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Article

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Economic and Environmental Studies (E&ES)

Provided in Cooperation with:

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Suggested Citation: Reinvang, Rasmus (2013) : Sustainable development and neo-liberal globalisation in international politics: Competing paradigms defining the waste management problem, Economic and Environmental Studies (E&ES), ISSN 2081-8319, Opole University, Faculty of Economics, Opole, Vol. 13, Iss. 3, pp. 239-254

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/93208>

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Sustainable development and neo-liberal globalization in international politics: competing paradigms defining the waste management problem¹

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Abstract: The unsustainable production and consumption patterns leading to a problem with waste management require technical and administrative solution on a local, regional or national level. Efforts may be challenged by processes of globalisation and international politics. The author discusses the contradiction between the United Nation's focus on sustainable development and the World Trade Organization's emphasis on economic growth and trade liberalisation, and addresses the question whether development will become more unsustainable when current development paradigms are not changed

Keywords: *sustainable development, waste management, neo-liberalism, United Nation, World Trade Organization*

1. Introduction

This article seeks to consider the waste management problem in an overall international political perspective. The source of the increasing problem of waste management is the unsustainable production and consumption patterns of the global post-modern society. However important it is to find technical and administrative solutions to the questions of waste management on a local, municipal, regional and national level, such efforts may, seen in

¹ This article was published in *Economic and Environmental Studies* 2003/3: 207-220.

isolation, be considered to be merely an attempt to deal with the symptoms and not the actual disease itself.

In international politics two paradigms for development have been competing for primacy over the last decade. On the one hand, the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 put “sustainable development” on the agenda of international politics and started a United Nations (UN) facilitated process aiming at bringing about an environmentally and developmentally sustainable form of development. On the other hand, the creation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Marrakesh in 1994, initiated a parallel process, in which growth oriented development is promoted through free trade agreements and a globalisation of the world economy. We will in this article briefly look at the two alternative models of development and the political process which has led us to the present day situation, in which the WTO agenda has sidetracked the sustainable development process initiated in Rio in 1992. In this context, the main point is that the current form of globalisation is in fact promoting still more unsustainable production and consumption patterns.² In order to solve the overall problem of waste management, a return to the Rio agenda, or maybe a whole new sustainable development agenda taking into account the escalating globalisation of the world economy, is necessary. We will thus in the final section examine the prospects for such a development in international politics, a development which is essential if we are to achieve an overall integrated solution to the waste management problem.

2. The sustainable development agenda of Rio 1992

Sustainable development was first put on the international political agenda by the United Nation Commission on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1987. Sustainable development was, vaguely, defined as meeting “the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The overall importance of UNCED was

² The world is today governed by a practice and understanding of development which is unsustainable. Forests continue to disappear or be degraded at a rate of 14 million hectares a year, Greenhouse Gasses are still increasingly pumped into the atmosphere causing global warming, there is a looming crisis of water shortages around the world. This environmental degradation runs parallel to an increasing economical divide. In 1997 the richest 20% of the world’s population earned 74 times more than the poorest 20%, up from 60 to 1 in 1990 and 30 to 1 in 1960. For more facts of this nature, see Worldwatch Institute’s (2002) *State of the World 2002*.

the recognition that the current modes of development are environmentally unsustainable and thus undermining the possibilities of future generations living on this planet. The UNCED started a process which culminated with the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The Earth Summit resulted in the adoption of the Rio Declaration on the Environment and Development, Agenda 21, as well as principles for the sustainable management of forests. Of these, Agenda 21 is a comprehensive programme of action to be implemented – from 1992 and into the 21st century – by Governments, development agencies, United Nations organizations and independent sector groups in every area where human activity affects the environment.

Besides recognising the ecological disaster, which the current modes of development will inevitably lead to, the Earth Summit also stressed that the environment crisis, with its many facets was embedded in economic and social systems. Thus, a realistic and long-term solution was suggested to lay in dealing with both the environment and the development crises simultaneously and in an integrated fashion.³

Besides the vital recognition and addressing of the problems of unsustainable development, the Earth Summit was groundbreaking in the model it proposed for dealing with these problems. The recognition that the global ecological crisis had to be solved in an equitable way through partnership was at the core of the political agreement in Rio. This was captured in the principle of “Common but Differentiated Responsibility” in the Rio Declaration. This principle acknowledged that the North has historically and at present, been more responsible for the destruction of the global environment, has more resources, due to the uneven nature of the world economy, and has a proportionately greater responsibility in resolving environmental problems.

