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Sustainable development, public policies and rurality in New-Caledonia: contexts, issues and the local/global nexus

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1. INTRODUCTION
There appears to be a broad consensus on the concept of sustainable development. However, its integration and translation into policies are vague, uneven and, ultimately, disappointing [4]. It is our hypothesis that, due to its ambiguous definitions and ideological load, sustainable development is altering local political debates; moreover the way in which it interacts with the dynamics already at work can explain, in part, the difficulties surrounding its implementation.

Drawing on the insular and rent-seeking economy of New-Caledonia, this paper analyses the contextualising mechanisms of sustainable development and its impact on local politics and dynamics. First, we will describe Caledonian rurality and its main developments in the context of the macro-economic and social background of New Caledonia. This is followed by a description and analysis of the emergence of sustainable development and its terminology in the political discourse and its applications to the rural world.

2. THE MAIN DYNAMICS LINKING THE PILLARS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Even if they conceal a double rent-seeking dependence, i.e. on nickel (a quarter of the world’s reserves are located in New Caledonia) and on the financial transfers from France, the structure and development of Caledonian GDP (EUR 22,750 per capita at the end of 2006) are those of a developed country. The proportion of services (26 %), administration (19 %) and trade (12 %) contrasts with that of agriculture (1.7 %). Moreover, the rural statistics reveal a concentration of agricultural activity and social and territorial inequality: the “European” trade systems (29 % of holdings for 74 % of the usable farmland) contrast with the Kanak horticultural systems (69 % of the holdings for a quarter of the usable farmland), which are mostly food-producing.

The following table presents the characteristics of the (dual and rent-seeking) situation in New Caledonia and the dynamics at work there.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main characteristics</th>
<th>Main dynamics</th>
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<tr>
<td>Social and political dualism: Kanaks/Celdoches, tribes/villages;</td>
<td>Failure to achieve social, economic and spatial re-balancing;</td>
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<td>Economical dualism: trade and non-trade sectors;</td>
<td>Differentiated dynamics between food-producing agriculture and “modern” agriculture;</td>
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<td>Agricultural dualism: food-producing/subsistence (and customary) sector, “modern” sector;</td>
<td>Weakening of the agriculture sectors (fewer holdings);</td>
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<tr>
<td>Territorial dualism: Northern Province/Southern Province/East-West etc.</td>
<td>Hyperpolarisation of the population, activities and infrastructure (Noumea urban pole).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mining rent (nickel, 12% of the GDP but with significant potential for increases in the short term)</td>
<td>Mining of new deposits and local processing; depletion of the resource and uncertainty with regard to prices and temporalities; risk of “excluding” growth; spill-over and isolation effects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative rent (25% of the GDP)</td>
<td>Uncertainty with respect to the future of the administrative rent (statutory evolution and indexing regimes).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richness and fragility of the eco-systems (global biodiversity hot spot, coral reefs included in the UNESCO World Heritage List etc.).</td>
<td>Management and protection of natural resources with the help of local and international NGOs and multinational companies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The main links between the pillars of sustainable development take different forms as illustrated schematically in the diagram shown below.

### 3. THE EMERGENCE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NEW-CALEDONIA: AN OPEN-ENDED PROCESS

The history of the New-Caledonia, a penal, agricultural and mining settlers' colony, is marked by the marginalisation of the Kanak indigenous people. The choice of settlement colonisation prompted “path dependence” [3], which has conditioned both immigration policy and land monopoly policy by the Europeans. The French State organised a trading-post economy that facilitated trade and mining. In the rural sector, the failure of the smallholder colonisation and the turning away of the Kanaks led to land consolidation and the creation of extensive stock-rearing estates. From the 1950s, the State professionalised the central territorial services; rural and agricultural policies were influenced thereafter by the desire to promote family-based cash-cropping and display objectives relating to modernisation. Kanak agriculture belatedly benefited from land distribution and occasional aid but was not incorporated into the services frame of reference. A dual vision of the agricultural world set in.

