be viewed as a neutral instrument working in harmonious socio-economic contexts. In this way, the myths about the virtues of planning still prevail. In sum, the first generation TFAPs did not reach beyond the orthodoxy of environmental planning.

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<sup>1</sup> “Although many of these plans have not been made publicly available – lack of freedom of information remains a persistent problem of the TFAP process – diligent NGOs have managed to secure copies of some of them. It is thus now possible to evaluate more accurately how the TFAP process is likely to affect tropical forests” (Colchester & Lohmann, 1990, p. 8).

## 5. The Second Generation of Environmental Planning: The NEAPs

Apart from the TFAPs of the 1980s, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) also supported a number of environmental plans and strategies, named National Conservation Strategies. Such plans were, for instance, prepared for Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. UN agencies also assisted in formulating action plans to combat widespread desertification in Africa (National Plans of Action to Combat Desertification)(Dalal-Clayton et al., 1994, p. 9 – 10; Speirs & Marcussen, 1999). Towards the end of the decade, the World Bank was re-organised with a view, *inter alia*, to enhancing its reputation as a development finance agency that took environmental problems seriously (Wade, 1997) and seized the opportunity of combining these disparate actors.

As a result, although support for planning was generally out of fashion in the World Bank, considerable human and financial resources were channeled into producing National Environmental Action Plans (NEAPs), often in collaboration with other agencies. As of 1992, after a decision by the Board of Governors of the Bank, NEAPs were required, as a condition for obtaining structural adjustment lending through the Bank system assisted in the proliferation of Bank supported or funded environmental plans.

By the mid-1990s at least 30 African countries were involved in the NEAP process. Many other countries in Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America (Lampietti & Subramanian, 1995; World Bank, 1996a) were also involved.

Considerable efforts that have been channeled into the preparation and implementation of “sustainable development strategies” and NEAPs. Yet very little is known about the results and impact of these attempts to improve the conservation and management of natural resources and to devise better policies to reduce environmental degradation. In previous work, this author has tried to remedy this shortcoming and in the following, a brief account of the results of this earlier work as well as the conclusions from internal World Bank assessments, among others, will be provided (Marcussen & Speirs, 1998a; Marcussen & Speirs, 1998b; Speirs

& Marcussen, 1998; Speirs & Marcussen, 1999; Marcussen, 1999).

The previous assessment of NEAPs and other environmental plans and strategies can be summarized according to the following two criteria. First, the extent to which the planning exercises have succeeded in “perfecting the tools” of planning, adjusting to current thinking regarding “state of the art” and best practices *i.e.* reaching beyond traditional orthodoxies in planning. Secondly, the extent to which the environmental plans have been able to address root causes of environmental degradation successfully.

### 5.1 NEAPs: Perfecting the Tools?

In setting out on its NEAP course, the World Bank went about it with its typical thoroughness. The preparations were elaborate and the ambitions high, as the NEAPs would “provide a framework for integrating environmental concerns into a country’s economic and social development, and to embed that framework in the fabric of government and peoples so that it is their process; they have ‘ownership’ of it and it is an authentically national effort” (Falloux & Talbot, 1993, p. 19). This would be “a demand driven effort” requiring “the mobilization and meaningful participation of all levels of society, government and non-governmental” (Ibid. p. 19). Furthermore, in this initial formulation and on the basis of experiences with environmental planning in several countries at the end of the 1980s, it was anticipated that NEAPs would be holistic (cross-sectoral) processes. They would focus on the underlying causes of degradation and environmental problems, including a range of social, cultural and economic factors, and leading to action with the participation of donors through an environmental investment programme (Ibid. p. 21 – 28). But the Bank particularly stressed that it would make a major effort to seek to learn from past experience. It would reach beyond traditional planning orthodoxy by actively addressing shortcomings in earlier plans and trying to avoid the pitfalls and failures of past plan efforts (Falloux et al., 1991; Greve et al., 1995). The NEAP would, in this ideal perception, avoid duplication of efforts and ensure cost effectiveness.

While having got off to a promising start, stressing an iterative process as well as built-in reflexivity. Soon after, however, when the Board of Governors decided in making NEAPs part of the conditionality package, things started going astray. The NEAPs became more and more blueprint approaches; supply driven and prepared with heavy involvement by foreign (and national) experts hired by the donors, in particular the World Bank.