The Earth Summit thus outlined a North-South agreement for achieving sustainable development which would require a series of initiatives with the developed countries of the North as the motor:

- The North would “put its own house in order”, by changing its production and consumption patterns (and its economic and social model), would take the lead in improving environmental

³ For the developing countries, hampered in meeting the basic needs of its people by its unfavourable position in the world economy, its national resources being drained through falling commodity prices, and by heavy debt burdens and other outflows, development goals such as poverty eradication and provision of basic needs are (or should be) their top priorities and environmental concerns must be integrated with (and not counteract) such development objectives in order to make any real sense.

standards, reduce pollution and the use of toxic materials, and cut down the use and waste in natural resources, through changing lifestyles, for example.

- The North would help the South with financial aid and technology transfer, and through partnership in bringing about a more favourable international economic environment - for example, through more equitable terms of trade and a resolution of the debt crisis. The symbol of the North's commitment to help the South was contained in the pledge of the North to meet the earlier commitments of Overseas Development Aid (ODA) reaching 0,7% of their GNP.
- The South, by having more financial and technological resources, would manage its economy better, give priority to policies that meet people's needs, improve pollution standards and reduce depletion of resources such as forests.
- International agencies and structures would help further this process, for example, by reducing the debt problem of developing countries and reviewing the content of structural adjustment policies, by ensuring that the trade system brings about more favourable results for developing poor countries, by helping to mobilise financial resources and providing technical aid in improving environmental standards.
- Issues requiring an integration of economic and environmental concerns should be resolved through North-South partnership, in which the development needs of the South would be adequately recognised. For instance issues such as the interaction of trade and environment, the relation between intellectual property rights and transfer of (environmental) technology and between intellectual property rights and indigenous knowledge.

The sustainable development paradigm represents one paradigm for international relations with a set of core elements:

- Institutionally, it is based on consensus seeking at UN summits and aims at incorporating the needs of all countries (big or small) through a partnership in which the strong would help the weak.
- In its analyses of the problem of unsustainable development, it focuses on an integration of environment and development concerns.
- The tool for implementing sustainable development is the intervention of the state and the international community on behalf of the public interest to control market forces, so as to

attain greater social equity and bring about more sustainable patterns of production and consumption.

During the 1990s the United Nations held a series of world conferences, in which global problems relating to the environment (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), human rights (Vienna, 1993), population and development (Cairo, 1994), women's rights (Beijing, 1995), social development (Copenhagen, 1995), habitat (Istanbul, 1996), and food (Rome, 1996) were discussed and sought to be resolved in a framework of consensus-seeking. At the time of writing this article, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) at Johannesburg in the fall of 2002 is an upcoming event, the result of which will be crucial for the future of the sustainable development paradigm in international politics.

3. The 1990s – the era of globalisation

The main force in international politics in the 1990s, however, did not turn out to be sustainable development, but an increased growth of the world economy facilitated by an increasing globalisation. The Uruguay Round agreements of 1993 lead to the creation of the WTO in Marrakesh in 1994, advocating the opening up of markets (especially those of developed countries) to the exports and investments of corporations and financial institutions. At the same time the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – the so called Bretton Woods institutions - became strong players in international politics, promoting structural adjustment programmes based on market liberalisation as conditions for investment projects and loans in developing countries.

With these institutions and their policies another paradigm for development was put forth. At the core of this paradigm stands a very different set of principles than the ones the world's governments committed themselves to at the Earth Summit:

- The globalisation paradigm gives supremacy to the market, advocating the reduction or cancellation of state regulations and a high degree of rights and “freedoms” to the large corporations that dominate the market.

- The inner dynamics of market forces are considered to automatically produce whatever may be in demand and to foster an ever-increasing growth creating a surplus which can be set aside for, for instance, environmental protection.
- Internationally, the paradigm advocates the liberalisation of international markets, the breaking down of national economic barriers, and enforcing the rights of corporations to sell and invest in any country of their choice without restraints or conditions.
- Governments should not interfere with the free play of the market, and social or development concerns should be downgraded.

