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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Sustainability and Development: From the Lens of Social Justice

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**Abstract:** Sustainability is a much-talked-about term in today's time. Sustainability's relation with development is quite complex. The term Sustainability means to sustain and was first mentioned in the Brundtland Report in the World Commission on Environment. It defined sustainability as meeting our needs without being detrimental to future needs. Sustaining the resources with a decent pace of development is what is important. The development itself is a debated term with respect to its meaning. Whether it only means economic growth or overall development of a country, including social development, economic growth, and sustaining the natural environment to provide enough resources for the generations to come. Taking only that much from nature which doesn't result in exploitation of the environment, thereby resulting in injustice. This further raises an issue with regard to the affluent countries already developed and poor countries making an effort to bring a standard of living for its citizens. This paper makes an attempt to argue that sustainability and development are not opposite to each other rather, both should go hand in hand. Thus, the concept of sustainable development came to be, and what we rightly mean by sustainable development and how it may result in terms of social justice. A developed society is one where social justice prevails, not only in the talking terms but also in terms of policies and implementation. This paper makes an attempt to draw this parallel between the theory and practice.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, development, sustainable development, social justice, environment, policy.

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## 1 Introduction

Sustainability is a trendy term in the current times, and this leads to many understandings of the term. This is to clarify that in the present work/paper, this term is being referred

to in the context of environmental sustainability and developmental growth together, if not stated otherwise. Again, by the term development, this paper refers to the overall human growth per international standards. Though both the terms are debatable thus, it is required to define what these terms mean. The present work aims to establish a relationship between the two and what is their relation to social justice. In other words, how justice is resulted or ignored/not resulted in the process of achieving sustainable development. To understand the issue at hand more clearly, let us briefly look at the key concepts. The most significant term here is social justice. Social justice advocates justice for all. In other words, it is concerned with the distribution of goods in any society. It talks about equality for all members of society.

When we ask the question of whether a society is just or unjust, there can be multiple ways this question can be looked at in any given human society. Such as, are people treated fairly? Whether the benefits and burdens distributed fairly? And also, in terms of income, the gap between rich and poor, and whether this gap is fair or unfair. All these questions concern distributive justice, as it deals with social benefits, particularly economic rights and opportunities (Christman, 2018). Development is similarly an essential and urgent issue in the social and political philosophy. The concept of development has evolved over time and has undergone various changes. It is understood as a 'good' change or a 'positive' change in society that is desired for the wellbeing of people. Since the start of the discussion of development, it was wrongly equated with the economic growth of a country or nation in terms of GDP and per capita income. It became a question of economics and economic policies. But the concept of development is an ethically laden concept with huge ethical responsibility. The economic paradigm of development overlooked the environment and social wellbeing of people, resulting in injustice. To include ethics in theory and at the policy level, various thinkers such as Amartya Sen, Denis Goulet, Nigel Dower, and others raised questions and argued for an inclusive concept of development involving justice into it. The question of development cannot be seen in isolation from justice, as it has to do with the distribution of benefits and burdens, and whether these distributions are just is taken care of by the concept of justice. Accordingly, the conception of development evolved further to become worthwhile and sustainable to incorporate social justice in it. Sustainability along with development attempts to address the concerns of economic growth and environmental protection together.

## **2 What we understand by 'sustainable development'?**

The concept of sustainable development is built on the notion that sustainability and development are not in contrast to each other but rather complimentary. The concepts of sustainability and development were brought together in the Brundtland Report for the first time, and the term 'sustainable development' came into existence. Sustainable Development (SD) talks about a development that is sustainable over time. SD aims to meet the needs of the present without being detrimental to the needs of future generations, as defined in the Brundtland report. It contains two main ideas: 1) the concept of 'needs' that are meeting the needs of the people and 2) the environment's capacity to meet the needs of the present as well as the future generations. So, the goals of socio-economic development must also be defined in terms of sustainability. As stated by the 'Caring for

the Earth definition', "sustainable development means improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems." SD is a debated term, and there are various understandings of it, but they all share certain features and thus move from an agreement on the basic concept of sustainable development to having formed a practical notion of it. Accordingly, it is a "development which is sustainable economically, socially and environmentally, and where these considerations are integrated into actual policies" (Attfield, 1999, p.106).