According to the Bank's own internal evaluation of the NEAPs (World Bank, 1996a), the environmental plans had failed to establish national "ownership" and to ensure a "country driven" planning. Instead, the process was largely supply driven, fostered not least by the conditionalities associated with preparing a plan as a requirement for lending. Furthermore, "many governments initiated NEAPs because they thought that the plans would lead to additional funding for natural resource management and environment protection from the Bank and bilateral donors" (Ibid. p. 77-78). Despite the "action process" objective, the NEAPs were found to have frequently produced little more than "one-off events" usually in the form of a document, to have relied far too much on external consultants and to have had limited impact in terms of capacity building within governmental and non-governmental institutions.

My own research on the impact of the NEAP in Burkina Faso very much supports such views (Speirs & Marcussen, 1999). Based on field studies in Burkina Faso over the period 1995 - 1998, the general assessment of the NEAP was that the preparatory process involved mainly Bank specialists and other external consultants. They called the tune and directed a local team of specialists providing parts of, and inputs to the plan, while stakeholders, including Burkinabe NGOs, were generally excluded. A round of "participatory consultation" took place, but served more to justify the process rather than to secure the active involvement of local partners.

In terms of strengthening institutions, as Brinkerhoff (1996) pointed out in an assessment of coordination issues in environmental planning in Madagascar, the key problem is one of "capacity development", in that the administrative and technical capacities to manage environmental issues were "consistently overestimated" in the NEAP process. It is not enough to create a ministry, an environmental authority or protection agency, the heart of the matter is to ensure that the regulatory body is able to function effectively. The failure to create effective management is precisely what happened in Burkina Faso where a coordinating body, the CONAGESE (Le Comité National de Gestion de l' environnement), was established. CONAGESE was never able to impact on the planning process due to shifting and uncertain mandates and the interference of ministries and departments competing for territory and funding. The shifting requirements of donors, which led to one institutional reform process after another, increased institutional confusion and non-direction in the decision-making structures etc. etc.

Other problematic issues in connection with the formulation and implementation of the NEAP in Burkina Faso relate to the plan remaining marginal and not integrated within economic policy making processes. That the plan failed to propose priorities on a cost-benefit basis, resulted in a wide array of project proposals that were proposed to the international donor community for funding. The project proposals had little internal logic or coherence. The plan document seemed to follow a fairly standardized model and structure. The diagnosis of the environmental problems seemed to follow a common recipe and the causes and effects of environmental degradation were only rudimentarily dealt with.

In the case of Ghana, the preparations for the Ghana NEAP – in which the present author as UNDP representative took part – was initiated in 1988 in response to the negotiations going on with the Bank on the second Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP II)<sup>2</sup>. The Environmental

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<sup>2</sup> The drafting of the NEAP for Ghana is an example of how the one environmental planning initiative is replaced by another, without much reference and without much impact. For instance, for Ghana a National Conservation Strategy backed by IUCN was formulated in 1987. In the very same year a National Plan of Action to Combat Desertification was drafted, supported by UNDP/

Protection Council (EPC) that was already in existence (very similar to the CONAGESE for Burkina Faso) was given the mandate for management of the NEAP, both by the government of Ghana and the Bank.

During the consultations, NGOs and donors participated. But – as witnessed by this author – there was never any doubt that the World Bank was fundamentally in control of the process. It was also the Bank that insisted on institutionally “shaping up” the EPC through a number of capacity building projects. The Bank insisted that the EPC be under the direct control and responsibility of the Office of the Head of Government. This was in an effort to ensure that institutional rivalries and competition for turf amongst ministries and departments would be kept to a minimum. However, all this changed after the UNCED conference in Rio in 1992, when the Ghanaian government in 1993 decided on a new institutional affiliation of the EPC to a newly created ministry.

According to one assessment (Dorm-Adzobu; 1995), the new ministry had little or no jurisdiction in key areas of the national economy, such as lands and forestry, mines and energy. It did not command control mechanisms that formally belonged to the ministry. Ministerial jealousies proliferated and lack of cooperation resulted. Environmental issues became more compartmentalized than before and, generally, things slowed down or were terribly delayed. Donors started opting out in the face of this institutional confusion and the implementation of the NEAP was temporarily disrupted.