It is evident that such a paradigm is not compatible with the framework agreed upon by the world's governments in Rio. As the globalisation paradigm gained momentum during the 1990s, it became clear that the political will to actually implement the sustainable development paradigm was missing. With the main points of the North-South agreement of the Earth Summit in mind, what actually happened was:

- There were no significant moves in the developed countries towards basic changes in production and consumption patterns or lifestyles. Despite some efforts on the energy front for reducing the emission of Greenhouse Gasses (which are generally believed to be still inadequate to arrest adverse effects on climate change), there has been, in many Northern countries, a regression of environmental policies or a lack of progress in critical areas requiring attention. Generally, there has been a downgrading of environmental concerns in national agendas, as commercial interests and the need to retain "national economic competitiveness" take precedence.
- The governments of the developed countries in the 1990s either refused or were not able to commit themselves to the reform of international economic relations or structures, or to initiate a new North-South economic dialogue. This meant that there was no commitment to resolve structural economic problems that weighed heavily on the majority of developing countries (particularly the poorer ones).
- Despite the pledges to increase aid at UNCED, the volume of aid fell instead even in the first year after the Earth Summit. The OECD countries' aid fell from US\$61 billion to 56 billion in 1993, and 14 of 21 donors decreased the share of aid as a ratio of GNP. In 2001 the ODA average of the OECD countries was 0,24% of GNP, far from the promised 0,7%.

- There has been no tangible progress in the transfer of technology to the South, either in general or in environmentally sound technology, but rather the opposite. Since the Earth Summit, there has been a much greater emphasis on increasing the rights of holders of intellectual property (mainly corporations in the developed countries) and a corresponding downgrading of the rights of the public (and developing countries) in technology transfer and diffusion.
- In most Southern countries, environmental concerns have also not received the kind of special attention that the Earth Summit had promised. The poorer countries remain enmeshed in problems of external debt and low commodity prices and face additional problems caused by a decline in aid. They are also bypassed by foreign investment flows. As a result, the lack of financial resources continues to hamper progress towards sustainable development. Generally in the South, there is a lack of progress towards sustainable agriculture or in phasing out the use of toxic substances.
- Although a small minority of developing countries were able to take advantage of external factors to experience high economic growth⁴, the majority of developing countries continued to suffer from poverty and social problems, and in some countries the situation even worsened. The terms of trade for developing countries continued to deteriorate, with prices and demand for commodity exports falling. The debt crisis persisted. Aid volumes declined. The result has been low or inappropriate growth, reduced social development expenditure, persistence or worsening of poverty, higher unemployment and greater inequities.

The dynamism and implementing power of the Earth Summit process was severely hampered by a lack of a strong institutional follow-up. The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was established under the UN Secretariat to oversee the follow-up activity of UNCED, but was not given the powers or resources to actively carry out such a role. Understandably, but unfortunately, the decline in aid is seen by developing countries as a lack of commitment and sincerity of the governments of the developed countries to implement the Earth Summit agreements, and has robbed the Earth Summit follow-up processes and institutions of

⁴ In the industrialising Southern countries, however, the pressures of urbanisation, industrialisation, and high growth have put additional pressures on the environment, concerns about which have remained low compared to the imperatives of growth.

their status and legitimacy. The stress on intellectual property rights (IPRs) protection at the expense of technology transfer has further robbed the post-Earth Summit process of its legitimacy, since technology transfer was the second plank of what was seen as the North's commitment to facilitating sustainable development.

While failing to deliver on the promises of the Earth Summit in the 1990s, the governments of the developed countries were in fact actively endorsing the process of neo-liberal globalisation. During the 1990s the governments of the developed countries were successful in downgrading the role, resources and influence of the UN in social and economic affairs and policies. Simultaneously, they increased enormously the powers and influence of the Bretton Woods institutions and especially the WTO in determining international economic and social policies. A significant factor for the current supremacy of the neo-liberal globalisation paradigm, is that the international institutions overseeing the process of globalising free market access became endowed with resources and sanctioning powers. In the Bretton Woods institutions, structural adjustment can be enforced as conditions for much-needed loans, and in the WTO system, agreements and rules are enforceable through a powerful dispute settlement system, which includes trade penalties and retaliation. In contrast, the sustainable development paradigm was deprived of its main means of implementation, financial resources and technology transfer, and had no institutional set-up which could enforce sanctions on countries not living up to their obligations.

