

Sustainable Development: Its Conceptual Issues

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Abstract: In the present time, the concept of sustainable development has become one of the most ubiquitous, contested, and indispensable concepts. Sustainable development did not arise out of environmental concerns but of the reaction against it and the issues regarding the presupposition, logic and major themes of sustainable development has been raised by various academicians from different disciplines of science. The issue is the taking of economic development as the solution to avoid social, economic, social and environment catastrophe by various stakeholders involved such as the United Nation. In this regard the paper aims to explore the various concepts of sustainable development. It will also examine the conceptual issues related to sustainable development. The paper is based on secondary sources and is theoretical in nature.

Keywords: Agenda 21, Brundtland Report, economic Development, sustainable development, environment, post-structuralist, environmentalist Marxist

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the awareness of the eminent danger to the existence of our planet caused by human beings and their actions, the idea of sustainable development has existed alongside in every plan and Programme of saving the earth. Although the concept has been initiated with ideals objective of reducing environmental degradation, according to scholars of different disciplines, the inception of sustainable development as a concept has been largely determined by the political context of the western countries and more so by the market economy of the world which is based on the principle of profit-making.

Material And Methods

In this light, the paper will draw reference from various literary sources to discuss the broad conceptual approaches to sustainable development and will take into account its historical background, development, its usage and implication. The paper will be based on secondary sources and theoretical in nature.

Conceptual Approaches of Sustainable Development

With the growing awareness of the effects of global warming and climate change, the concept of sustainable development has been evolving since the 1970's (Tandon & Garg, 2009). However the concept has variation in terms of its emphasis, policies, action and implementation. Its inception is also not entirely agreed upon. The Concept of sustainable development as some leading authors would say, did not grow out of the environmental movement rather it was a product of the mainstream reaction against the radicalism of the environmental movement that proposed limits to growth and emphasized regulation as a means of stopping ecological degradation. (Castro, 2004, p. 196).

The source of the conceptual issue of sustainable development lies not merely in the structure of the concept but on the basis on which it was built up. The concept has been largely defined by mainstreams analyses like the United Nations model, the eco-environmentalism, and critiqued by the critical approach such as the post-structural critique and the Marxist critique.

The critique arose as a refutation to the position taken by the United Nations (UN). To fully understand the conceptual issues, we have to analyze the critique of each perspective and also the position they have taken. As Carlos J. Castro stated neither the critical approach has a monopoly on truth but purpose of this analysis is to reveal some of the hidden presuppositions of the mainstream approach and to provide insights into critical alternative (Castro, 2004, pp. 195-196). To look at the conceptual issue it is necessary to analyse these various approaches to sustainable development.

Sustainable development as a concept was largely popularised by the United Nations. They were responsible for initiating serious discussion through various summits out of which two summits were particularly important namely the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), and the Earth

summit of Rio de Janeiro (1992). The documents of these two summits namely the Brundtland report and the Agenda 21 respectively highlights the UN's approach to sustainability (Castro, 2004, p. 196)

According to Castro (2004), the definition of the Brundtland report reflects a political compromise, between growth, and environment sustainability that pro-growth delegations at the United Nations could accept. Although the Commission's aim was to address the problem of environmental degradation, there formulation was largely biased to the neo liberal and pro-growth delegations. The Agenda 21 report reproduced what the Brundtland report stated, but with more weight as the world leaders endorsed it. They relegated the problem of environmental degradation to poverty as the main reason and looked at the economic growth as the solution to these problems. According to this report to achieve economic growth the developing countries and the under-developed countries needs to have free markets and expand its operation, and there should be transfer of knowledge, capital and technology. The implication of this approach is that the developed countries will continue to accumulate capital by selling expertise, capital and technology to the countries of the periphery. According to (Castro, 2004), the reports are not analytical but exhortative and practical and do not explain the reason behind the economic and environmental crisis but offers solution to them (pp. 196-197). According to third-world perspective this is only a reaffirmation policy of the western developed society.

Analyzing the approach of the United Nations, scholars have pointed one of the main contradictions of their approach in these two reports. They state that the UN seems to promote trade liberalisation or free trade at the same time it advocates environmental sustainability, the issue they point out is that free trade does not promote economic growth let alone environment sustainability. Daly, Pearce and Warford in (Castro, 2004, p. 198) point out that even conservative mainstream environmental economist does not think that free market will promote environmental sustainability. The issue in formulation of the concept of the UN is the acceptance of neo liberal agenda and also of the perception that the developed countries, will assists the developing countries with the transfer of technology and capital free of cost.

