SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A COMPLEX PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development carries several meanings, and is adopted by scholars, many governments, leaders of socioeconomic reform movements and environmentalists, organs of the United Nations including World Bank (usually under the influence of Industrialized Countries) and, of course, multinational corporations. This paper emphasizes that conceptual multiplicity and ambiguities prevail because of multiplicity of stakeholders whose interests continue to be accommodated in multilateral reports, individual stakeholder’s reports and scholarly articles representing various perspectives/disciplines.

KEYWORDS

Sustainable Development (SD), Economic Growth (EG), Economic Development (ED), The World Conservation Strategy (WCS), Third World, Agenda 21

During the 1960s a sense of global crisis began to develop, principally originating with degradation of environment, radioactive fallout from nuclear tests, examples of cross boundary acidification, toxic chemical wastes—all threatening widespread endemic pollution and ecological damage.

At the same time, economic development among the poor nations that had gained, or were in the process of gaining, independence from colonialist control, was not occurring as fast as it was hoped. There was growing inequality among rich and poor nations, and rich and poor within several countries. Effects of population growth, especially in the Southern countries, were combined with those of phenomenal growth (in the West) and inequality.

The significance of the problem lay in its being global. Environmental pollution tended to know no bounds and poverty and inequity in several nations affected the economic activity and interests of other nations. All such situation was topped by cold war between Western countries led by the USA and the Communist bloc led by USSR.
The last sentence gives some indication of the variety of perspectives with which the global problem was viewed. Western developed countries tended to see the global crisis in terms of environmental destruction in the so-called Third World (the loss of rainforests, desertification, decimation of wildlife, loss of habitats) and population pressures rather than in terms of activities of the developed First World.

The Third World, on the other hand, tended to emphasize the high levels of resource consumption and unfairness of the international economic order, and the claim that the First World’s interest in the Third World stemmed as much from self-interest as from altruistic concerns.

In 1966, Kenneth Boulding wrote a paper entitled: “The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth”. The reigning economic system exploited abundant resources, used vast amount of energy and accelerated production with little thought of tomorrow with respect to stock of capital. Boulding opined that spaceship economy should behave differently: It should minimize production, and waste. Boulding emphasized two ideas:

- Resources were part of a system with finite limits;
- Conserving capital stock was important.

With the depletion of resources and production of wastes continuing to increase, the early 1970s saw a wave of critiques of economic growth. The Limits to Growth (1972) (Brundtland, G. H, 1987) explored how exponential growth interacted with finite resources. The book’s exponential index was interpreted by environmentalist groups as a prediction, when the world would (soon) ‘run out’ of various resources. Whatever criticisms of the Limits to Growth, the basic assumption had to be right, namely, that growth that depended on the consumption of more and more resources could not continue indefinitely in a finite world. For many in the North, the simultaneous rapid growth of population gave the issue of limits a special urgency. The editors of The Ecologist published Blueprint for Survival wherein sustainability appeared as a major theme. Echoing some of the concerns expressed in the Limits to Growth report by Meadows Blueprint argued that the principal defect of the industrial way of life with its ethos of expansion was that it was not sustainable. In its view, indefinite growth of whatever type could not be sustained by finite resources.

From these concerns with the ‘unsustainability’ of growth economies, ‘sustainability’ emerged as a discourse synonymous with the idea of a steady-state economy. Many took it to be transition from high growth to low or even no-growth societies. Steady-state theorists argued that unlimited growth was a biophysical impossibility and that sustainability would require a ‘low throughput’ economy. They argued that there was an incompatibility between maximising economic growth and the goal of environmental sustainability. This was so because sustainability was more than a purely economic or ecological concept. The steady-state perspective emphasised policies and philosophies related to the reduction of energy consumption, as it encompassed broader socio-political goals and ethical values. Meadows also posited the idea that a no-growth economy needed to be supplemented by its consistency with equity, personal liberty, cultural progress, and the satisfaction of basic physical and psychological needs.

In 1962, a United Nations Resolution recognised the threat that declining natural resources would have on the prospects for economic development in the Third World. The United Nations
resolution considered natural resources to be of considerable importance to the economic development of the countries of the Third World. The resolution emphasized the need for preserving, restoring, enriching and making rational use of natural resources and flora and fauna.