Between 1965 and 1988, the State procrastinated in relation to the degree of political autonomy to be granted to the territory and tried to control the increase in the demand for independence. The management of the mining boom (1968-1973) and of the subsequent crisis (1974-1980) created a new “bifurcation”. The life-worlds of the urban elites and the State were altered through the arrival of new European entrepreneurs, who replaced the political personnel, and through the simultaneous emergence of a Kanak political class, which did not find its place in the prevailing frame of reference. This period also saw the consolidation of the affirmation of an assisted-economy model, combining the participation in the global nickel market (which became established as a priority sector in relation to the rural dynamics) and takeover of the State through its financial transfers. In broad terms, the financial transfers intensified which raised salaries and prices, put a strain on the local production channels and promoted the tertiarisation of the economy and the prevalence of nickel.

Because the wealth created locally was not sufficient to maintain the macroeconomic equilibrium, this role was assigned to the financial transfers, thus creating a confinement within the model and a new path dependence [1]. In the rural world, a group of influential European stockmen and farmers, who were able to draw on past organisational experience, succeeded in asserting itself and tried to organise in the defence of its rights. Policy measures still favoured prices aids (with allocated sums remaining limited) and supports in the field remained weak. The strategic and identity-based nature of an agricultural backwoods was recognised, but also its weak absolute competitiveness and the lack of policies adapted to it.

In addition, from the 1970s, the pro-independence claims emphasised the inadequacy of these policies vis-à-vis Kanak society. A period of – hesitant – construction of a reference framework for Kanak development followed [2]. Two agricultural models began to co-exist without contact between them, one being imported and adapted and the other struggling to be converted into efficient operational programs. During the political ‘Events’ of 1984 to 1988, public attention was focused on the quest of civil peace. The political settlement of this situation of quasi-civil war led to a reversal of the political perspectives with the admission that exclusively “loyalist” and “independentist” positions can only lead to a conflict. A federalist-like decentralization was established with the creation of three provinces and a collegiate government. Two provinces were managed by the independentists (North and Loyalty islands) while the Southern province remained attached to New Caledonia’s French roots. The State became involved financially to ensure the “pacified” construction of the system. The associated Agreements focused on the “balanced economic, social and
cultural development of the whole territory”. Two terms became established locally as the new local policy frames of reference: i.e. the “re-balancing” of the economic, social and cultural spheres and the “common fate”. At macro-economic level, the Agreements were the starting point for increased financial transfers from the State. Thanks to these transfers, and to the favourable conditions on the global nickel market, a 20-year-long period of strong growth began, reinforcing the social peace. In reality, all of this contributed to the marginalisation of sustainable development as this type of approach was perceived as not being either useful or relevant to the local context. The dualism in the rural sector became stronger and institutionalised. European agriculture benefited from the intensification of the State transfers, which finally enabled the implementation of consistent programmes, while the pro-independence provincial officials developed plans specifically aimed at the Kanak world, particularly in the North and in the Loyalty Islands.

Environmental issues were late to emerge in the Caledonian political discourse. However, New Caledonia is a remarkable biodiversity reserve with numerous endemic species and is, therefore, the focus of interest of the major international environmental NGOs and some large-scale conservation programmes. The latter instigated the gradual introduction of the international normative discourse from the late 1990s with the progressive and increasingly intensive reference to sustainable development. Moreover, during the same period, large multinational metal-processing companies (INCO and Falconbridge which have since been taken over by Vale and Xstrata) set up operations to develop major metal-processing projects. Invited by the international community to adopt good social but above all, environmental practices, the discourses of these companies are equally normative when it comes to the topic of sustainability. This dual external influence gave rise to the emergence of a level of local environmental awareness close to recommendations made at the international conferences. However the chronology was specific to New Caledonia: the politicians here adopted the environmental issues having first focused their debates on identity and social issues.

Sustainable development did not appear in the promotional literature of the political parties until the provincial elections of 2004 and the perspectives relating to it were differentiated:

- The loyalist leaders have been highlighting environmental issues since 2004 and they sometimes associate them explicitly with sustainable development. Thus, sustainable development appears side by side with the environment on the web page of the Southern Province, however it does not feature in relation to the economic development capacities. On the other hand, eco-friendly or “eco-civic” approaches are promoted in the economic sphere while strict conservation and integrated management interventions are also very prominent. However, little clarification of the possible links between the economic, social and environmental dimensions is provided. The general model of the assisted economy is not really discussed, nor is the concrete management of the mining rent.

