Critiquing Sustainable Development: A Meaningful Way of Mediating the Development Impasse?

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ABSTRACT – Sustainable development is a concept that was popularized during the 1990s into mainstream development circles, prescribing that we must “meet the needs of current generations without compromising the needs of future generations.” Initially this line of thought was seen as a breakthrough; finally, it seemed that world leaders and development experts were attempting to atone for the negative side effects that unbridled economic growth unleashes. While sustainable development had the potential to become the basis on which further positive economic and environmental reforms were introduced worldwide, it has in fact served to further justify and reinforce the very paradigm that it initially sought to deconstruct. Unfortunately, sustainable development has become more of a catch-phrase than a revolution of thought, and employing its use has simply fuelled the interests of advocates of exponential economic growth, undermining environmental reforms. This essay examines the shortcomings of this approach, and suggests ways that it might be rectified.

RÉSUMÉ – Le développement durable est un concept qui fut popularisé, durant les années 1990, à l’intérieur des principaux cercles de développement. Ce concept prescrit que nous devons “satisfaire les besoins des générations préentes sans compromettre les besoins de générations futures.” Au commencement, cette idée était perçue comme innovatrice. Enfin, il semblait que les dirigeants politiques mondiaux et les experts en développement essayaient de réparer les effets secondaires néfastes que le développement économique permet. Malgré que le développement durable eut le potentiel de devenir la base sur laquelle de nouvelles réformes économiques et environnementales fussent introduites mondialement, il a, en vérité, servi à justifier et renforcer davantage le modèle même qu’il tentait initialement de déconstruire. Malheureusement, le développement durable est devenu plutôt un cliché qu’une révolution de pensée. Son usage a simplement appuyé les intérêts des partisans de la croissance économique exponentielle, tout en abîmant les réformes environnementales. Cet essai examine les points faibles de cette approche et suggère des méthodes pouvant la rectifiée.

“Somewhere along the road to our present crisis we lost the idea of ‘enough.’ Somehow the twentieth century’s version of progress lost its compass and began to see ‘more’ as the only desirable direction. [...] [W]e never sought to reflect on where we were but became obsessed with where we might be.” (Woollard, 2000, p. 3)
International development theorists, students, and practitioners alike have become increasingly concerned with the so-called “impasse” in development theory. Due to the decline of the modernization paradigm’s potency throughout the 1980s – an approach which sought economic advancement as a solution to mass poverty and economic decline – there is no longer a consensus concerning how we may reconcile the issue of declining standards of living in the periphery.\(^1\) While agreement over one particular way forward does not exist, most prominent development institutions (the United Nations, World Bank, and governments) favour the policy of sustainable development as an answer to the developing world’s economic and environmental woes. Popularized with the 1987 Brundtland report,\(^2\) this approach defines development as that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Stefanovich, 2000, p. 17). The approach reflects an understanding that, focusing solely on economic growth, ignores and impedes social development and environmental protection, thus attempting to integrate various avenues for the improvement of conditions in the developing world. While sustainable development is the most viable strategy of late, it encompasses a number of serious internal flaws that must be addressed before it is widely adopted as the sole development approach. Although it does seek to reform the comparatively destructive modernization discourse, its changes are not deep or enduring enough to label it a fundamental, revolutionary change to development policy.

This essay will critique the approach of sustainable development by elaborating upon the following principal observations. First of all, upon analysis of the assumptions and underpinnings of the approach, it becomes apparent that sustainable development simply embodies a new form of the old discourse; it fails to emerge from its ethnocentric vices. Secondly, with its emphasis on sustainable growth (over other components), the approach neglects to reconcile development’s inherent contradictions and downfalls. The policy therefore fails to take into account the ways that the Western world contributes to the inferiority and subordination of poorer parts of the world. Also, the concept is much too broad and all-encompassing, creating ambiguity in terms of its definition and causing a gap to occur between its rhetoric and policy initiatives. This lack of clarity also results in a varied range of policy choices, often contradictory and incoherent. With these observations in mind, suggestions for the reformation of the sustainable development approach will be given, thereby attempting to negotiate ways that its framework may be improved in order to render it a satisfactory means of breaching the impasse.