When in 1962 the UN published The Development Decade: Proposals for Action for the First Development Decade (1960-70), optimism about the development efforts of the 1950s was still high. The argument was that rapid industrialization was the key to progress in the poorer countries, for it would lead to improvements in standards of living. However, a report of a meeting in 1969 of experts on social policy and planning noted that development either left behind, or in some ways even created, large areas of poverty, stagnation, marginality and actual exclusion from social and economic progress. In the view of the report, the undesirable condition was too obvious and too urgent to be overlooked.

Such First and Third World concerns were brought together in the U.N. ‘Conference on the Human Environment’ (Goldsmith, E., 1972) held at Stockholm in 1972. The conference enabled cooperation at the international level on environmental issues and also focused on the global implications of many environmental problems for biophysical and economic linkages. There was an understanding that economic activity would need to be constrained with possible trade-offs between economic efficiency and ecological integrity. However, developing country leaders were suspicious of environmental motives in the North, especially the emphasis on pollution abatement, as a potential restriction on their development aspirations. They rejected both low and no-growth scenarios, seeking instead a more equitable engagement with the global economy. Inclusion of poverty as a cause of environmental degradation helped to generate some acceptance of the idea that the environment was a problem for the development process as well. Compromises made at the Stockholm conference stimulated changes to the content and rationale of development programs and set in place the foundation for an understanding of sustainability which was different from the one that had emerged in the ‘no-growth’ school. However, Third World Countries were shortchanged.

Various forms of human activity causing most environmental concerns are reviewed. Some principles were laid down to meet Third World reservations. It was said that “integrated development” and “rational planning” could provide the means to improve environment. Both the phrases were words without substance. The Action Plan for Human Environment hammered out at the conference listed 109 items out of which only eight (8) recommendations dealt with relationship between environment and development. To some commentators, Stockholm Conference had a “remedial focus intended to limit environmental damage, or have it made good, but not to check development: the principal strategy was to legalize the environment as an economic externality.” (Kidd, C., 1972). On the conceptual level, environment and development remained opposed.

By the mid-1970s the debate on the integration of economic and social development had moved on. In a United Nations Symposium, Third World leaders expressed their dissatisfaction with the dominance of the conventional model of economic growth and its seeming inability to reduce destitution. The title of the symposium was “Pattern of Resource Use, Environment and Development”. The participants issued what came to be known as the Cocoyoc Declaration. This stated that the point of development should not be to develop things, but to develop man. It further said that any process of growth that does not lead to the fulfilment of basic needs was a travesty of
the idea of development. The declaration was also critical of development’s destructive impact on the diversity of local and traditional economies and cultures. It emphasized the need for the poorer countries to pursue the goal of self-reliance.

A United Nation Environment Program (UNEP) was formed subsequent to Stockholm conference, under the executive directorship of Maurice Strong. He was a Canadian entrepreneur, environmentalist and leading advocate of the United Nations’ role in global affairs. Strong was an important link in the attempt to reconceptualise the environment development relationship. UNEP sought a conceptual middle ground. UNEP’s 1978 report emphasized on developing economies and noted that, in order for development to be sustainable, it had to be constructed as eco-development. Such development would aim as sustaining the yield of renewable resources and reconcile the needs of present and future generations.

However, in emphasizing economic growth of a sustainable kind, Strong argued under the influence of development economics. The argument was that in both industrialized and less developed societies, eco-development should mean better growth, sound growth and perhaps even more growth in qualitative terms. Ultimately, UNEP was influential in building the language of ‘sustainability’ and ‘development’ which served to eclipse that of eco-development, and with it, the idea of ecological limits as a constraining factor in economic growth.

The idea of sustainability came to dominate popular discussion of the environment by the 1980s, but it was through the concept of sustainable development that such idea gained significance at the policy level. The World Conservation Strategy (WCS), a UN document of 1980, gave currency to the term ‘sustainable development’. Prepared with financial backing from UNEP and WWF and the benefit of comment from FAO and UNESCO, the WCS defined development as the modification of the biosphere and the application of human, financial, living and non-living resources to satisfy human needs and improve the quality of life. However, modification of the biosphere would be a threat unless resources were effectively conserved. WCS put strong emphasis on conservation which it defined as the management of the human use of the biosphere so that it might yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generation while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.

