



# Sustainable Development: Multiplicity Of Stakeholders And Conceptualization

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**Abstract:** 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.

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

## Introduction

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 (ED) 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 poor and rich nations, and poor and rich within several states. 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 the so-called Third World, for example, 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.

## Developing the concept and principles of 'sustainable development' from 1966 to 2002: A Discussion

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 (EG).

The Limits to Growth (1972)[1] 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 Ecologist came out with a detailed programme for survival, wherein sustainability appeared as an important theme [2]. The publication repeated the concerns that had adumbrated by Meadows in their celebrated work, Limits of Growth. There, their argument was against the industrial manner of life. Such way of life involved expansion. As such, it lacked sustainably. In the view of the Ecologists, indefinite growth could hardly be sustained by resources that were, by nature, finite.

There seems to have occurred a transformation: what started as important regarding 'unsustainability' of economics undergoing growth, unsustainability came to transformed, into a discourse: a discourse synonymous with a different idea, namely, that of a steady-state economy. For steady-state involved a transition, high growth was to be brought to low growth, some would prefer non-growth or even no-growth nations. steady-state theorists saw an incompatibility between two goals, the goal of maximum EG, on the one hand, and, on the other hand environmental sustainability. The reason was that sustainability was not simply economic, nor ecological. The steady-state view emphasized policies that would result in the reduction of energy consumption, but it also had broader socio-political objectives and moral values. Meadows thought a no-growth economy required to be supplemented by goals such equity, cultural progress, and personal liberty. The goal of satisfaction of physical need was psychological needs.

In 1962, a United Nations Resolution, It perceived a basic one as was that of threat: that decline in natural resources could minimize the prospects for development in the Developing Countries. The United Nations resolution considered natural resources to be of considerable importance to the ED 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, in 1969 some expert in social and economic policies noted that it would create large areas of poverty stagnation. As such, several people would be excluded from social progress and economic benefits. Such desirable condition was obvious enough and too urgent to be overlooked.

In this, concerns of both Developed and Developing Nations coincided in 1972 when a 'Conference on the Human Environment'[3] was organised by United Nations in the Sweden capital 'Stockholm.' This cooperation on environmental event facilitated problems at the international level. An understanding came about some trade-offs would have to be evolved with regard to economic efficiency, on the one hand, and ecological integrity, on the other. However, some leaders from developing countries were suspicious: They suspected environmental motives in the North. Developed countries gave priority to abatement of pollution. Such would result in potential restriction on the Third World's development aspirations. Developing countries rejected low-growth and no-growth scenarios. They sought equitable engagement with the global economy. Inclusion of poverty as an important reason for environmental degradation did the trick. There grew up some acceptance of the view that the environmental problem threatened the development process. Compromises made at the Stockholm conference generated changes with regard to the content as well as rationale of development programs. The conference provided a new perceptive of sustainability: different from the one that had come into view in the 'no-growth' school. However, the Third World Countries were short-changed.

Various forms of human activity causing most environmental concerns were reviewed. Some principles were laid down to address 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 (APHE) 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." [4]. On the conceptual level, environment and development remained opposed.

By the mid-1970s the debate on the incorporation of social and ED had moved on. In a United Nations Symposium, Third World leaders expressed their dissatisfaction with the dominance of the conventional model of EG 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 development should the point be seen to consist in development of things, it should mean development of man. It further said that any processes of growth were deemed to the fulfillment of human. 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 was mainly concerned with development of economies; and noted that for sustainability, development had to mean constructed as ED. Such development would aim as sustaining the yield of renewable resources. This would also reconcile the needs of those living new and those of future generations.

Nevertheless, in emphasizing EG of a sustainable category, theorists argued in fact, in aid of development economics. The argument was that in both industrialized and developing countries, ED was to mean better EG. It should involve more growth. Ultimately, UNEP built the language of 'development' and 'sustainability'. Such language was to undermine that of ED. The notion of ecological limits that could constrain EG.

