

## THE NEXUS BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY: SHOULD NOT THE FORMER BE REVISITED

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### **Abstract**

*As the idea of 'Economic Development' has reached a new dimension with its fulcrum fixed at 'Sustainable Development' (SD) paradigm, the new generation economic theorists primarily focus on ecologically friendly and environment supporting development models. Notwithstanding the fact that the above approach is fast gaining acceptance in Environmental Economics and allied disciplines, the author points out that the concept of SD has evolved from the economic realities of the developed world and as such the same is basically targeted at furtherance of their own interest. In view of the grim challenge of rising poverty and multi-dimensional deprivation of the masses in the developing world, should not we make a rethink on overemphasis on environmentalism and rather focus on distribution of the growing output among the world rich and poor?. Because, maintain equity and justice has got in itself an environmental protection effect.*

**Key Words:** *Sustainable Development (SD), Poverty, Intra-generational Equity.*

### **Introduction**

The idea of 'Economic Development' has reached a new dimension and the present paradigm is 'Sustainable Development' (SD). The new generation of economic theorists concentrates mostly on ecologically friendly and environment-supporting models of development because of the prime fact that present pattern of development promotes an ever increasing scarcity of environmental goods and services over time. A certain level of environmental quality is to be maintained and the ecological systems are to be preserved for sustaining human beings and other living organisms on this planet. The relevance of this subject is apparent from the enumerable literature appeared and being discussed recently, under the title 'Environmental Economics/Ecological Economics' which are fast growing branches of general economics. However, the concept of SD is seemed to be evolved with the economic realities of the 'developed world' and promoting their further growth. The developing world, on the other hand, faces the grim challenge of reducing raging poverty levels and resulting multi-dimensional deprivation of millions of its population. The argument follows is that the idea, sustainability overemphasis on growth rates of output via environmentalism rather than on distributing the growing output among the world rich and poor for preserving the environment itself. Of course, maintaining equity and justice has an environmental protection effect.

### **Sustainable Development: Evolution of the Concept and its Meaning**

The question of sustainability and the carrying capacity of this planet have become a matter of heated debate since the Stockholm Conference, 1972 and the publication of "The Limits to Growth" by the team headed by Meadows. The idea gained further ground with the appointment of the World Commission on Environment and Development called Brundtland Commission and the publication of its report 'Our Common future' in 1987. Later, the issue was further discussed, elaborated and the ideas involved confirmed in 'Our Common Future' in the Rio Earth Summit 1992 and the Johannesburg Earth Summit 2002. Now, the question of sustainability is deeply felt everywhere and efforts are being made

to accomplish its goals. Very often, the pre-fix “sustainable” is now being invariably used before terms relating to various aspects of human engineered development.

The concept of SD is not enough precise to delimit its boundaries. Economists like J. S Mill, David Ricardo, and T. R Malthus talked about sustainability much before the present generation started evolving a conscientious definition of SD. The most widely quoted definition is from the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. It defined “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Equally important is the clarification that follows: “the concept of ‘needs’ in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given”. The report, which provided a sense of global acceptability to the concept of SD, based its considerations on the argument that development was not possible in the long run without protecting the environment. It has simultaneously accepted that environmental degradation was further impoverishing people.

### **Analytical Significance of the Study**

The conception of SD in the report gave a high priority to poverty alleviation and to equitable development, arguing that “a world in which poverty and inequity are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises” (p-43) and that “long before these are reached, the world must ensure equitable access to the constrained resource” (p-45).

A UNESCO statement says that “every generation should leave water, air and soil resources as pure and unpolluted as and when it comes on earth”. Alternatively, it was suggested that “each generation should leave undiminished all the species of animals it found on earth” (Solow 2005). It is implicit that the notion of sustainability is about our obligation to the future generations. Does this obligation mean that we must refrain from making permanent construction, building roads, dams etc? Never. As U. Sankar rightly points out “It is an obligation to...preserve the capacity to be well of as we” (Sanker, 2005). Hence, it is a matter of inter-generational equity.