Another important perspective which has largely influenced the idea of sustainable development is the World Bank. The World Bank has been criticized for its neo liberal agenda and its role in environmental degradation. According to the World Bank, sustainable development means "development that lasts", which it says is a definition put forward by the World Commission on Environment and development. For the World Bank, sustainability is seen in terms of the countries in the periphery following the model of the development prescribed by the bank, embracing of technology as a way to solve the environmental problems, promoting of the power of the free market to improve productivity and efficiency. The report of the World Bank proposed the use of market mechanisms (taxes, elimination, subsidies, and property rights) and the avoidance of direct regulation, except to regulate monopolies (Castro, 2004, p. 201). The Bank reverberate the top-down approach, and the neo liberal approach of market-based mechanism as a solution to problems of poverty and environmental degradation and promotes development-talism of the west.

The issue of relation of economic development and social development and environment concern has been raised by many scholars. According Munasinghe Mohan, although sustainable development has no universally accepted practical definition, the concept has evolved to encompass three major points of view namely economic, social and environmental with each viewpoint corresponding to a domain or systems which has its own driving forces and objectives (Munasinghe, 2001, p. 408). In this respective domain the issue with the concept of sustainable development relates to how development is defined and what are the aspects involved in it. Clive George points out, that the distinction has been drawn not only between social and economic goals but between social and economic development. George states that the distinction of economic development as separate pillar from social development is made and that economic development has a different purpose that is to sustain the market economy. One of the main issues lying behind the conceptual issue of sustainable development is that the environment is given an economic value and hence moves any environmental quality from the environmental sphere to the economic sphere (George, 2007, p. 105).

Another critique has been made by the post-structuralist approach by focusing on the process of Objectification of the third world. Following the ideas of Foucault, the post- structuralist has criticized development theory in general and sustainable development in particular, for trying to produce a docile body, for the construction of the poor and underdeveloped as object of development and for the use of the power of the state as an instrument for developing these societies (p. 207). One of the best samples of this critique will be that of Ferguson book which is an analysis on how the world bank analyzed and, in the process, constructed the country (of Lesotho) and how this discourse led in turn to intervention in the countries by the World Bank. Ferguson goes to show that Lesotho was constructed by the World Bank as "traditional subsistence peasant society" and duped it as marginal, poor and backward using statistics and other abstractions that is particularly the use of knowledge to extent power (Castro, 2004).

While Escobar in (Castro, p. 208) another post-structuralist, looked at the culture and discourse and introduced these two elements to political ecology. He argued that development and sustainable development as capitalist system's newest re-incarnation is trying to introduce modernity in the communities of the periphery of

capitalism. While the environmentalist Marxist talk about superseding the capitalist system and change in the relation of production. What the environmental Marxist does is that it critiques the ideas of sustainable development through the form exposition of the capitalist system.

The above discussion on the concept of sustainable 'development' illustrates the dominance of economic imperatives. In an article Jickling Bob states, that some analyst now argue that sustainable development has primarily followed economic imperatives and has left behind social and environmental instability, resulting in rising poverty and inequality in income and development (Jickling, 2005, p. 256).in

Further, the conceptual issue of sustainable development arises from the contradictions in the three pillars approach as George Clive and other scholars have stated. The three pillars are the environment development, the economic development and the social development. According to George the three dimensions were originally introduced with the aim of identifying areas in which social, economic and environmental goals interact such that environment issues might be more fully integrated into development decisions. However, this also draws the distinction between each pillar and further seems to bring to light upon the issue of perception of economic development as not being purposed for achieving the social development of a higher quality of life (George, 2007).

These three pillars can be defined in this way. Social development refers to improvement in both individual well-being and the overall welfare of society of society (more broadly defined), that results from increase in social capital-typically, the quantity and quality of social interaction that underlie human interaction. While the development in the environmental sense is a more recent concern relating to the need to manage scarce natural resource in a prudent manner- because human welfare ultimately depends on ecological services (Munasinghe, 2001, p. 395) . While economic development can be understood as defined by C.P Kindleberger, development that "implies both more output and changes in technical and constitutional arrangements by which it is produced" (Lekhi & Maini, 2010, p. 127).

As mentioned above the three-pillar approach has brought out a contradiction as the concept of development is itself interdependent and the three pillars approach merely contributes to the attempt of segregating the economic development from its social aspects. According to K. C. Alexander (1994), "development is fundamentally a process of change that involves the whole society- its economic, socio-cultural, political and physical structure, as well as the value system and way of life of the people." The concept of development has subjective, and objective and empirical meaning. From the former perspective, it can be viewed as a process of realising certain goals or behaviours (such as improved health and housing, better nutrition, greater communication networks, improved transportation and increased command over resources). On the other hand, comparative study of the more developed and less developed countries can be comparatively studied and the empirical differences between them can be used to illustrate the meaning of development (Alexander, p. 8). As K. C. Alexander shows, development consists of the entirety of the society and not the economic aspects alone.

