Part III
Progressive Development and Strategic Environmental Assessment

Introduction

“Progressive development” calls for renunciation of traditional Bedouin life styles in the desert, replacing them by a culture of irrigation and water harvesting \[1, 2\]. If this is implemented, it would essentially mean a departure from the old concept of “sustainability”. This sustainability aimed to preserve the current resource availability for an indefinite time by keeping a balance between extraction and renovation of natural resources (particularly water in the case of the desert belts). In contrast, “progressive development” intends to exhaust resources, namely fossil water, for a certain time until human development and environmental change shall allow establishing a new balance based on technology. Is it worthwhile to sacrifice the traditional ways of living for this new concept which is characterised by the belief that man can and should improve himself?

Most discussions of environmental policies focus on reducing the over-extraction of resources, and any concept rejecting the goal of sustainability appears heretical. However, a closer look at history makes clear that change is the essence of the environmental past in the desert belts. Sustainability of a certain life style or production method can only be achieved as long as the environmental framework remains stable— but this stability is a perceived feature of northern European environments, not the desert belts. For example, a small reduction of precipitation by 8% in the humid and semi-humid areas of Jordan means up to 75% less rain for the desert belts \[3\]. If global warming leads to severe drying of arid and semi-arid regions (ASAR), this could have dramatic impacts on traditional land use.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, the policies of most desert countries were characterized by attempts to develop ASAR according to northern European examples, importing European technologies and concepts in order to achieve European wealth. Simultaneously attempts were made to revive and preserve the specific desert heritage and identity. The inherent tension and opposition of these contrasting concepts might be the root of many failures. Is the idea of sustainability, a concept based on European experiences with over-exploitation of resources, suited to deserts? Or could “progressive development” offer an alternative?
References