

Pieter Glasbergen, Frank Biermann and Arthur P.J. Mol, Editors. 2007. *Partnerships, Governance and Sustainable Development: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, Northampton, Mass., Edward Elgar Publishing.

The Rio and Johannesburg summits apparently revealed to the NGO community that the role of government had changed since the 1980s. One did not have to wait for such auspicious occasions to come to that conclusion. World Bank strategies have changed substantially since the 1970s and the decline of statism in the West and elsewhere has reshaped the context and choices available for the development community. The challenge since then has been to achieve goals of *sustainable* development through a partially emasculated public sector, an emboldened private sector and a well organized (in some countries), savvy and

yet divided civil society.

One of the primary challenges *or* opportunities is addressing issues of sustainability without the tools of the coercive state. As environmental problems have become more apparent, technocratic and bureaucratic capacities in most countries have diminished. As it pertains to the developing world, the issue is of three fold importance: the role of the state has come under challenge under the neo-liberal paradigm; a preponderant state does not *necessarily* have the technocratic capacity to undertake sustainable development; and export oriented ‘accelerated development’ has had serious environmental implications.

Compiled after an international colloquium at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in the summer of 2006, this book represents an exercise in terms of theory and practice to design models which can achieve specific sustainability goals while hoping to channel the interests of the ‘stakeholders’ effectively. The contributors do not address broader problems in political economy pertaining to why the role of the state has changed and the viability of non-free market solutions to problems in development. The editors have no illusions otherwise. That being said, looking at the problem of partnerships for sustainable development could be a practical exercise for two reasons: For the short term, it doesn’t look as if any resurgent role for the state is on the horizon. The other reason why this could be a fruitful exercise is that it gives us a glimpse into the relationship between civil society and corporations and allows us to assess rhetoric of corporate social responsibility from an input/output perspective. The title has thirteen contributions from a variety of standpoints.

Jennifer Brinkerhoff’s contribution for example is titled “Partnerships as a Means to Good Governance”. Coming from a rational choice background and citing Douglass North liberally, Brinkerhoff’s analysis focuses on how partnerships can improve results in three areas: effectiveness, legitimacy and conflict management. Effectiveness is measured in terms of public service/goal delivery through utilization of comparative advantage, division of labour and reduced transaction costs among private (including NGOs) and public sector components. Legitimacy *can* be improved in her view once the public recognizes the inclusion of the private sector within development goals, particularly in

cases where the private sector has achieved the blessing of NGOs willing to label products or processes as being sustainable.

In terms of conflict management, partnerships can improve access to information, thereby reducing suspicion between the three sets of actors (the state, civil society and the private sector). Her analytical inclinations are evident when she claims that “Ironically, partnerships can be the source of legitimacy challenges”. If partnerships can swing the legitimacy of a project in a variety of directions, as she admits, then it would seem as if getting the public on board is very much a question of perception management. Would partnerships with a good deal of public accountability resolve this issue by providing more information, or does perception management really become an issue of discourse - providing the intangibles where information and causal links are in short supply?

Voluntary certification programs are often mentioned throughout the text as examples of how private sector/NGO partnerships can spring up. Assuming rational self interest as the spring board, the private sector, given public appetite, would work with NGOs in order to come up with a compliance structure that applies NGO generated standards of sustainable production. The discerning public would presumably be the ultimate arbiter of the environmental good, much akin to the notion that government regulation can be replaced by the ‘voting’ shareholder or consumer.

“Partnership as Governance Mechanism in Development Cooperation: Intersectoral North-South Partnerships for Marine Biodiversity” by Ingrid J. Visseren-Hamakers et al., provides an alternate account of the partnership experience. Their analytic framework revolves around power, discourse and rules, and the success of any partnership endeavor will depend on these three factors. For example, when attempts were made in Peru to manage the anchoveta fish feed industry, relatively weak NGOs in that country could not pierce the decision making process. Many NGOs in the south have little regularized access to the state due to the legacy of authoritarian governments. The interests representing the anchoveta fish feed industry had strong enough associations to the state such that Peru’s effort simply resigned itself to market access and not longer term sustainability goals.

Both articles represent pragmatic attempts to establish

input/output models for anticipating the success of multi-sectoral sustainable development partnerships. In Brinkerhoff's case, there is a liberal optimism that partnerships can provide information and legitimacy and markets can provide incentives for goals of sustainability to be achieved without the coercive arm of the state. Her analysis falls short due to its inattention to power structures and discourses, particularly with regard to the developing world. Much of the book straddles a balance between management theory and political science with a middle level range of theoretical abstraction. As previously stated, it does not represent broad strokes of political economy, but practical attempts to assess sustainable development partnerships. From this perspective, the thirteen contributions could be an important read, keeping in mind the theoretical limitations imposed by the nature of the exercise.

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