Myrdal (1974)also reverberate similar concept of development defining development as "the movement upward of the entire social system," and according to him this is the only tenable definition. According to him, social system encloses, besides the so-called economic factors, all non-economic factors, including all sorts of consumption by various groups of people; consumption provided collectively; educational and health facilities and levels; the distribution of power in society; and more generally economic, social, and political stratification; broadly speaking, institutions and attitudes- to which we must add as an exogenous set of factors induced policy measures applied in order to change one or several of these endogenous factors (pp. 729-30). According to Myrdal development is understood as the upward movement of the society, an upward movement of all factors both economic and non-economic. Basically, a move towards higher form of existence.

As discussed, the issue of the concept of sustainable development lies in being largely influenced and determined by the economic imperatives of the neo liberal economics. One of the main reasons is due to the synonymous use of the term economic development with development. Bert F. Hoselitz (1975) states the synonymous use is due to the identification of human progress with economic growth over the decades. However, these two terms have different meanings and are being discussed and critiqued in academic discourse. These discourses have provided spectrum of theoretical frameworks and perspectives (Nongkynrih, 2013, p. 73).

To locate the issue of the concept of sustainable development rightly we have to locate sustainable development within the context of the society. The issue lies in the complexity of integrating and synchronizing sustainable development with the existing economic system. Sustainable development must be fit in with 'the concern of the society with nature of modern society and of social change' (Eisenstadt, 1974). Without which it becomes a concept that will be influenced by external forces.

Sustainable development as a concept is evolving where the mainstream approach tries to influence it in the lines neoliberal principles and emphasizes on economic development as one of the most important factors to reduce economic, political and environmental catastrophe, in the countries of the periphery. The issue of formulation and application of sustainable development lies in the valuing and transforming of environmental

qualities in economic terms in the model of capitalism. The issue lies in the difficulty of not being able to see the environment, the bio-diversity as being separate from economic needs. The overbearing influence of neoliberal ideology and profit based market on the development of the concept of sustainable development has led some to argue that the concept of sustainable development just another word for conventional development. The formulation and application of the concept of sustainable development becomes very biased without considering the enormous diversity of the societies of the world along with socio-political, socio-economic context of each society and also the minorities especially the indigenous people (Windsor, 2017).

Through the various discussions and critique of the concept of development, it becomes difficult to make sense of the concept of development. One way is to look at the underlying features or motive how and why the concept has been developed.

The concept of sustainable development in its ideal sense can be understood as an approach to environment and development issues which seeks to reconcile human needs and the capacity of the environment to cope with the consequences of economic systems. It is a call to change our actions and to do things differently. The core principle of sustainable development is to improve human well-being and to sustain those improvements over time. This proposed action to achieve the objective is to reduce excessive levels of production and consumption by limiting the material and energy throughput in the human economy, through a more efficient use of resources and by addressing the challenge of poverty eradication through concerted actions which tackle the causes of poverty and ensure that available resources are used to the benefit of all (Berdan, 2011, p. 23).

The conceptual issue of sustainable development can be understood as all proponents of sustainable development agreeing that society needs to change, but there are major debates as to the nature of sustainable development, the changes necessary and the tools and actors for these changes. "There is no single unified philosophy of sustainable development; there is no sustainable development 'ism'". The common scenario is that on the debates of sustainable development already existing political and philosophical outlooks are brought upon. There is a fundamental divide between the supporters of the status quo and a transformation in their concept of and approach to sustainable development. The status quo approach sees change through management, top down and incremental, of the existing structures of decision-making. While the transformation views changes as being carried out mainly through political action working both in and outside the existing structures. The sustainable development discourse at present is dominated by the managerial outlook. The recent trend of the 'Transformationists' is that of viewing the connection between environmental degradation and human exploitation as encouraging the building of alliances between environmental and social justice movements. Although open to many interpretations, sustainable development has gained wide currency. It crucially embraces the key issues for humanity of how to ensure lives worth living and our relationship with the planet and our relations with each other. Rather than discarding the concept of sustainable development, it provides a useful framework in which to debate the choices for humanity (Hopwood, Mellor, & Brien, 2005, pp. 47-49)

The development of the concept of sustainable development has traceable precursors, a history especially of the surge of studying the concept of sustainable development during the 1970's and 80's. It does not exist outside the institutions and practices of the society, marginalized from them, but instead is an intrinsic part of such institutions and practices. It is the result of a mix of emergent and institutionalized processes. Established systems of occupational prestige and stratification are one of its key preconditions even as it transforms them, and the customary criteria employed by science and professions (Aguirre, 2002).