Earlier ascriptions of development converged around its association with a unilinear, continuous process toward the predetermined, finite goals of modernization and industrialization. Under such an approach, the ‘backwardness’ and traditionalism of societies were seen as the barriers to progress: “These forces were seen as inherent in all societies and, in so far as there was need for a theory of underdevelopment, its function would be to analyze ‘barriers to modernization’ and ‘resistance to change’” (Hettne, 1995, p. 54). However, during the 1970s and 80s, reports concerning the cataclysmic changes in environment and destabilizing increases in poverty emerged to counter and refute the above claims to development. For example, Fernando (1997) reports that between the years 1960 and 1999, the richest twenty percent of the world’s population went from owning seventy to eighty-five percent of the world’s wealth, while the share of the world’s poorest eighty percent went from 2.3 percent to 1.4 percent (p. 14). Such inequitable shifts are often attributed to “untenable metaphysical starting points” (Schuurman, 1993, p. 22) within development discourse; the assumptions and beliefs underlying previous

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\(^1\) This criticism took the following form: a “growing awareness that the emphasis on economic growth – awarded a central role in development theory – resulted in an insupportable burden on the natural environment […]” (Schuurman, 1993, p. 1).

\(^2\) The Brundtland report, more formally called *Our Common Future*, was prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development convened by the United Nations under Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former PM of Norway (Escobar, 1995: 192).
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attempts were extremely short-sighted, focusing on “gratification of our present needs at any
cost” (Stefanovich, 2000, pp. 3-4).

It was under these auspices that the Brundtland Commission acknowledged the need to
rethink the former approach of development (Stefanovich, 2000), which focused on an
overconfidence in the power of the market to reconcile development shortcomings. While the
Brundtland Report acknowledges the need to account for environmental and social costs to
development, it does so in an incredibly vague way, leaving much open to interpretation. In
short, “In failing to examine what caused all these demands to become necessary and in not
suggesting mechanisms for their fulfillment, [the report] leaves us to expect merely a
modification of business as before” (Stefanovich, 2000, p. 6). Furthermore, one text makes the
following observation:

While identifying unequal development as the villain in the environment, it
suggests that the revival of growth combined with a change in its quality is the
cure. [...] In failing to examine what caused all these demands to become
necessary [...]. Our Common Future leaves us to expect merely a modification of
business as usual. (Middleton, O’Keefe, & Moyo, 1993, p. 6 [emphasis added])

Thus, the inherently contradictory aims of economic expansion, environmental protection,
poverty eradication, and the free market are merged into an awkward, unsustainable policy. In its
linking of economic growth, material wealth, and economic progress (Stefanovich, 2000),
sustainable development has failed to atone for the fact that it is such aspirations that put the
world in such a precarious position in the first place.

This discussion leads us to the one fundamental flaw of sustainable development: that it
is simply a new manifestation of an old, tired discourse. Upon examining assumptions of the
modernization model, it is clear that economic rationality, based on Western intellectual and
scientific evolutionism, underpins initial development discourse. Ferguson (1997) correctly
identifies three aspects of this tradition: 1) societies are made up of rational individuals,
collectively making their way through evolution, 2) all societies are headed in the same direction,
and 3) differences between societies can be understood primarily as differences in development
(p. 154). These give rise to a reliance on linear development models, ones that can be explained
by simple cause-and-effect dichotomies, exposing the importance of rationality and reason
inherent in Western intellectual traditions. It is for this reason that Escobar claims that “The
globe and its problems have finally entered rational discourse” (Escobar, 1995, p. 192). Escobar
goes on to say that the sustainable development discourse simply redistributes and resuffles the
concerns of neo-liberal development models: basic needs, population, resources, technology, etc.
(Escobar, 1995, p. 195). With such assumptions and beliefs forming the basis of the approach, he
sees it as a perpetuation of the former disastrous and denigrating one. Sustainable development,
therefore, stems from the very suppositions of classical development theory, and fails to reflect a
reformation or meaningful rethinking of our dominant ideologies.