WCS emphasized that development and conservation operated in the same global context and that their underlying problems, which must be overcome if either is to be successful, were identical. It identified the main problems as poverty, population pressure, social inequity and terms of trade that worked against the interests of poorer countries. It listed the priority requirements, national actions and international actions, and called for a new international development strategy aimed at redressing inequities, achieving a more dynamic and stable world economy, accelerating economic growth and countering the worst impact of poverty.

According to WCS, conservation was entirely compatible with the growing demand for people-centered development, that could achieve a wider distribution of benefits to whole population. Such development would make for better nutrition, health, education, family welfare, fuller employment, greater income security, protection from environmental degradation. It would make fuller use of people’s labour, capabilities, motivations and creativity; and that is more sensitive to cultural heritage.
An important feature of the WCS was that it reflected both the utilitarian and moral strands of environmentalist thinking. It took a utilitarian interest in the economic potential of ecosystems and the application of scientific knowledge to their management. As a result, it was able to make many detailed suggestions for sustainable utilization so that resources could continue it to be available. It also acknowledged a conservation ethic founded on respect for the intrinsic value of the biosphere. It said: “We have not inherited the earth from our parents; we have borrowed it from our children.”

Such dualism was extremely useful. On the one hand, the utilitarian argument allowed conservation to be packaged in a way which was expected to be attractive to the materialism which was seen to underlie thinking about development. On the other, moral arguments could be employed where they were more effective, for example among environmentalist in industrialized countries.

WCS was overly optimistic in suggesting solutions to be applied on a global scale. Such relations tended to be presented as the obviously right thing to do. However, far from being appropriate, they reflected Northern bias. Their perspective was that of Northern interests—whether conservationist or exploitative—in largely Southern resources; their diagnoses were based on Northern science and their implementation would require Northern technology and expertise.

Principles such as “population increase must be halted” and “carrying capacity must be respected” were suggested without considering the political realities affecting the chances of their being implemented. In many ways, rights of local people were being neglected and ignored. As such proposals could appear to southern eyes as part of an undemocratic attempt to impose solutions that assumed Northern directed global management, served Northern interests and entailed Southern compliance at a very high cost.

Following the lead from multilateral agencies, private organizations were quick to ignore Third World concerns. One example was the World Resources Institute (WRI) which articulated sustainability in terms of the long-run capacity to maintain and even improve living standards. The Institute founded in 1982 was to carry out policy research and analysis on global environmental resource issues and their relationship to population and development. The Institute, organized as a non-profit corporation, could receive tax deductible gifts and contributions. The Institute articulated the idea of sustainability not as threatening to the status quo, especially in the industrialized economies: One of its researchers authored Not Far Afield: U.S. Interests and Global Environment. It reinforced the Institute’s idea that it was poverty in the developing world, as opposed to affluence in the developed world, that was the central factor in global environmental problems.

By the late 1970s the crippling effect of the burden of interest payments on development loans and the worsening financial plight of the poorer countries and the increasing suffering of their populations, led the UN to appoint three independent commissions to report on aspects of the crisis: the Independent Commission on International Development Issues (ICIDI) (Brandt Commission), set up in 1977; the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues (the Palme Commission), set up in 1980; and the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (Brandtland Commission), set up in 1983.

The first independent commission to report, within a few months of publication of WCS, was the Brandt Commission. It was made up of elder statesmen and men and women of stature from both North and South. It published its first report, North –South: A Programme for Survival, in 1980,
and a second, Common Crisis, in 1983, when the scale of the debt crisis became evident. North-South accepted that development based on economic growth had failed. In its view, no concept of development could be accepted which continued to condemn hundreds of millions of people to starvation and despair. The situation was not simply one of crisis, but possibly of survival. However, North-South contained no suggestion of how the goals of human dignity, security, justice and equity might be achieved. On the other hand, authors insisted that economic growth and industrialization were essential if the living standards of the poor were to improve. Notwithstanding, it were these very processes which had led to an increase in human degradation, insecurity, injustice and social inequity and which had led to so much criticism of the development model.

The most significant institution to popularise and propel political engagement with the concept of sustainable development was the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). Established as an independent body by the U.N. in 1983, the commission’s report, Our Common Future, argued that the acceleration of global environmental problems required proactive management and that international co-operation on sustainable development was the appropriate response. In the WCED articulation of sustainable development the long standing ‘North-South’ tensions in the environment-development question seemed to be reconciled.