A number of reorganizations of the EPC followed, very much as had happened in Burkina Faso, as donors shifted priorities or held back funding. The NEAP, that had been seen as part of the government's efforts to give the environment a marketable environmental profile, did not receive the

backing of other segments in society: notably the industrial sector and NGOs, who felt that the NEAP was solely a government priority. Furthermore, with the lack of consistent support from government agencies, the “political support induced by donor conditionalities and external influence (did) not achieve the desired results” (Ibid. p. 25).

As with so many NEAPs in Africa, the assessment of the NEAP in Burkina Faso argued that the NEAPs were formulated and implemented in a “blueprint” fashion (Speirs & Marcussen, 1999). Nor did such an assessment basically diverge from assessments by the Bank itself (World Bank, 1996a; World Bank, 1996b; Munasinghe & Cruz, 1995).

Despite good intentions, particularly at the outset and trying to learn from past experience – and thereby attempting to reach beyond traditional environmental planning – the NEAPs, with all the expertise available to an organization with an unparalleled standing and reputation (and resources) such as the World Bank, did not succeed in perfecting the tools of planning nor of transcending established “planning orthodoxies”.

In nearly all respects the national environmental action plans have failed to live up to the ambitions and ideals set forth when the plans were designed (Falloux & Talbot, 1993 and Lampietti, Talbot & Falloux, 1995).

### **NEAPs: Addressing the Root Causes of Environmental Degradation?**

In various assessments there is a rather widespread consensus regarding the limited outcome of the NEAPs<sup>3</sup>. Their positive impact has mainly been to increase awareness of environmental problems. However, assessments of the content and substance of NEAPs have been rather few.

In a discussion of the development discourse and its construction, linked to environmental

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UNDP/UNSO, with the Environmental Protection Council as the Ghanaian responsible institution. When the NEAP started off, again the EPC was – as mentioned – in charge, and many of the Ghanaian contributors from the Desertification Plan were brought in also as authors/contributors to the NEAP. However, little or no cross-referencing between plans was made, even if thematic issues often overlap or simply duplicated.

<sup>3</sup> One of the main proponents of, and driving forces behind, the concept of national action plans, Francois Falloux, was associated with the Bank. Later, he expressed serious doubts as to whether such an approach is at all valid, given the socio-economic and political complexities of the developing world (see, for example, Francois Falloux, 2002).

degradation in Ethiopia, Hoben (1998) mentions that:

“To the extent that a particular development narrative, with its associated assumptions, becomes influential in donor community development discourse, it becomes actualized in specific development programs, projects, packages and methodologies of data collection and analysis” (Ibid. p. 123).

In this way, a particular development discourse “becomes not merely a set of beliefs or a theory, but a blueprint for action”. And he continues: “Because they (the development narratives) are institutionally and culturally situated or embedded, those cultural paradigms that are central to the interests and activities of their adherents are not easily challenged, discarded or replaced” (Ibid. see also Hoben, 1995).

Based on previously published analyses of how the root causes of environmental degradation are depicted in the NEAP for Burkina Faso (see i.a. Marcussen, 1999), a brief account of the results is presented here.

The environment-development narrative portrayed in the Burkinabe NEAP is based on an ideal perception of the harmonious relations between man and nature believed to have existed in the past. Hence it is the general objective of the NEAP - even an overarching conviction - to seek to restore such an equilibrium that has been disrupted by a number of different causes. It is, in other words, assumed that in the past a harmonious and stable relation between man and nature existed whereby the use and exploitation of natural resources happened in such a way as not to distort or go beyond any “carrying capacity”. Due mainly to man’s overexploitation of natural resources in recent decades, “paradise has been lost” but needs to be restored!

Another feature receiving particular attention in environmental planning is the narrative that tries to depict a situation of severe crisis, one that can only be remedied by the proposals suggested in the NEAP. Unless the NEAP is strongly supported by the donor community, the environmental crisis - in the form of land degradation or even

“desertification” - may prove to be irreparable or irreversible.