Equity is to be maintained over generations in respect of both the quantity and quality of environmental resources as well as services. Future generations should be able to breathe at least the same quality air as we breathe. In the same fashion, the quality of water and soil resources should be kept undiminished for future generations. Our children must at least get the same quantity of crude oil as we make use of for our present use. We should preserve the land potential or fertility which our ancestors left for us, for the coming generations. The land should provide enough food, comfortable shelter and it must contain pure water in sufficient quantities and must be covered with clean breathable air for all humans and living creatures who are expected to be the rulers of this planet during coming centuries.

### **Notion of Equity in the Concept of SD**

Some doubts may arise about the implications of the phrase ‘as well off as we’. Here the well being of the present generation is very important in determining what we should leave for future generations. Of course, it does not mean that we must leave the adversities which we suffer from the present pattern of development to the future generations. For example, if rivers in Kerala are contaminated, we shall not, definitely leave it to our children. Instead, our policy must be to reduce the contamination levels.

Though the concept SD was formulated by integrating both inter-generational equity as well as intra-generational equity initially, its subsequent operational development has been marked by significant weaknesses which are detrimental to ensure equity and justice. Even though, the broadly formulated concept of SD has its coverage beyond the narrow national interest and nationalism, it is not surprising that the developing countries started looking at it as a definition suited to and made for the developed

countries. The further diffusion of the concept gave importance to inter-generation equity rather than intra-generation equity and the idea of SD got shrunk into mere environmentalism.

**Firstly**, in the process of the further diffusion of the concept and its apparent general acceptance, the dimensions of equity and poverty alleviation tended to be de-emphasized (Lélé, 1991). Even in the final report itself, the original term “Sustainable and Equitable Development” (Jacobs *et al.*, 1987), was truncated to just ‘sustainable development’.

**Secondly**, even with pleading for SD, several multilateral finance and development institutions, important bilateral aid agencies, as well as many national governments, continued to estimate economic growth in GDP terms as the focus of development. In fact, national income is only a partial measure of development that matters which can, most probably, coexist with a wide range of inequalities that include widening income disparities.

**Thirdly**, the focus on “sustaining” some thing implies already perilous state of the environment’ with no room for further social action on nature and society after it is equated with SD. However, poverty eradication across the developing world and sharp and rapid increase in human well-being, both fundamental aspects of equity, would require transformative action, on a large scale that is entirely non-equilibrium in character.

**Fourthly**, it is alleged, in the context of developed nations, that sustainability has been limited strictly to individual life style aspiration goals in the local environmental considerations only. Indeed, sustainability must be a global goal for both developed as well as developing nations. In a pure resource constraint perspective, as the idea of ‘limits to growth’ insists, the responsibility of preserving the natural resource footprint fall on the developed and developing nations disproportionately. The developed nations have consumed most part of their natural resource in an earlier era where as the developing nations are just utilising them for enhancing the material welfare of the poor masses. In fact, the onus of preserving such resources is with the shoulders of the developing nations and, of course, it will prevent any drive for achieving material-well being in these countries.

Therefore, Sustainability is not only a matter of inter-generational equity but also a matter of intra-generational equity. The latter may be defined in international, national or local perspectives. At the international level, the world development ends up mostly in the deprivation or erosion of environmental resources/services among the people of developing countries. At the national level, some states or provinces mostly suffer from national development. All these are the outcomes of continuing unsustainable practices in production and distribution. The major driving force behind non-sustainable practices is the knowledge that it is possible to make profit at the cost of others. Here the term ‘others’ not only implies future generations but also our contemporaries and the environment as well. Thus, ensuring intra-generational equity is an integral component of addressing any sustainability issue.