- The presentation of sustainable development in the Northern Province is more vague. Established in 2000, the Department of the Environment is included in the organisational chart of the Directorate for Economic Development and Environment but has few officials. This situation is justified by the fact that “environmental issues are, of course, integrated into all activities”. Thus sustainable development translates precisely into “environmentally-friendly economic and social development”; priorities are set in this order. The economic dimension favours public investment in structural projects (including metal-processing) which are expected to make the local economic fabric denser. Rent management is rendered more explicit; however the dependencies are not really addressed nor are any possible exit scenarios from the assisted economy.

- The cultural angle on sustainable development dominates in the Loyalty Islands Province. Because the Kanak customary structures and the access to resources have been less affected by colonisation here, sustainable development is considered as closely related to the resistance/resilience of these structures, which are seen as ensuring a management approach that is perceived as being balanced between economic development, social and cultural life, and the relationships between people and their environment.

Along with this political rhetoric, the rise of the discourse on the rights of the indigenous peoples constitutes, moreover, a new element that could structure and echo the cultural dimension of development. In reference to the global debates on autochthony, the Rhéébu Niû association and the Comité autochtone de gestion des ressources naturelles/Caugern (Indigenous Committee for Natural Resource Management) are demanding the strengthening of Kanak rights vis-à-vis the multinational nickel companies based on the economic marginalisation and environmental damage they have experienced. While it initially focused its attention on mining issues, this committee is broadening its horizons and applying itself to the global political field; Rhéébu Niû entered the political arena in 2008 with a discourse that is closest to the canonical definition of sustainable development.

Today, we face a paradoxical situation. While the weakness of policies that effectively link the economy, society and the environment is obvious [5], New Caledonia is experiencing an impressive mediatisation of sustainable development. This process, which tends to focus on the environment, allows the various corporatism to affirm their “good behaviour” in a textbook process of ex-post legitimisation. At the same time, there is a proliferation of ideas and projects for the integration of sustainable development into the policy tools: the development of an Agenda 21 in the Northern Province; the drawing up of a sustainable development strategy in the Southern Province; the implementation of a sustainable development observatory and a territorial planning and development scheme etc. These tools are not yet operational, thus it is too early to assess their capacity to push the boundaries, particularly in the rural sector. However, the adoption of sustainable development and its adaptation to the local contexts already appears to constitute a ‘new deal’, which will impact on agricultural and rural policies.

4. CONCLUSION

Beyond the conditions necessary to the efficient function of sustainable development policies, which must still be consolidated, the local dynamics are unfolding in accordance with multiple scales and temporalities. The prospects for the mining and administrative rents and the perspectives associated with the statutory evolution of the country are key variables that condition very dissimilar visions of sustainable
development, which are expressed by the different policy models adopted by the provinces.

Furthermore, the focus on environmental issues can be used to avoid political issues that remain sensitive. The consensus surrounding this – a priori unifying – topic could, in effect, weaken the notions of ‘common fate’ and ‘re-balancing’ – keywords throughout 20 years of the development policies. The risk of ‘normalising’ the messages in accordance with external global frameworks is real, and this could revive tensions related to dualism. Thus, the inclusion of a part of the Caledonian lagoon in the UNESCO World Heritage List in July 2008, and its implications in terms of the management of the watersheds, are exemplary. They inspire a unified vision of resource management even though the different executive powers still have dissimilar visions of it today.

Sustainable development, which only recently emerged in New Caledonia, has not ultimately triggered any radical change of course in public policy. Nevertheless, it is being integrated to the discourses and, more hesitantly, the policy tools. This integration/contextualisation requires new associations with the meaningful and shared expressions originating from the political Agreements – the notions of rebalancing and common fate: for some people, these keywords represent synonyms or local formulations of sustainable development, while others try to distance themselves from it. However, these debates and the political background limit the interrogation or re-examination of sustainable development in relation to the country’s rent-seeking economy. They refer back to the ambiguous and ideological nature of sustainable development, which are both responsible of the difficulties involved in its implementation in its canonical form.

5. REFERENCES