Brundtland’s definition and the ideas expressed in the report, Our Common Future, recognized the dependency of humans on the environment to meet needs and well-being in a much wider sense than merely exploiting resources: ecology and economy were becoming ever more interwoven – locally, regionally, nationally and globally. Rather than domination over nature our lives, activities and society were nested within the environment. The report stressed that humanity, whether in an industrialized or a rural subsistence society, depended for security and basic existence on the environment; the economy and our well-being now and in the future needed the environment. The report also pointed to the planet-wide interconnections: environmental problems were not local but global, so that actions and impacts had to be considered internationally to avoid displacing problems from one area to another by actions such as releasing pollution that crossed boundaries, moving polluting industries to another location or using up more than an equitable share of the earth’s resources. Environmental problems threatened people’s health, livelihoods and lives and could cause wars and could threaten future generations.

The WCED conception of sustainable development began with the imperative of economic growth and then moved to the question of how such growth might be made sustainable. It conceded that the concept of sustainable development implied limits, but not absolute limits. The limits were only those which were imposed by the present state of technology and social organization and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. WCED argued that such factors could be managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth. The idea was that, over time, technological advances could improve the earth’s carrying capacity, implying that the biophysical context of humanity was a frontier to be conquered rather than a limit to be respected. The WCED model emphasised the need for equity and also poverty eradication but accepted distributional ‘trickle-down’.

‘Policy entrepreneurs’ working within key organisations, such as the OECD and the WCED, tried to situate environmental norms within the growing consensus on a liberal economic order by re-conceptualising the environment as an economic rather than ecological problem.
This facilitated an acceleration of international co-operation on environment issues and helped to move environment concern into the mainstream of international governance.

Having found synergies with a growing consensus about ‘proper’ economic conduct, the World Bank, issued a report in 1988 stating that sustainable development would be central to its policy goals. The idea of sustainable development allowed the formulation of environmental policies consistent with its broader goals of promoting economic growth and trade liberalisation.

In the five years following the release of the Bruntland report, preparations began for a massive conference during which the idea of sustainable development could be elaborated upon and clarified. The 1992 Rio Summit formalized the Bruntland definition of sustainability, whilst ensuring a new degree of prominence for the concept. Little discussion was given to the basic concept itself, but much attention was given to operationalizing the concept. The outcome was Agenda 21, a massive list of means by which to implement sustainable development. This was expected to guide future action at the local, national, and global level. While the substantive outcome of the Rio Summit is hotly debated, it could safely be said that this conference cemented the reputation of sustainable development as the buzzword of the 1990s in policy and humanitarian circles. As the decade progressed, the concept of SD quickly penetrated civil society, the scientific research community, the world of international politics, and eventually began to appear in corporate publications from some of the largest multinationals corporations ever to exist.