There is an ambiguity around the term Sustainable Development due to the variety of meanings that comes within this term. The objections and ambiguity around sustainable development is widely discussed by thinkers like Wilfred Beckerman, Steve Connelly, Michael Jacobs and others. In his paper "Sustainable Development: is it a useful concept" Beckerman argues that this concept is either morally unacceptable or logically redundant. He maintains that environmental issues can be addressed in economic policies even without any overridden policy criterion that amounts to concepts like sustainability (Beckerman, 2012, p.371). The ambiguity in the definition of sustainable development is problematic for Beckerman. Harvey Brooks argues in a similar vein and maintains that sustainable development is just technical and scientific features of a particular development model paired with the moral injunction. This points to the flaw in the concept because "any particular development path is technically sustainable does not, by itself, carry any special moral force" (Beckerman, 2012 p.372). According to Harvey Brooks, "...concept of sustainability in the process of development to be operationally useful it must be more than just an expression of social values or political preferences disguised in scientific language." Therefore, ambiguity is one problem. It is true that the concept of Sustainable Development is open to multiple possible interpretations, yet there must be certain fundamental features shared in these interpretations, and with this agreement of basic characteristics, we move forward. Herman E. Daly argued that the concept of sustainable development accurately described is a crucial concept and that "all important concepts dialectically are vague at the margins" (Daly, 2012, p.391). He compared the concept of sustainable development to the concept of money. We are able to handle the concept of money very efficiently, and without it we will have a hard time, same is true for the concept of sustainable development (Daly, 2012).

According to Michael Jacobs, there are two senses in which the meaning of a concept is questioned. In the first sense, the disputed concept is unitary and defined by the fixed core ideas essential to the concept. At the second level, the concept is questioned with respect to its practical interpretation, that is, in its implementation. It is at the second level that the concept of SD is disputed or questioned. Jacobs presents four major fault lines in the concept of SD; 1) Environmental protection- there is a need to distinguish between a weak and a strong sense of sustainable development. Weak sustainability follows a less strict notion of environmental protection. That is to say; environmental protection is only till that limit where economic growth is not compromised. Strong sustainability is a strong commitment to living within the limits of the environment's carrying capacity. 2) Equity- it is a requirement of sustainable development. There is a conflict between the northern and southern interpretations of equity. In the northern interpretation, equity is given less emphasis, and there is no commitment to national or global resource distribution. Southern interpretation focuses on raising the living

standards of the poor, and equity is the central concern. 3) Participation- this is about the top-down and bottom-up approaches to sustainable development. In top-down interpretation, participation is limited to major stakeholders of society, business, local government, and large NGOs. In the bottom-up approach, ordinary members of public and community organizations are participants. And 4) Scope of the subject area- this has to do with the narrow and broader concept of sustainable development. In the narrow sense, it revolves around environmental protection. Broader sense includes health, freedom, education, participation, pollution, and other such aspects of development. These fault lines show that the interpretation of conceptions can form a distinct model of sustainability or sustainable development. Further, this explains that the conception of sustainable development can be used according to the ideological objectives (Hattingh, 2001). In the narrow or conventional model of sustainable development, there will be an emphasis on the human capital, i.e., how durably humans can use the resources and their distribution. The broader or the progressive model of sustainable development is concerned with bigger changes in our economy, politics, institutions, and individual lifestyles. It focuses on ensuring a fairer distribution of resources at the national and global levels. Keeping in emphasis generations, both future, and present, while staying within the carrying capacity of supporting ecological systems (Hattingh, 2001).

Sustainability and sustainable development came up as the answer to the many problems that the world is dealing with. Its history traces back to the Brundtland report that came up in 1987. This report coined and defined the word sustainability for the first time. The meaning of development was debated, and competing ideas were trying to define its meaning and essential aims as well as different theories with regard to achieving development (Fukkuda-Par and McNeil, 2019). The development goals and the agenda of these goals thus represented an unparalleled effort to bridge the north-south, and rich poor divide. As it tried to look for a common ground “with a set of ideas as the consensus global norm concerning both the ends and the means of development” (Fukkuda-Par and McNeil, 2019, p.5). The ‘preservation of opportunities to live well’ is the normative principle that guides the notion of sustainability. This notion of sustainability has equal consideration for both humans and non-humans.

### **3 How it is related to justice?**

In this regard, it is important to talk about justice coming into the picture to answer the question of whether the development agenda that we are following and are aiming to achieve is just or not. A society, in order to be able to be fully developed, requires to be just. Justice is the prerequisite for development. Just development is one where the benefits and the burdens are distributed equally in the society, where the benefits are not only enjoyed by a certain section of society and the burdens are faced by another. It also ensures opportunities for every member of the society, to get an education, health services, employment, and conditions for their growth, including environmental resources, etc. The notion of justice is thus very important for any development agenda as without including social justice in its formulation and prescription, any agenda will fail miserably and will not be a development that is inclusive and thereby catering to its normative principle of ‘preservation of opportunities to live well.’ The Sustainable development Goals Agenda claims to

be consistent with the idea of justice and involves environmental justice into it. With the measurements of monitoring the goals across the world, it also promises to take care of a just distribution. The environment is an important facet in the concept of justice as well as it provides with the basic foundations of living well, that is, provides with conditions of living well. Incorporating the environment in the agenda of development is what makes the SDGs a hope for the global community, but it was not an easy task to do.