The conclusion of the Uruguay Round on free trade in December 1993 heralded a new era where multilateral trade agreements and negotiations would subject countries to the objectives of Northern governments to a greater degree by advocating greater and wider "market access" for their corporations. This replaced the approach of viewing developing countries as disadvantaged global partners requiring aid and deserving assistance by a more aggressive commerce- and trade-oriented approach of viewing developing countries as markets (that need opening up) and as potential rivals (whose advantages should be curbed). As a result, the "development principle" and the "development dimension", which hitherto had been recognised in the sustainable development paradigm as cornerstones in North-South relations, were challenged and eroded, not only through the decline in aid, but also in the much greater reluctance to accord special treatment or advantages to developing countries in UN negotiations. The various Earth Summit declarations and processes, which represented a spirit of international cooperation, were as a

result constantly being undermined by the more legally binding and enforceable rules of the WTO system.

4. The current situation.

The current situation is full of paradoxes. The globalisation paradigm argues that free trade leads to increased economic growth globally and thus sets free resources, which can be used for dealing with environmental problems and the like. The main environmental problem, however, is the model of economic growth itself, which leads to a depletion of the earth's resources, global warming and increasing mountains of waste. Moreover, contrary to what the spokesmen of neo-liberal globalisation proclaim, free trade is at present expanding the gap between rich and poor countries (cf. the recent report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development). The so-called "free trade" of neo-liberal globalisation in reality means free trade for developed countries at the expense of developing countries, whose access to the markets of the developed countries is effectively checked. Moreover, the recent UNEP (United Nations Environmental Program) report, stresses that the increasing divide between the rich and the poor is in itself one of the main factors increasing the world's environmental problems. This highlights the fact that the integration of environment and development concerns made in the sustainable development approach is essential, and that neo-liberal globalisation neither promotes fair and equal development nor is able to face the environmental challenge of the present.

The non-integration of the Earth Summit follow-up process and the international institutions promoting a neo-liberal globalisation agenda, gives international politics a somewhat bizarre and schizophrenic character. As in 1997, when the CSD called upon the WTO to give more consideration to sustainable development – the world's governments calling on the world's governments! While lip-service is paid to the ideals of sustainable development at UN conferences, the same governments are pursuing a different agenda in the WTO and the Bretton Woods institutions. In this paradigm, waste management simply means dealing with the symptoms and not the real problems of unsustainable production and consumption patterns. In this framework, one solution to, for instance, the problem of hazardous waste is to export it to the developing countries. It goes without saying, that this does not really solve the problem.

One disturbing fact of the current situation is that economic power, to a large extent, has moved away from governments, which (in most developed countries at least) are democratically elected, to multinational companies which only need to consider the interests of their shareholders. Of the top hundred economies, fifty-one are multinational companies and only forty-nine countries (Klein, 2000: 340). Practically all multinational companies have moved the basic production of their products to developing countries, where sub-contracted companies often produce expensive brands under slave-like conditions (see Klein's (2000) numerous examples, of which the Nike sweatshops are the most well-known). That multinational companies generally do not take their social responsibilities seriously, was highlighted by the public outcry in 2001 over the control multinational pharmaceutical companies hold over medicine treating AIDS. The overwhelming majority of people infected with HIV are poor and live in Africa, where millions die untreated every year. The multinational companies holding the patented rights to this medicine are free to set their own prices, prices which are far beyond the reach of most Africans. In 2001, these companies sued African and Indian firms producing cheap copies of this medicine for the millions of poor people with HIV, trying to prevent the access of millions of poor Africans to this medicine, as this was infringing on their intellectual property rights (IPR). When the press reported this, it produced a public outrage in the Western world eventually forcing the multinational companies to back down out of concern for their image. The general lack of social concern among multinational companies was highlighted in another way at the Danish political party *Enhedslisten*'s press conference on 11th November 2001. *Enhedslisten* had dug out numbers showing that three hundred multinational companies in Denmark (among others Coca Cola and McDonalds), have arranged their businesses in such a manner that they pay practically no tax in Denmark. Experts estimated that Danish society was deprived of between seven to fourteen billion Danish kroners of tax revenue annually. The world economy, in which unsustainable patterns of production and consumption take place, is in other words not only less and less under the control of governments, but the new dominating players are businesses which are generally not concerned with taking responsibility for the society and environment in which they are making their profits.