The data material forming the basis for assessments of the environmental crisis are, however, estimates - at best good estimates - but more often simply “guesstimates”. It seems that the more dire these guesstimates the better as when - in the case of Burkina Faso - it is stated that the costs of degrading the natural resource base have already surpassed some 20 to 25% of BNP. Such wild guesstimates are nevertheless presented as established truths. Another dire guesstimate is that, over the past decades, several thousands of hectares of arable land have been lost due to the advancing dunes or to soil degradation generally.

Many of the assumptions underlying such calamitous predictions are linked to population increase and demographic pressure in general. Population pressure may, of course, be a serious problem that also has repercussions on degradation processes. But again, this is presented as a general and unquestioned truth, for which no arguments are really needed.

While such perceptions may be in line with the World Bank’s inclination to support restrictive population policies (see, for example, Williams, 1995), in its generalized form this reasoning is out of tune with many recent research results. According to such research, the simple population pressure logic is an oversimplified version, and in some cases simply wrong, as when degradation processes are closely linked to manpower constraints (see Tiffen et al., 1994; Mortimore, 1995 and 1998; Hoben, 1998).

Other oversimplified versions of the reasons that paradise has been lost and serious overexploitation of resources ensues, occur when such degradation processes are directly linked to overgrazing, cutting vegetation for household fuel needs, the setting of bush fires or, generally, the extension of land under cultivation. All bear witness to oversimplifications and attempts to present causal relationships, easy to grasp and understand (and repeat), but not necessarily “unquestioned truth”. Rather, according to much recent research, such versions of the environment - development nexus are buttressed by orthodox views, with limited

empirical backing, portraying and presenting development narratives in order to sustain the perceptions, the conventional wisdom, the myths (for a wide array of recent research, see for example Benjaminsen, 1996, 1997a, 1997b; Behnke et al., 1993; Scoones, 1994; Leach & Mearns, 1988 and 1996; Juul, 1996, 1997; Thebaud, 1995a; 1995b).

To sum up, in the case of the NEAP for Burkina Faso, the root causes of environmental degradation are depicted in generalised and oversimplified terms. They are based on alleged causal relationships, whereby population increase and demographics pressure generally is seen as the independent variable, from which follows all environmental calamities.

The NEAP prepared for Ghana does not, to the same extent, depict such superficial and over-generalised scenarios, although in the Technical Background Papers drafted (Laing, 1994), there seems to be a constant search for causal connections which resemble these same notions. For example, here too population pressure (p. 246ff), particularly in the north of country, is seen as the most important factor causing degradation, even “desertification” if the process is not halted. Further, wide guesstimates are presented as to the extent to which Ghana is losing arable land due to extending the area under cultivation, overgrazing or deliberate bush fires (p. 193 and 247).

In an assessment of the NEAP in the Ivory Coast, formulated as a national follow up to the Rio UN conference in 1992, published in 1995 and adopted by the government in 1996, Bassett & Zueli (2000) reach very similar conclusions. Their analysis points to similar observations as in Burkina Faso and Ghana, where the plan once adopted and ready for implementation, soon ran into difficulties due to mainly institutional factors. In the case of the Ivory Coast, when the institutional solution decided upon by the government ran counter to what the Bank (and donors) found appropriate, the Bank opted out and the whole process seemed to be grounded.

Bassett & Zueli also mention the problem of the validity of data material available, the data from which the Bank concluded “environmental degradation to be so widespread that the “business” of environmental planning and regulation is

now seen as a global affair” (p. 67) – despite the lack of reliable data. The authors also found a similar orthodox perspective on planning:

“Under the banner of sustainable development, the Bank now promotes a “win-win” strategy of combining economic growth with environmental conservation. Never considering that in the past policies and interventions are in any way implicated in the so-called environmental crisis, the Bank presents itself as an impartial observer and promoter of good stewardship. It is currently assisting dozens of African governments to develop NEAPs which, in assembly-line fashion, are being produced according to a blueprint” (p. 68).

