

The Economics of Sustainable Development. By Sisay Asefa, editor, Kalamazoo, MI, W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2005, 191 pp., \$40/cloth, \$15/paperback.

Most of us are fairly certain that sustainable development is important. Trouble is, we are not quite sure what the term means. This and many other related issues are taken up in *The Economics of Sustainable Development*, edited by Sisay Asefa, professor of economics at Western Michigan University. This volume assembles six papers presented during the annual Werner Sichel Economics Lecture-Seminar Series at Western Michigan University within an international development context, emphasizing topics such as poverty, agriculture, inequality, population growth, and property rights.

The introduction provides an extensive summary and brief synthesis of the papers that follow. In the first paper, Malcom Gillis tells us that although there is no universal agreement on what is meant by sustainable development, the weight of the knowledge suggests that sustainable development has to do with discovering a path for growth that maximizes net benefits for society after taking into account the costs of environmental degradation. This definition is

indeed consistent with those found in environmental economics textbooks.

The second and third papers deal with two issues that are critical for the developing world: avoiding humanitarian disasters and securing greater agricultural production through productivity gains. Next we learn from David Lam about how falling mortality rates brought on a world population explosion during the 1950s and 1960s, and how declining fertility rates brought it to an end. Since the 1970s and continuing to the present, parents are having fewer children and investing more in schooling and health care, a cause for optimism.

In the fifth paper, Daniel Bromley offers a philosophical discussion of the connection between property rights and environmental sustainability. The final paper by Scott Swinton examines whether poor farmers are forced to overuse natural resources in order to survive in the short-run. He finds that the poor are not necessarily bad stewards of natural resources, but face capacity constraints not encountered by farmers in richer countries. He theorizes that poor farmers would respond to the proper mix of incentives that promote sustainable resource usage, including clearly defined and durable property rights, support from local institutions, and an efficient transportation and com-

munication system.

Clearly, the volume deals with quite a diverse set of topics. Some readers may have difficulty finding commonalities between the six very different essays. More attention to an introductory synthesis would have been helpful in this regard. One theme that they do have in common is the notion of capacity building: What institutions, policies, and capabilities lead to the path of sustainable development in the developing world?

A minor discomfort with this volume has to do with the title: *The Economics of Sustainable Development* suggests to the reader that what follows is a survey of the economics of sustainability, which is not the case. A better title would have been *Essays in Sustainable Development*, suggesting a more loose collection of papers around a general theme.

In general, *The Economics of Sustainable Development* offers valuable attention to specific issues that may be of interest to a variety of scholars in interested in economic development and sustainability.

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