Yet another way that the approach perpetuates and reaffirms past discarded policies is in
its ethnocentric, technocentric, and anthropocentric qualities, exposing its inherently Western
biases (Adams, 1995; Watts, 1995). While past approaches have failed to meaningfully address

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3 This lack of answers have led the report to be seen as “‘an enthusiastic and unquestioning reaffirmation of the system,
lifestyles and values that are causing the problems under discussion’” (Stefanovich, 2000: 21).
4 Stefanovich attributes the focus on what is real, definable, and measurable back to Greek philosophers and Plato
(Stefanovich, 2000: 23).
5 Adams believes such biases represent “the dominant industrialist and modernist ideology of what Aseniero calls
developmentalism, defined by Friberg and Hettne as ‘a common corporate industrial culture based on the values of
competitive individualism, rationality, growth, efficiency, specialization, centralization and big scale’” (Adams, 1995: 90).
the needs, values and cultural differences of “developing” nations, sustainable development repeats these mistakes – Western social scientists continue to dictate what is right for the rest of the world. In fact, “By advancing an environmental agenda the North has once more concentrated on its own interests and has called them ‘globalism’” (Middleton et al, 1993: 5). Escobar sardonically muses that, “The Western scientist continues to speak for the Earth. God forbid that the Peruvian peasant, an African nomad, or a rubber tapper of the Amazon would have something to say in this regard” (Escobar, 1995, p. 194). While it is seemingly unethical to impose such an ideology on those to whom it is not indigenous, it is alarming that the components of the classical development model are still being advocated; as we have seen, the approach has done little to eradicate poverty, and nothing to resolve the degradation of the environment.

The second main criticism of sustainable development is the way that it unsuccessfully attempts to mesh two contradictory endeavours: environmental protection and economic expansion. Failing to reconcile this inconsistency, sustainable development conveniently avoids a serious criticism of the West’s role in underdevelopment and other global inequities, simply allowing for our continued growth without meaningful reform.6 As articulated by Escobar (1995), sustainable development places a premium on economic growth over the environment: “By adopting the concept of sustainable development, two old enemies, growth and the environment, are reconciled. […] It is growth (read: capitalist market expansion), and not the environment, that has to be sustained” (pp. 195-6). This approach thus purports that “only minor adjustments to the market system are needed to launch an era of environmentally sound development, hiding the fact that the economic framework itself cannot hope to accommodate environmental considerations [...]” (Escobar, 1995, p. 197 [emphasis added]). The inherent contradiction therefore remains: “it has become clear not only that capitalism impairs or destroys the social and environmental conditions on which it relies (including nature and labor) but also that capitalist restructuring increasingly takes place at the expense of those conditions” (Escobar, 1995, p. 200).

Perhaps one of the greatest failures of sustainable development is its lack of attention to excessive consumption in the West; unsustainability of this practice: “Our current understanding of the relationship between overconsumption, underconsumption and sustainable development […] remain narrow and misleading” (Fernando, 2003, p. 19); and that “maximization of capitalist profit and environmentally sustainable and equitable consumption cannot be achieved simultaneously” (Fernando, 2003, p. 21).7 Future reforms of sustainable development must thus look to the immense concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few – this is where the real lack of sustainability rests (Fernando, 2003). Therefore, we must consider changing our ideas about production and other social relations, which perpetuate inequality, and in the process amend the assumptions upon which sustainable development is based.