The idea of sustainability became important in popular discussion in the decade of 1980s, but such prominence owed to the idea of SD at the policy level. The World Conservation Strategy (WCS), a UN document of 1980, gave significance to the term 'SD'. Prepared with financial backing from UNEP and WWF and the benefit of comment from FAO and UNESCO, the definition given by the WCS was modification and utilization of biosphere to fulfill human needs, thus adding to the improvement of quality of life. However, modification of the biosphere would be a threat unless resources were effectively conserved. WCS put strong emphasis on conservation.

WCS emphasized that underlying problems of development and conservation were similar, simply because both operated in the same worldwide perspective. It identified the major issues that were for the success of both. Identified includes over population, poverty, social and economic inequity that worked against the interests of poorer countries. It listed the priority requirements, national actions and international actions, and called for an international strategy for development that would aim at redressing inequities. It would also assist in achieving a dynamic and stable world economy. Such development would accelerate EG and counter the undesirable impact of poverty.

According to WCS, conservation was quite compatible with the new trend asking for participatory development. Such development would bring about wider distribution of benefits. Also, it would make fuller employment and greater income security. It would result in better nutrition, education, health and social wellbeing. It was envisaged to reduce environmental degradation.

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 prospective 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.

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. The institute founded in 1982 was to undertake research and analysis on global environmental policy issues. It was also to study their relationship to population and development. The institute was a non-profit organization. As such, it could receive gifts and contributions. The institute articulated the idea of sustainability not as one that would threaten the status quo, especially in the case of industrialized countries: in 1987, one of its researchers authored *Not Far Afield: U.S. Interests and Global Environment*. [5]. It reinforced the organization's notion that poverty in the developing countries was the main reason in global environmental issues afflicting the globe. The author absolved affluence in the industrialized countries for charge of harming the environment.

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 give report on various dimensions of the crisis:

The Independent Commission on International Development Issues (ICIDI) (Brandt Commission)

The Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues (the Palme Commission) and

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (Brundtland Commission)

These commissions were set up 1977, 1980 and 1983 respectively. The 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. In 1980, It published its first report entitled 'North-South: A Programme for Survival', and in 1983, a second was known as 'Common Crisis' when the scale of the debt crisis became evident. North-South accepted that ED based on EG had failed. In its view, no notion of ED could be approved which continued to condemn hundreds of millions of people starvation. 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 EG and industrialization was 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 important institution that popularised and propelled serious engagement with the notion of SD was the WCED. Brundtland's definition and the notions recognized that humans were reliant on the environment for fulfilling basic requirements and well-being. The major point of the WCED report was that people living in whatever location, depended on environment for security and existence. Our economy and our well-being needed environment now and in the future. There existed planet-wide interconnections: environmental problems were as much local as global. Actions and impacts had to be seen globally. That would avoid displacing issues from one subject to another. This meant that people were to avoid releasing pollution that crossed boundaries.

The WCED notion of SD explored the need for EG. It then attended the question of making growth sustainable. It recognised that the notion of SD implied limits however did not recognise as absolute limits. WCED argued that such aspects could be managed and man could usher in a new era of EG. The hope was that, with the passage of time, scientific developments could enhance the carrying capacity of human's planet. The WCED report emphasised the need for equity but preferred distributional 'trickle-down' to eradicate poverty. Such conceptualization better facilitated international cooperation on environment issues. In 1988, the World Bank report stated that SD would be its major policy objectives.

Five years after the Brundtland report, the 1992 Rio Summit formalized the Brundtland definition of SD, whilst ensuring a new vitality for the notion. By then, debate over the concept was over. Further efforts were made to operationalize it. The Agenda 21 [6] was the outcome which provided a big list of methods and mechanisms to implement SD. It was expected to direct prospect action at national and international level. There did continue debates on Rio Summit, it was admitted that the summit cemented the reputation of SD in policy and humanitarian circles. Overtime, the notion of SD came to penetrate civil society, those involved in scientific research and global politics.