### **The Nexus between SD and Poverty**

Poverty and un-sustainable development are mutually reinforcing each other. Un-sustainable development breeds poverty and the latter reinforces the former. People in poor countries are for the most part agrarian and pastoral folk. WDR 2008 releases information as:

Agriculture is the source of livelihoods for an estimated 86 per cent of rural people. It provides jobs for 1.3 billion smallholders and landless workers, ‘farm-financed social welfare’ when there are urban shocks, and a foundation for viable rural communities. Of the developing world’s 5.5 billion people, 3

billion live in rural areas, nearly half of humanity. Of these rural inhabitants an estimated 2.5 billion are in households involved in agriculture and 1.5 billion are in smallholder households. (p -3).

This section of population is the low income category. The WDR 2008 says it thus: Three of every four poor people in developing countries live in rural areas-2.1 billion living on less than \$2 a day and 880 million on less than \$1 a day-and most depend on agriculture for their livelihoods (p-1). The WDR 2008 further elaborates:

Two thirds of the world's agricultural value added is created in developing countries. In agriculture-based countries, it generates on average 29 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) and employs 65 per cent of the labor force" (p-3).

### **Ignoring the Natural resource Base of Rural Production**

The developing countries and sections of poor people depend mostly on natural resources such as soil and its cover, water, forests, animals and fisheries at their reach for their production activity, directly or indirectly. The poor countries remain poor because the resource base of production in these countries has been neglected for the last fifty or sixty years. "Ignore the environmental base and we will obtain a misleading picture of productive activity within rural communities of poor countries" (Dasguptha, 2005).

Environmental degradation first of all hits very hard the poorer and weaker sections of the society. It mostly affects women, children, and casual labourers and so on. For the poor people in developing countries, natural resources supplements to income. Depletion of such resources badly affects the living conditions of the people even at the vicinity of moderate growth.

### **Poverty and Resource Degradation**

Environmental deterioration which contains all sorts of damage to the life supporting systems is the single most important factor that breeds poverty which poses a threat against the sustainability of developing countries. "Environmental problems are almost always associated with resources that are regenerative but which are in danger of exhaustion from excessive use" (Dasguptha, 2005). The arable land is a paradigm of this kind of resource. The potential of land may deteriorate due to excessive as well as unwarranted use. The regeneration or quality improvement of land depends upon the current state of land fertility and the rate of excessive as well as unwarranted use. Soils are degraded as a result of overusing, overgrazing, intensive cultivation, excessive use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, deforestation etc. This causes the quality of land to deteriorate, until eventually it produces nothing to the livelihood of human beings.

The symbiotic relationship between soil quality and vegetation cover is crucial for the deterioration of the land fertility. The loss of vegetation and forest cover diminish soil potential; that any endeavor to reconstruct vegetation and forest cover becomes a difficult task. The story does not end here. The present agricultural practices contribute to soil erosion in a big way. "Soil erosion can result in productivity losses as high as 2-3 per cent a year" (WDR, 2008). Environmental quality, here productivity of land, is in the nature of a non-market, or un-priced, production input. Any damage to the environment in this sense reduces the supply of that input, leads to lower production than before.

### **Environmental Degradation and Displacement**

Environmental degradation, in the final stage leads to the exodus of people from those areas to unexploited green areas for food, water and shelter. Environmental refugees are often characterised by

homelessness and dislocated family. Unless it is checked in time, it may result in further degradation. Moreover, the worsening condition of the poor gradually may turn into violence and unethical practices. The degree to which a nation or region can prosper depends upon its productivity, which is the efficiency with which it is able to utilise the resources of the environment to satisfy human needs and expectations. If the gains in productivity are to be sustained, resources must also continue to be available over time. This requires that while providing for current needs, the resource base has to be managed so as to enable sustainable development. (Prasad, 2006).

Thus, poverty today is really a catastrophic threat to preserve today's natural resources for the well-being of all coming generations!

