



ISSN: 0976-3031

Available Online at <http://www.recentscientific.com>

CODEN: IJRSFP (USA)

International Journal of Recent Scientific Research
Vol. 9, Issue, 1(G), pp. 23319-23322, January, 2018

**International Journal of
Recent Scientific
Research**

DOI: 10.24327/IJRSR

Research Article

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CONCEPT AND VERACITY

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijrsr.2018.0901.1444>

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 10th October, 2017
Received in revised form 14th
November, 2017
Accepted 08th December, 2017
Published online 28th January, 2018

Key Words:

Development, Environment, Ability,
Government, Convergence.

ABSTRACT

Sustainable development is a futurist development paradigm and over the past twenty years governments, business and civil society have accepted sustainable development as a guiding principle. Sustainable development combines the two terms, "Sustainability" and 'Development' to indicate a pattern of growth which strengthens both the national capabilities to core for their people in relation to their total relationship with the resources of earth. It focuses upon a relationship between human being and their environment and indicates a warning that human being cannot push development which is against nature. It is generally accepted that sustainable development calls for a convergence between the three pillars of economic development, social equity and environmental protection. It is thereby considerably widened the scope of global problems to include such matters as the environment, health, trade and poverty. It also highlights the links between globalization, planet-wide risks and shared responsibilities that created a need for concerted action by the international community. This paper uses the phrase 'sustainable development' to describe attempts to combine concerns with the environment and socio-economic issues. It highlights the drawbacks of the current mechanism for challenges resolution and as possible solutions; it suggests the urgent need to shift the attitude of the world towards the concept and requirement of transformative changes at local, national and global levels.

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INTRODUCTION

The understanding of development took a new dimension in the 1980s and was perceived as multidimensional concept encapsulating widespread improvements in the social as well as the material well-being of all in the society. It was recognized that there was no single model for achieving development and that investment in all sectors i.e. agriculture, industry and so on was required. For development to be sustainable; it must encompasses not only economic and social factor, but also those related to population, natural resources and resulting impacts on the environment¹ The concept of sustainable development has emerged through many stages; from an ideological side-show, an interesting trend mixed with enthusiasm, skepticism and uncertainty to an agenda on which there might be differences of opinion, but one which cannot be denied, and one which individuals, companies and institutions increasingly adopt as their own. It begins as an almost unnoticeable trend that gradually takes shape and finally develops into a fundamental global condition.²

Sustainable Development: Theoretical Development

The concept popularized in Our Common Future, a report published by the World Commission on Environment and

Development in 1987. Also known as the Brundtland report, Our Common Future included the classic definition of sustainable development; "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."³ Despite as on-going debate on the actual meaning, a few common principles tend to be emphasized. The first is a commitment to equity and fairness, in that priority should be given to improve the conditions of the world's poorest and decisions should account for the rights of future generations. The second is a long-term view that emphasizes the precautionary principles, i.e., "where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation."⁴ Third, sustainable development embodies integration and understanding and acting on the complex interconnections that exist between the environment, economy, and society. This is not a balancing act or a playing of one issue off against the other, but recognizing the interdependent nature of these three pillars. It focuses upon a relationship between human and their environment and indicates a warning that human being cannot push development which is against nature. It is thereby considerably widened the scope of global

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problems to include such matters as the environment, health, trade and poverty. It also highlighted the links between globalization, planet-wide risks and shared responsibility that created a need for concentered actions by international community.⁵ The Brundtland report provided the momentum for the landmark 1992 Rio Summit that laid the foundations for the global institutionalization of sustainable development. Marking the twentieth anniversary of the Stockholm Conference the Earth Summit adopted the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and Agenda 21, a global plan of action for sustainable development. The Rio Declaration contained 27 principles of sustainable development, including a principle on “common but differentiated responsibilities” which stated; “in view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, states have common but differentiated responsibilities”. The developed countries acknowledged the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of technologies and financial resources they command.⁶ It was a landmark achievement incorporating environmental, economic and social concerns into a single framework. As agreed in Rio, sustainable development is associated with issues of social justice and environmental democracy which stands for the creative participation of international communities in the construction of the new environmental rationality for sustainable production. So Agenda 21 included 40 separate chapters setting out actions in regard to the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development, conservation and management of natural resources, the role of major groups and means of implementation. Three seminal instruments of environmental governance were established at the Rio Summit: the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). Since that time a number of important international conferences on sustainable development have been held- including the 1997 Earth Summit+5 in New York and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg.

Is a Myth or a Reality?