Although the concept of sustainability has an indisputable relevant place in society and its significance and genesis have long been a distinct research object in social science, we need to approach the concept of sustainability as a problem itself, as Neckel Sigward states, a problem which the society of the present day must tackle. One approach is that of taking up a problem oriented and reflexive stance towards sustainability that does justice to sustainability contradictions, dilemmas and paradoxes. This approach does not take sustainable development as a normative guiding principle but is used as an observational category that can offer insights about the dynamics of sustainable development. Insights about ongoing socioeconomic transformations that are underway, the emerging aspects of conflict, the inequalities and hierarchies that are taking shape, the practices and new forms of justification of the social order (Neckel, 2017, pp. 46-47).

Despite the variance of definition and dispute regarding the relevance of the concept of development stating that it is merely a reverberation of the development model of the capitalist system, the problems posited by concept of sustainable development is real and the question lies not in whether should take up sustainable development but how to adopt sustainable by taking into considering the various conceptual issues mentioned in the paper. The problems as posited is real can be provided with ample proof when we consider the report given UNEP 2009 on global environmental assessment in (Berdan, 2011), where twenty per cent of Earth's land cover has been significantly degraded by human activity and 60% of the planet's ecosystems are now damaged or threatened.

(MA, 2005; UNEP, 2007) in (Berdan, 2011) also states that species are becoming extinct at rates which there are 100 times faster than the rate shown in the fossil record, because of land-use changes, habitat loss, overexploitation of resources, pollution and the spread of invasive alien species. Further, of the major vertebrate groups that have been comprehensively assessed, over 30% of amphibians, 23% of mammals and 12% of birds are threatened.

In (Solomon et al., 2007; UNEP, 2007) in (Berdan, 2011), regarding the concentrations of carbon dioxide, the main gas linked with global warming, currently stand at 386 parts per million, or more than 25% higher than in 150 years ago and concentrations of other greenhouse gases, such as methane and halocarbons, have also risen. The Global average temperatures have risen by about 0.74 °C since 1906, and the rise this century is projected to be between 1.8 and 4 °C; some scientists believe a 2 °C increase would be a threshold beyond which the threat of major and irreversible damage becomes more plausible.

Available freshwater resources are declining: some 80 countries, amounting to 40% of the world's population, are suffering serious water shortages; by 2025, 1.8 billion people will live in countries with absolute water scarcity (UNEP, 2007). Around half of the world's rivers are seriously depleted and polluted (UNEP, 2002). More than 2 million people worldwide as per (UNEP, 2007) are estimated to die prematurely every year from indoor and outdoor air pollution (Berdan, 2011, p. 4). Further in terms of social problems as per the UNEP and UNICEF reports in (Berdan, 2011, p. 4) there are Around 1.4 billion people are living in extreme poverty (measured as \$1.25 a day) (UN, 2009); the number of hungry people worldwide grew to 963 million, or about 14.6% of the world population of 6.6 billion, representing an increase of 142 million over the figure for 1990–1992 (FAO, 2009); more than 100 million primary school age children remain out of school (UN, 2009); around 1.1 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water and an estimated 2.6 billion people today lack improved sanitation facilities (UNEP, 2007); poverty claims the lives of 25 000 children each day (UNICEF, 2000).

CONCLUSION

Due to the diverse presupposition, logic and major themes of sustainable development, it becomes difficult to define exactly what sustainable development is. The conceptual issues lie not merely in the structure of the concept but on the basis on which it was built upon. When the concept was popularized by the United Nation, the concept was largely influenced by the neo liberal and pro-growth delegations. The UN was followed by World Bank which opted to find solutions in market mechanism of the neo liberal economy. Due this approach the western countries has been criticized for its top-down approach and its exercise of dominance on the developing countries; some of the main proponents being the post-structuralist and the environmental Marxist. Some approach has been adopted to solve the aforementioned issues such as the three pillars approach, but it has contributed the complexity of sustainable development. Another issue is the taking of sustainable development as a policy mandate whereas on the other hand it is to be made a part of the system. The statement of (Neckel, 2017), can be used to describe the conceptual issue of sustainable development. Neckel states, that “Sustainability should not be in other words, be sociologically investigated from the position of participants in society, but should serve as an observational category capable of offering us insights into the socio-economic transformations that are under way, the novel lines of conflict that are emerging, the inequalities and hierarchies that are taking shape, the practices and new forms of justification for the social order (Neckel, 2017, p. 47).

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