The world-wide support for such interpretation of sustainable development reached its high peak in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro. It was subscribed to by local, national and international government and non-government organisations and institutions. Creating a global partnership for sustainable development, national government delegations at the ‘Rio Earth Summit’ signed on to Agenda 21 (Myers, N., 1987) which committed signatories to developing and implementing national plans of action. However, UNCED’s understanding of sustainable development reconstructed the idea that a healthy environment is central to securing continued economic growth in such a way that growth is central to securing a healthy environment. Where sustainable development once implied ecological sustainability, it was now commonly promoted as economic sustainability: sustaining the growth in material consumption. Where Our Common Future (Reid, D., 2013) had been ‘ambiguous’, Agenda 21 overtly promoted growth while rejecting the discourse of scarcity and limits. Although the production and consumption habits of developed countries were acknowledged as a major source of environmental problems, UNCED documents recommended more economic growth (in both developed and developing countries) as the solution to such problems. In the WCED rhetoric, sustainable development had been promulgated as a principle for reconciling the interests of North and South, rich and poor, with goals that included environmental improvement, population stabilization, international equity, and peace. Our Common Future had tried to make economic growth consistent with such goals, but in Agenda 21, UNCED made economic growth the means for achieving them. The concept of sustainable development came to be used by global institutions for explicitly promoting growth. At UNCED, there was widespread acceptance of the argument that the structural transformation of poor societies into market-based economies was a prerequisite for eliminating poverty and for encouraging technological innovation. Growing economies were conceived as creating the resources and incentives necessary to solve environmental problems. With economic growth viewed as the central ‘end’ of
governance, a consensus on market mechanisms as means became a foregone conclusion. More
significantly, in Agenda 21 a commitment to the environment was situated within free-market
principles. The method of renewed economic growth was to find in the reduction of tariff barriers
and the expansion of international competition. Capitalist business enterprises were conceived as
the agents of a more sustainable world, both in bringing about growth as well as technological
innovation. Indeed, ‘partnerships’ between governments and business were flagged as important
for the process of realising the goals of Agenda 21, partly due to the efforts of the business lobby.
The Business Council for Sustainable Development was active at UNCED and also helped to
finance the Rio summit. It had been formed in 1990 at the invitation of Maurice Strong in his
capacity as secretary-general of UNCED. Stephan Schmidheiny, a key figure with Strong promoted
the shift in emphasis towards business as the agents of sustainable development. In his book
Changing Course Schmidheiny argued for the free operation of market forces and integration of the
polluter pays principle. This type of environmental accommodation sought to apply market
principles to natural resources and to encourage innovative environmental options for business and
industry. Such ideas were distinguished from the ecological modernization embedded in Our
Common Future by their appeal to private profitability which was promoted as a way of obviating
the need for a public regulatory apparatus. Taking up the business view, Agenda 21 effectively
collapsed the distinction between ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustained economic growth’,
making sustainability congruent with the free-market. The conflict between unlimited economic
growth and the limits of ‘nature’ as resource and sink was thereby eliminated. Agenda 21
seemingly overcame distributional conflicts. It offered equity for future generations by presuming
the substitutability of ‘man-made’ and ‘natural’ capital. It averted attention from over-consumption
in the North and promised compatibility between environmental preservation and the maximisation
of growth. Economic growth, once the problem, had been recast as the solution, and the
oppositional discourse of sustainability which had been started against growth transformed into
orthodoxy of accumulation. This reconstituted principle of sustainable development was widely
embraced at the level of national and international level at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable
Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. The WSSD was convened in order to define the
instruments for tackling global poverty and reaching ecosystem security, as well as setting
timeframes and targets for Agenda 21 which initially contained no binding agreements for
implementation and accountability.

On other hand, there occurred negotiation of voluntary partnerships. Several hundred such
partnerships between business, governments and NGO’s were established many such partnerships
involved private business entities who were overtly shaping the sustainable development agenda.
The business lobby at WSSD continued to argue that the only hope for the world’s poor was
economic growth produced by free-trade.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary environmental priorities have largely been shaped by the imperatives of capital
accumulation. Although poverty eradication remains central to the current rhetoric of sustainable
development, there is little to connect that goal to the eco-development movements of the 1970’s.
There, sustainability was a critical discourse aimed at growth patterns that had destroyed the
environment and had created inequalities at local and global levels. In a way, a quite different
‘sustainability’ has emerged; one where economic rather than ecological concerns dominate the
environment-development discourse. In the process of political compromises, sustainable development has been divorced from its critical content and made congruent with neoliberal policies. Consequently, the potential for ‘sustainable development’ to serve as the vehicle for a progressive ‘ecological restructuring’ was severely weakened, and the rhetoric of sustainability was instead utilised as a discursive frame for consolidating a neoliberal ‘economic restructuring’. The WCED opened the door to sustainable development’s ‘neo-liberalisation’ by charting a course between the idea of absolute limits to growth and that of unlimited potential for growth. It appealed to the notion of progress in the context of ecological threats to social advance, especially in poor countries (Meadowcroft 2000:382). However, whereas the WCED understood environmental protection as a necessary condition of sustainable development, the UNCED subsequently reversed this logic in its conception of economic growth as a necessary condition of environmental protection. This re-conceptualisation of economy-environment relations prioritised market instruments over socio-political alternatives such as direct regulatory actions which imply trade-offs with market values. Emphasis on economic criteria has furthered the opportunities for profit generation without achieving the promised social and environmental benefits. The global environment continues to deteriorate and inequality between North and South continues to widen. The shift to a neoliberal interpretation of sustainable development may have facilitated great rise in the number of stakeholders with greater global prominence for environmental issues. But the trend of government through the market has failed both the initial notions of sustainability and development.

REFERENCES


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