### **Climate Commons and Productivity**

Being climate an 'international commons', any adverse change has its disproportionate repercussions on the rural productivity and living means of poor people in developing countries comparing to the productivity and living standards in developed countries. The vulnerability can be in the following areas. Developing countries depend mostly on natural climate for rural agricultural production. For example, agricultural production in India is monsoon dependent. Though, now the contribution of this sector to GDP is less than 18%, still 2 out of 3 Indians depend on agriculture or related occupations for employment. Thus, the variations in GDP growth are driven by variations in the performance of the monsoon via spillover and multiplier effects. Therefore, any dislocation of regular monsoon showers may end up in severe reduction of agricultural production.

Another concern regarding the international climate change is due to rising minimum sea levels. A large section of people, about 250–300 million in India now, lives in the costal areas. Though the case of Maldives, Bangladesh and all other countries prone to this threat is not different in nature, there is no other country as vulnerable as India, just in terms of the sheer number of lives impacted.

Another point of vulnerability arises from what is predicted to happen about the health of the Himalayan glaciers as a result of global warming. Though, the experts hold mixed opinion on the health of the Himalayan glaciers, for neighboring countries, it is a cause for great concern. If the majority of Himalayan glaciers continue to retreat in the manner that they have been, it will seriously affect the amount of water availability in the North Indian Rivers that are the lifeline for almost a billion people living in India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

It is worth pointing out that the developing countries are small emitters of CO<sub>2</sub> in per capita terms (World Bank Study, 2004). CO<sub>2</sub> emissions form the major share among the Green House Gases (GHGs) causing global climate change. Even in absolute terms, the second most populous country, India was ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in emitting CO<sub>2</sub> among other countries, the first being United States. However, India's emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> (1113 metric tones) are stood at one fifth of the United States' emissions (5912 metric tones) in 2004. As far as total GHG emissions are concerned, India's share is only 5%.

It is apparent that the 'tragedy of climate commons' disproportionately affect the poor people in the developing world.

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis is instrumental in arriving at the following conclusions

1) In the present perspective of SD discourse, except the dogmatic propoganda and a little initiative, neither the developing nor developed countries sustain as visualized earlier. The distributional aspect of

sustainability what is described as intra-generational equity is sidelined under the polished mask of environmentalism. Indeed, neither the environment is protected at large, nor is the development sustainable. If this state of conditions continues without any check, the poor people in poor countries are likely to face a food crisis first especially due to the degradation of soil contamination of water resources and global climate change.

2) The net result of un-sustainability is distributed unevenly or disproportionately among the people, among whom the poorer sections in developing countries mostly suffer regardless of who contribute to the potential un-sustainability. This is quite evident that the people in the developing world face a dual disparity; they enjoy only a meager share of world income whereas they have to face a major share of adversities of generating that world income. They are deprived of material wellbeing on the one side and environmental catastrophes on the other. Thus, the incidence of unequal distribution of world output across the globe would be much greater than what is measured in terms of money income. Unless wise policies (entitlements) that address ensuring at least the minimum material well-being issue of the poor masses, the resources including land, water and other natural assets for rural production and livelihood of the poor masses would not be protected. The resulting crisis and its consequences will be unpredictable to the future generations which spread over in both developed as well as developing world.

3) The operational principles and indicators of SD should be revisited so that both developed and developing countries can strive for the common end side by side. Without considering the development aspirations of the major chunk of population inhabiting in the developing world, any effort for sustaining the world would be incomplete and fruitless in the long run.

4) Discussions should be emerged either on the possibility of a system of international compensation transfer or on reducing emissions that pollute or aggravate the use of ‘international commons’, or both. It is reasonable that the polluter compensate, not as an assumption in a theory, but through money or material transfers for the damage of the pollution affected countries unless the polluters actually reduce emissions to internationally agreed and accepted standards.

5) Finally, the role of the governments is immense in framing and implementing suitable policies of entitlements to the poor, as the markets, which function entirely based on ‘prices’ and ‘profits’, never signals the true development needs of the poor people in the society for the best sake of SD.

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