The current reality of international politics does not raise much hope for the future of the sustainable development paradigm. It will take serious and radical initiatives backed up by consistent political will for the world's governments to reclaim control over the world economy

and to initiate an actual change towards sustainability. In large sections of the international NGO community and in parts of the UN, creating a strong UN World Environmental Organisation which can rival the WTO is seen as a vital and necessary step to further the implementation of the sustainable development paradigm. With the WSSD taking place in three months (at the time of writing this article), it has already become clear that this idea will not be supported by strong governments. It is in fact difficult to see any real political initiatives and will to change the very unsustainable system of the world economy itself. The USA is today the strongest economy in the world and constitutes its motor. No fundamental change is possible without the co-operation of the USA. Unfortunately, the US government has over the last decade consistently undermined the Earth Summit process and pushed for the globalisation of its own economical model on its own terms. The US delegations to the post Earth Summit process have explicitly stated that “the American way of life is not up for negotiation” (Robins and Roberts, 1998: 1). The US government made it clear last year, that it would not ratify the Kyoto Protocol, consisting of a program for a global reduction of the emissions of CO₂ causing global warming, as it was not favourable to the US economy. The US government even went so far as to state that the Kyoto Protocol was “dead”. In international politics, the Earth Summit process itself appears to be dead and reduced to being forums producing nice declarations of intent with no power of implementation.

The new model for dealing with the problems of sustainable development promoted by the US is one of voluntary partnerships. Sticking to the credo of minimal government control, the idea is that various major groups in society should commit themselves (voluntarily) to partnerships dealing with such problems. An example could be oil companies forming a partnership with the indigenous population in the area in question. This partnership might consist of the oil company getting the rights to drill for oil and sell it, while the indigenous population would get jobs in the production and get a school system financed. This would be a typical example of “partnership”. The real world, however, is different. During the last hundred years, brutal exploitation and environmental degradation has followed in the footsteps of practically all international oil companies in the developing countries. The company Shell’s activities in Nigeria in the 1990s, is merely one grotesque example of many (see Klein, 2000).

Besides the idea of voluntary partnerships another way of dealing with problems of sustainable development in the globalisation paradigm, is one of voluntary codes of conduct. The

logic is that major companies compete today to form an image, and as stories of production under slave-like conditions and environmental degradation reflects badly upon their image, companies will themselves make voluntary codes of conduct and the most clean will get an edge in competition. From a critical viewpoint, however, it is difficult not to consider this a bit naïve. To consider voluntary codes of conduct by multinational companies – the implementation of which is, of-course, monitored by the company itself – a solution to sustainable development, greatly underestimates a company's marketing powers and overestimates the ability and resources the public and the press are willing and capable to invest in checking up on all products they are presented with.

Concerning these approaches the most important point, however, is that none of these models make any sense in the overall picture. McDonald's may pack their burgers in recyclable materials and Ford may have a solar-powered production plant somewhere, but of what real use is it when these companies are representing and aggressively promoting a culture of consumerism, which in itself is the main ecological problem on this planet? No alternatives to the classical energy intensive and consumption based model of development are considered seriously by governments of either developed or developing countries. This is for instance illustrated by the transition-economies of the Eastern European countries, for which full integration with the more unsustainable economies of the EU is the only success criteria (Reinvang, 2002).

5. Prospects

The political system itself, does not seem to be able to make the commitment which is necessary to change the global consumption and production patterns into sustainable ones. Reality is complex. A real implementation of the sustainable development paradigm will mean a reduction of material living standards in the developed countries and a radical transformation of our societies and culture. In a short term, local perspective (like for instance the next election) initiating such a process is practically impossible. If, for instance, Denmark abolished all restrictions on imports from developing countries, it would merely lead to chaos. Also, to what degree can a government succeed in changing the mentality of its people towards sustainability when multinational companies are constantly bombarding them with propaganda promoting their

products and a lifestyle in which a high level of consumerism equals status and a good life? To some extent, even the governments of the developed countries are hostages in a process they cannot control but only administrate.