Sustainable Development raises questions about the post-war claim that still dominates much mainstream economic policy that international prosperity and human well-being can be achieved through increased global trade and industry. It recognizes that past growth models have failed to eradicate poverty globally or within countries, “no trends...no programmes or policies offer any real hope of narrowing the growing gap between rich and poor nations.⁷ There is no sign of an increase in global equity; in fact the world is becoming more unequal. Inequalities within and between countries are greater than anything experienced before, where 80 per cent of the world income is received by 20 per cent of the world’s population. The USA compared with its share of the world’s population, continues to greatly over-consume resources. On the other hand, the Multidimensional Poverty Index, which measures deprivation in health, education and living standards, counted 1.6 billion people living in multidimensional poverty in 2016 – nearly twice the number of people living in extreme poverty measured by income alone.⁸ Economists observed that the dominating development model tends to focus on economic growth as precedence rather than people’s right or welfare and

environmental processes and limits. Various contributors supported economic growth coming first in developing countries, especially least-developed countries (LDCs) and concluded that investment in environmental protection should be left to a later stage of development, essentially accepting environmental degradation to meet immediate needs.⁹ Economic growth since the Rio Summit has been fed by unprecedented resource and material consumption and related environmental impacts. Large portion of the natural world have been converted to human use. While the world has made some progress on decoupling natural resource extraction from economic growth, the absolute consumption of resources is projected to increase long into the future.¹⁰ Increasing consumption, combined with population growth, mean that humanity’s demands on the planet have more than doubled over the past 45 years. These impacts are revealed in a number of disturbing trends. Global biodiversity continues to decline and species in all groups with known trends are, on average, being driven closer to extinction. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment reveals that the provision of many critical ecosystem services-such as water, biodiversity, fiber and food-is being compromised due to the impact of human development. Scarcity of and competition over fresh water is a growing concern for many regions in the world, with around 50 countries currently facing moderate to serve water stress. Climate change will exacerbate water stress and other problems. Current predictions summarized in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), indicates that the carrying capacity of large parts of the world will be compromised by climate change. Significant political division threatens international progress on climate change, yet the window for action to avert the most dangerous effects of global warming is shrinking by the day.¹¹ Climate change poses numerous and stark challenges for sustainable development and its effects will be felt in all regions of the globe, although the intensity of exposure will vary. Degree of vulnerability will vary even more, with developing countries and the poor, which have contributed the least to global warming, likely to suffer the most. Coastal communities, notably in small islands and mega-deltas, mountain settlements and urban communities in mega-cities of developing countries are particularly vulnerable. Agriculture will also be negatively impacted by the increasing frequency of extreme weather events such as heat waves and droughts, and the intensification of the water cycle, further intensifying aridity of already dry zones and thus reducing the amount of arable land. Growing average temperatures and changes in precipitation trends are already having a significant negative impact on yields of global maize and wheat crops. All three factors-land, water and energy-have a direct impact on agriculture and food production. Food prices have already increased and become more volatile in recent years, partly driven by higher prices and tighter supplies of those factors. Competing demands for land, water and energy, and the impact of climate change, are exacerbating the scale of this challenge. At the same time, the expansion of food production has to be achieved in an environmentally sustainable way, so as not to contribute to further degradation of the environment.

Simultaneously, while mortality is declining throughout the world, fertility rates remain high for some countries, notably least developed countries, and as a result, future population growth will be extremely concentrated geographically. This

diversity implies that future increases in world population will be highly concentrated geographically. Only eight countries-the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, the United Republic of Tanzania, and the United States-will account for half of the projected global population increase. More worrisome is the fact that rapid population growth continues in countries that are the least well equipped to provide the necessary investments to deal with larger populations. Populations are expected to more than double in the least developed countries between now and 2050, and short of major development progress in these countries, this is likely to challenge their sustainable development prospects in a number of ways. A vicious circle of poverty, lack of education, ill health, unemployment etc. can perpetuate inequalities. Breaking it will require further investments in health and education systems, as well as better access to reproductive health services and the protection of women's reproductive rights. At the same time, these investments have to be complemented by expanding productive employment opportunities, as a growing number of young people enter labour markets. Population growth, in particular in combination with climate change, can add to local environmental stresses and resource and land scarcity.¹²