According to the authors, in this NEAP too there are “Images of chaos and environmental devastation” (p. 69) running through the plan, where “Land-use practices are described as anarchic, as peasants and pastoralists are purportedly destroying savanna woodlands through agricultural land clearing, burning, and overgrazing” (ibid.), which risk leading to “desertification”. Based on “a poor understanding of the nature and direction of environmental change”, the Bank’s remedies are directed towards “halting” the desertification process, regulating bush fires, controlling farmers’ behaviour, for instance through the creation of “Forestry Police” structures, planting trees, establishing laws and frameworks regulating resource access or privatising land rights. The Bank has become a prime mover of environmental discourses, that have abandoned reason and instead become an instrument “that gives meaning and an immediacy to (its) mission” (p. 91). Such meaning is closely associated to perceptions by which “NEAPs are heralded as modern vehicles that will lead its member countries down the road to rational and orderly sustainable development” (p. 68).

## 6. The Myths Sustained? - Conclusion

In recent decades, environmental planning directed towards improved natural resource management practices in the developing world has followed a blueprint approach. Such planning takes little consideration of little local complexities, socio-

economic, political and institutional issues and the locality-specific nature of many environmental problems. In this sense environmental planning has failed to reach beyond traditional, orthodox planning concepts, uninformed as it is by current debates within western planning theory and discourse. But crucially, this form of environmental planning has greatly contributed to sustaining certain myths about planning in at least two different ways.

First, the way in which environmental planning has been conceptualized, formulated and implemented has contributed to sustaining traditional “planned intervention” modalities. “Planned intervention” – whether in the form of a project, a programme or a “plan” – forms part of a larger modernization project, whereby external interventions are not only feasible (and needed) but also entirely possible. If only better managed and following the diagnosis and recommendations in environmental plans, the natural resource base and the environmental problems identified can be remedied or entirely corrected, restoring the previous harmonious balance between man and nature.

The environmental plan is here the instrument that supplies “structured rationality” to the field of “planned intervention” whereby management practices can be improved or changed at will, controlled and predicted. The tools of environmental planning may be adjusted when problems arise, but the validity and feasibility of the instrument is never questioned. Environmental planning here belongs to what Porter (1995, p. 71) has called “master metaphors”, where planning proceeds according to an alleged logic and addresses development problems, depicted according to assumed causal interrelations.

The second way in which contemporary environmental planning perpetuates myths is that environmental problems and the root causes of environmental degradation are addressed in superficial and generalized terms. They disregard the results of recent research and instead reiterate standard conceptions and present degradation within expected causal chains of explanation.

By perpetuating conventional wisdom and uninformed by recent research results, environmental planning adds to the construction of particular notions of the environment, of the

causes of degradation and their remedies. The end result of this is that certain myths about environmental degradation are sustained and justified: they continue to provide a *raison d'être* for external interventions whereby both multilateral and bilateral aid organizations seek to control, master and retain their turf, with the World Bank as the most aggressive lead agent.

Together, the two ways of sustaining myths not only maintain the “master metaphors” but also ensure that simple, easily comprehensible ways of thinking and conceptualizing modernity are repeated and reiterated, by aid donors and recipient governments alike. This form of modernity develops a consensual “language of development” (see, for example, Arce, 2000 and Arce & Long, 2000). Adhering to such “language of development” contributes to the structuring of common meanings and understandings, paving the way for systems of knowledge that ensure that the parties involved share concepts, meanings and development jargons. Hence these external agents are able – each from their own angle and with their own agenda - to explore, even exploit, the opportunities offered them by “planned intervention”. In this way, arenas are opened for different actors to position themselves, claim territory and exert influence and power.

In particular, such a language expresses a mythological view of development, which not only is controllable but also basically harmonious. The situation in which they intervene is a tabular *Rasa* or a field cleared and ready for the external intervention needed. It is a notion – sustained by environmental planning – which tends to neglect the complexity of the local, contextual situation and which disregards conflicts, power struggle and positioning in arenas for individual or collective gains. It is a development discourse that tends to establish understandings and concepts as part of a knowledge system, which repeats itself and which points to the main actors in the aid community as self-evident players – and rescuers of a divided world.

Environmental planning, as analyzed in the above, seems to continue. It is unaffected by recent research results or current debates within planning theory. The National Action Plans decided as a follow up to the United Nations Convention to Combat

Desertification signed in 1994, and reaffirmed recently at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg 2003, bear witness to this ongoing, seemingly endless process of producing national environmental plans based on much the same recipe. Other similar initiatives are national strategies to be developed as action plans, in the wake of the Kyoto Protocol and under the aegis of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Plus ça change plus c'est la même chose.

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