As Klein (2000), among others, has pointed out, creating a culture opposing the current modes of development is even more difficult today than before, as the market also effectively incorporates counter-cultural tendencies and turns them into products of a consumerist culture. In contrast with the more traditional capitalism of the cold war, modern day capitalism is extremely flexible. Counter-cultural expressions in art, music, design etc. are picked up almost immediately, used in commercials and made into products within the very consumerist system alternative groups are trying to distance themselves from. Symbols and statements are in this process robbed of their original contents and turned into indicators of style – one more superficial role to put on and play with in a postmodern consumerist universe...

A change is, nevertheless, vitally necessary and voices opposing the current mode of development have, over the last five years, increasingly begun to make cracks and peek through the glossy facade of consumerist culture. With the riots at the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1998, it became clear that the new globalised world economy has a large number of losers and that there is a growing feeling of discontent among the populations of not only the developing countries. A disorganised, global movement against neo-liberal globalisation has emerged, with its annual rallying point at the World Social Forum at Porto Alegre in Brazil under the motto “another world is possible”. In this movement we find a wide array of groups, spanning from indigenous peoples groups, Brazilian peasants reclaiming unused land, the Zapatista “guerillas” of Chiapas in Mexico, trade unions, women’s groups, the reclaim-the-streets movement promoting carnival type of events in public places, adbuster groups making disturbing ironic raids on the brands of multi-national companies, the ATTAC movement promoting the idea of a Tobin tax on currency speculation, and more classic environmental and development NGOs. A counter-movement to neo-liberal globalisation is thus emerging, but it is of an anarchistic nature and has no overall accepted program it can promote in the political system nor any spokesperson to present it. Intellectuals like Klein, note that this weakness may also be its strength, as the amorphous entity this movement represents cannot be taken over or neutralized by the system. By its mere existence, the movement shows that in reality there is an option to the consumerist lifestyle hyped by the growth oriented culture taking over the world through neo-liberal globalisation. This is in

a way true. The different movements and groups within the overall movement will pursue their own agendas and possibly make progress with regards to their specific aims - for instance redistribution of land in Brazil or the introduction of an international Tobin tax. One may hope that such a differentiated attack on the system will eventually produce so many positive changes in environmental and developmental issues, that a critical mass will be reached at one point tipping the overall situation from being an unsustainable mode of development to a sustainable one. However, the fragmented and anarchistic nature of this movement and its lack of a commonly shared overall vision, makes it more likely that this movement's impact will come isolatedly in the different areas focused on by its constituent groups. The poor Brazilian peasants, for instance, want land, they have not stated that they are against a consumerist culture as such.

The world is complex and big. At the heart of the waste management problem, lies the fact that we have created unsustainable systems of growth and development on this planet, systems which to some extent have taken on a life and gained a momentum on their own. The task may seem daunting, but we do have the power to change the system if we really want to. The change from unsustainable to sustainable development presupposes a joint international initiative followed by concrete actions taken by all governments, or at least the main actors in international politics in unison. It is possible, although one may wonder at times if we need another world war or a global environmental catastrophe to mobilise the will and power to do it. Such a transformation cannot take place without a change in the fundamental notions related to, for instance, freedom of the individual, in which the economic and environmental freedom of all individuals are given precedence. We may even need some kind of new powerful ethos or religion to be able to make such a shift away from the current individualistic and materialistic way of life.

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Sustainable development and neo-liberal globalization in international politics: competing paradigms defining the waste management problem

Streszczenie

Niezrównoważone wzorce produkcyjne i konsumpcyjne, wywołujące problemy związane z zarządzaniem odpadami, wymagają rozwiązań technicznych i administracyjnych na poziomie lokalnym, regionalnym oraz krajowym. Wszelkie wysiłki mogą napotkać wyzwania wynikające z procesów globalizacji oraz polityki międzynarodowej. Autor omawia koordynację pomiędzy koncentracją Organizacji Narodów Zjednoczonych na zrównoważonym rozwoju a naciskiem Światowej Organizacji Handlu na wzrost gospodarczy oraz liberalizację handlu. Na tym tle sformułowano pytanie, czy współczesne tendencje rozwojowe nie staną się bardziej niezrównoważone, jeśli obecny paradygmat rozwoju nie ulegnie zmianom.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój, zarządzanie odpadami, neoliberalizm, Organizacja Narodów Zjednoczonych, Światowa Organizacja Handlu