## 4 Environment into the Agenda

The formulation of SDGs was that of incorporating environment. It was so because the connection between environment and development has always been a debatable and contentious. In the traditional approach of '3 Pillars' of development, the environment was one of the main pillars, along with the Economic and Social pillars (Farely and Smith, 2013). Theoretically, in this approach environment seems to be crucial, but at the practical level, preference is given to the economic and social pillars over the environment by the governments and such institutions. Thereby priority given to the economy and environment is compromised. This policy approach was based on the idea of growing first and cleaning up later. This further paved the way for ignoring or excluding the policies for the protection of the environment from development agendas (O'Connor, 1996). The line between synergies and tradeoffs among environment and other pillars was also blurred by this three pillars approach, and the environment was compromised. However, on the other hand, some thinkers also argued for an integrated approach where the environment is seen as the basic footing to rely upon for human development and wellbeing of people, thereby taking a strong stand for active measures for protecting the environment.

Sustainable development's ability to cater to as the middle ground between the issues of nature and environment and issues of value for economic development, and the issue of bringing an improvement in the human conditions has been one of the achievements of SD. The world commission on Environment and Development described environment and development as inseparable, and this inseparability serves as the foundation of this negotiation between the two. Therefore, we generally discuss sustainable development in reality "are negotiations in which workable compromises are found that address the environmental, economic, and human development objectives of competing interest groups" (Kates et. al., 2005, p.9). This is a reason why the definitions of SD consist of accounts of democratic decision-making and the participation of people in it. Further, the negotiation between environment and development has involved both the rich and the poor countries in a worldwide effort that also catered to the change in the viewpoint of rich and poor countries. Earlier, the demand for environmental protection was looked at as an obstacle in developing poorer countries, and their development was seen as a danger to the valued environmental resources by the affluent countries. SD endeavors to combine the need to protect nature and developmental aims.

## 5 Ambiguity of Definition of SD

From the time when the term was first defined by the Brundtland committee, it has been defined and redefined multiple times. Various thinkers and scholars have tried to

define it in their own way and present their alternative of the meaning of the term, but a clear and fixed definition or meaning is lacking until now. The unclarity regarding the meaning leads to its critique. Many thinkers like Ashish Kothari called it an oxymoron; that is, it is inherently contradicted and incompatible. There is also a danger of sustainable development becoming meaningless at the practical level if it's been redefined to be fitting to some purposes. It involves the danger of disguising and/or greenwashing socially or environmentally damaging actions (Kates et. al., 2005). But those who argue in favour of the open-ended definition of SD, claim that the attempts to redefine it are rather significant in framing an ongoing dialogue and being inclusive. Also, it is argued that the ambiguity regarding the meaning of the term is adding to the 'power, resonance and creativity' of SD. It is an evolving and open idea that serves the need to fit different contexts that it deals with. The openness allows participation from people at all levels and across institutions to adapt it to suit their context and various challenges that vary in different conditions of living and the political and social framework and formulating policies accordingly. At the same time keeping up to the global standard as laid by the UN. Even after all this ambiguity and multiple interpretations, there are certain guiding principles and values that are essential to it, that is, meeting the needs of the present and future generations within the carrying capacity of nature. These needs again are concerned with economic, social, and human development without exhausting the natural resources. As discussed earlier, development is a positive change or good change; similarly, sustainability also has a positive meaning, that is, the ability to be sustained over time, and both together instill and strengthen the notion that sustainability is an alternative for diverse and disputed social conditions with universal agreement. SD is thus seen as a value that is worthwhile to be argued for.

The concept of sustainable development not only includes environmental sustainability and economic protection in its narrow sense. But also includes alternative development notions of human and social development and sustaining and protecting nature, addressing the debates of anthropocentric and ecocentric views. This broadening and widening of the concept of SD are possible because of its openness to reinterpretation. This has also made it possible for the institutions and governments to adapt the SDGs according to their social, political, and ecological conditions in so doing addressing the issue of justice.

For a development agenda in order to be just requires participation from all stakeholders at the level of policy decisions and their implementation in field. This involves multifaceted challenges such as making the process of development achievable and at the same time just, so that individual stakeholders do not reject it. In many cases, the gap between the policy in theory and its practical outcome do not resonate, and thus becomes unachievable. In other cases, the policies ignore the people in decision-making for whom the policy is being formulated and thus again it becomes unjust and unachievable. Therefore, in the process of development the policy-approach plays a significant role. Thinkers like Ashish Kothari have argued in favour of a bottom-up approach where the benefits are reaching to the last person in the society, and the burdens are equally distributed.

## 6 Conclusion

Conclusively, it is not an easy task to achieve social and ecological justice in a real-world scenario as compared to in paper analysis. Yet, the agenda of sustainable development aims high to achieve this goal. Keeping up with the normative principle that it follows, 'preserving the opportunities to live well', the role of participation of stakeholders becomes important. Further with its ever-evolving definition allows room for adaptation by local communities without giving up on global standards. Sustainable development mirrors the efforts of individuals and institutions to strive for a society where justice prevails by aiming to fulfilling the basic human needs of present and future generations without further damaging nature (Kates et.al., 2005). However, the damage that has been already done to the environment is irreversible, and this marks the importance of sustainable development even more strongly.

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