Possible Pathways

Some argue that the world has failed on sustainable development. But just twenty years is a relatively short time frame to implement the needed changes on such a complex and challenging issue. The recent financial crisis and the beginning of the decline of trust in the liberalization and globalization model could mean some renewed receptivity for new sustainable development paradigm. A new model could chart a development path that truly is concerned with equity, poverty alleviation, reducing resources use and integrating economic, environmental and social issues in decision making. The lack of implementation of sustainable development is partly a lack of entry point to make real progress. As noted, the economic agenda and economic institutions have had greater influence than those governing environmental and social issues, at both the national and international level. At the institutional level, responsibility for the implementation of sustainable development is generally assigned to the Ministry of Environment. But ministries tend to be weaker departments and they do not control the policy tools required to drive real change.¹³ Environmental agencies find it difficult to take a balance approach to economic growth, social development and environmental protection. At the regional level, regional agreements on sustainable development and mechanism for their implementation are not stable. At national level, a multi-disciplinary approach to governance is needed rather than the persisting tendency for different line ministries, departments and agencies to act on a clear framework for coordination across the sectors. Lack of coordination to integrate the three pillars of sustainable development has been a major challenge at all levels. The outcome of the discussion by the World Summit on sustainable development that was held in South Africa in 2002 was that sustainable development has not been able to evolve out of its environmental roots and that greater focus on climate change may be pulling the issue towards a purer environmental direction rather than integrating sustainable development perspective. Implementation of

actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change-such as reducing deforestation, promoting sustainable energy, improved agricultural methods- have the potential to bolster sustainable development. But this has become a limited approach given the current state of the climate change negotiations and that climate change is also perceived as an environmental issue and lacks entry points. There is a critical need for a deepened understanding at all levels, of the complex interactions between the economy, social development and the environment.¹⁴ At the global level, the human development agenda and the goal of environmental protection have to be jointly pursued. Developed countries in particular would make moves towards sustainable production and consumption, while developing countries would offer greater cooperation in meeting climate and other global challenges. Such a global consensus on sustainable development will be based on solidarity, with human development and environmental protection as integrated and universal goals for all countries.

The pursuit of sustainable development requires a concomitant reform in constellation of social and political forces at the global, national and local level. Several voluntary agreements have been reached particularly during and post Rio Summit, but the political will to enforce them has often been misplaced. The regional agreement on sulphur dioxide and a global agreement on Ozon-depleting chemicals such as chlorofluorocarbons led to a general optimism that the world is heading towards the right direction and inspired the conventions on climate, biodiversity and the forests. However the outcomes of the negotiation on these three issues indicate misplaced optimism.¹⁵ Similarly, the differing views and conflict of interest among major players on the ability of the environment to endure human impact are the major reasons for inadequate policy. This has raised concerns on the effectiveness of the current democratic decision-making and consensus-seeking mechanism to the achievement of sustainable development. In September 25, 2017, is the second anniversary of the approval of the Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - the international community's roadmap for achieving a more prosperous and peaceful world for everyone. In addition to establishing an ambitious group of 17 comprehensive goals, (including no poverty, zero hunger, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, good health and well-being, responsible consumption and production etc.) the agenda has required a paradigm shift with regard to taking on the complex challenges of development. This, in turn, requires greater effort and new methodologies to insure its principal end, which is to eradicate poverty and improve the lives of all people.¹⁶

A transformation of the energy system will be necessary to achieve near universal access to energy in an environmentally sustainable manner. Current emissions trends of greenhouse gases will likely lead to further increases in global temperatures, with potentially catastrophic consequences. To avert further warming, major investments in energy efficiency are critical, while industrial policies and technological innovation, transfer and adaptation can support a low-carbon inclusive growth path to facilitate a global energy transformation that is compatible with economic and social inclusion in developing countries. Coherence in national development strategies implies most fundamentally that

socioeconomic development strategies aim to avoid further environmental distress. Developed countries in particular have to address unsustainable consumption and production patterns and their continuously rising environmental impact, while emerging and developing economies need to pursue the goal of greening their catch-up growth.

Sustainable development like any other evolutionary concept has a long history. The spectrum of challenges and their deep-rooted interconnectivity are the justification for the pursuit of sustainable development. Progress in sustainability will require basic things: first of all the three pillars should be integrated. Second, modern science and technology is important for ecologizing economy. Third, social movements should change from watchdogs to active participants in sustainable development. Fourth, the role of the state ought to change to become more proactive in mobilizing private actors to take initiatives such as corporate social responsibility. Also, the need to generate adequate scientific capacity and institutional support in developing countries is particularly urgent as they are most vulnerable to multiple stresses that arise from rapid simultaneous changes in social and environmental systems. There must be mechanism for monitoring the compliance of countries to their obligations under various environmental agreements. Currently there is a multiplicity of institutions with fragmented responsibilities. A better governance regime is required to ensure cooperation and compliance.

Only sustainable development has the potential to deal with the fundamental challenges for humanity, now and into the future. There is just a need to have more clarity of concept, concentrating on sustainable livelihoods and well-being rather than well-having and to link the social, economic and environmental issues to human equity.

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How to cite this article:

Sunil Kumar.2018, Sustainable Development: Concept and Veracity. *Int J Recent Sci Res.* 9(1), pp. 23319-23322.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijrsr.2018.0901.1444>