This led to creation of a global partnership for SD. However, UNCED's understanding of SD made changed in the idea. It made a healthy environment crucial to securing sustained EG in a different way. Earlier SD meant ecological sustainability. Now it came to be mean economic sustainability. Whereas WCED published its report in 1987 commonly known as *Our Common Future* [7] had not provided clarity of concept while , Agenda 21 (UNCED 1992) came to demand EG and reject other discourses such as limits and scarcity. A main source of environmental issues which were taken more seriously were the production

and consumption habits of industrialized countries; however UNCED documents came to recommend more EG could solve such issues. In the WCED view, SD had been propagated as something that could reconcile the interests of the developed and developing countries. Such reconciliation was to involve objectives that would include healthy environment, social and economic equity population stabilization, and global peace. However, in Agenda 21, UNCED posited EG as the source for attaining them. The notion of SD thus came to be used by world organizations for promoting EG. At UNCED, the theorists held that free market – based national economies and the structural transformation of developing countries was required to eliminate poverty. That was believed to encourage technological innovation. Adoption of market mechanisms became a foregone conclusion.

Agenda 21, also focused on free-market economies. Businesses in the capitalist world visualized as a major factor of sustainability. In a way, ‘partnerships’ between governments in the capitalist world and business were flagged see to be important for the process of realising the goals of Agenda 21, Much of such thought came about as a result of the spade work done by the business class. At UNCED, Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD) was working. Its formation, in 1990, took place under the auspices of Secretary-General of UNCED, Maurice Strong. Stephan Schmidheiny in his capacity as, a key figure with Strong wrote a book, *Changing Course*. In this book, his argument was in favour of the free market mechanism. He also advocated the principle ‘polluter pays’. This was a big accommodation in favour of market mechanism in case of limited resources. It sought facilitate new environmental options in favour of industry and business. The notion was supported to obviate the need for governmental regulatory authority. The new thinking tried to ‘eliminate’ clash between unlimited EG and the limits of resources. Agenda 21 tried in its own way to overcome distributional conflicts. It offered international equity by its view that ‘man-made’ and ‘natural’ capital could be substituted. EG was once a problem. The new thinking recast it as the solution. This new principle of SD came to be recognized at global level in 2002. When the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) was organized in Johannesburg by the United Nations .The RIO and the 2002 Summit all reflected the consensus that EG was vital to healthy environment.

On the other hand, there occurred negotiation of voluntary partnerships. Hundred of millions of ‘partnerships’ were set up between governments and non-governmental organizations. At WSSD the business lobby maintained their argument that EG was the only hope for developing countries, with the added conviction that the same could be produced by free-trade.

## Conclusion

Necessities of capital accumulation have largely shaped priorities regarding environmental questions. The current rhetoric is about SD. In the 1970’s, the aim of the critique was the growth patterns that had destroyed the environment and had created inequalities at local and global levels. Overtime, a different ‘sustainability’ emerged; in the new one, environment-development discourse was based on economic rather than ecological perspectives. There have been political compromises and SD has been congruent with neoliberal policies. The potential for ‘SD’ for any ‘ecological restructuring’ has been weakened. On the other hand, the rhetoric of sustainability has served another purpose. It has served to consolidate a neoliberal ‘economic restructuring’. According to the WCED environmental protection was vital SD, however, the UNCED reversed this argument by saying that EG was vital environmental protection, which reconstituted the concept of economy-environment relations. Overemphasis on economy has enhanced the profit generating opportunities. This has put aside the promised environmental and social benefits. The global environment deteriorated continuously which result in creating much deeper inequalities between North and South. The rise in the number of stakeholders with greater global prominence for environmental problems can be attributed to reinterpretation of SD by neoliberal. However the market trends of the government could not yield the initially anticipated sustainability and development.

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