All of these underlying contradictions and inherent flaws of an approach which, on the surface, appears to be a conscientious and measured approach to reform point to perhaps its most fundamental weakness: that it is too broad and inclusive. The all-encompassing definition of sustainable development has meant that its conceptual framework has been used as a rhetorical shield to conceal underlying economically-based initiatives, thus allowing a variety of actors to evade responsibility for the environment and social justice itself. Thus there is a very real danger

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6 Certain efforts have been made to reform the West’s ways; however, endeavours such as the Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement attempting to cut global carbon dioxide emissions and thus bypass global warming, has failed as there is a lack of consensus on how it may be implemented. Fundamentally, Western states are unwilling to change their practices.

7 Middleton, O’Keefe & Moyo (1993) suggest that sustainable development will only advance and perpetuate the very problems in supposedly seeks to resolve: “Disparities between rich and poor, most obvious in the South but entrenched it the North too, have, as it were, been institutionalized in the Northern commitment to ‘market forces’ and the economics of capital” (Middleton et al, 1993, pp. 16-7).
that sustainable development may soon be subsumed under the heading of discarded development
approaches: “the very concept of sustainable development has become increasingly ambiguous
and open to a wide range of interpretations and appropriations by a variety of interest groups.
Now, there is growing concern as to whether sustainable development has reached an impasse
both in theory and in practice” (Fernando, 2003, p. 7). Such an approach “neglects to situate
discrete activities in a wider political and economic context.” (Parnwell & Bryant, 1996, p. 1). It
also encompasses a variety of belief-systems and ideological commitments, ranging from far-left
to far-right: “Sustainable development contains elements of both radicalism and reformism. As a
result, ships of very varied allegiance are sailing cautiously under the same flag, and the
destination is rarely debated” (Adams, 1995, p. 98). The danger is therefore that sustainable
development provides a way for all development actors, mindful or unmindful of environmental
and social equity issues, to continue to implement the status quo. This can hardly be seen as a
way to negotiate the development impasse.

Related to the above point is the fact that the definition fails to provide a framework for
action. In its current form, it is simply a loose concept of an ideal situation. Any action in its
name therefore risks disappointment: “the lack of a single coherent ideology, and the lack of
understanding of the political economy of the development process and the structures of the
world economy, expose those seeking to implement the muddy concept of sustainable
development to significant risk of failure [...]” (Adams, 1995, p. 99). This has therefore led to an
inconsistency in what actors claim to be vying for and their actual outcomes (even when their
efforts are clearly genuine and sincere): “it is becoming increasingly clear to many community
activists that there is a disjunction between what citizens and local governments say they want in
terms of securing a sustainable future and what they are willing to do to achieve it” (Moore, 2000,
p. 101). Therefore, while many involved in the development field selflessly strive to help those
in abject poverty without a clear framework of implementation, one that more clearly addresses
the specific ways in which our current world order has been created, we may unfortunately
continue to see the same development failures of the past perpetuated in the future.

Given the criticisms enumerated above, it would seem that the sustainable development
approach should simply be discarded as a way through the impasse. However, while many
development theorists engage in such denigrations, sustainable development is an important and
meaningful starting point towards reform of development strategies. It reflects an articulation,
however vague, that unabated growth is dangerous for the environment. Escobar (1995)
acknowledges this fact: “The sustainable development movement is a massive attempt, perhaps
not witnessed since the rise of empirical sciences, to resignify nature, resources, the Earth, and
human life itself. It is a somewhat clumsy and shortsighted attempt [...] but its importance should
not be minimized” (p. 202 [emphasis added]).

Nonetheless, what sustainable development fails to do is articulate specific and tangible
ways that such realizations may be put into action; it may also reflect an attempt to ‘water down’
the severity of our current development situation so as to make it more acceptable and favourable
to governments that are primarily and solely economically-oriented. However, without an
analysis and reformation of the ideological underpinnings of sustainable development, its more
positive aspects may be lost amid ambiguity. Fernando (2003) offers many tactile proposals for
such improvements, starting by bringing back the role of the state in its management and
surveying capabilities: “The role of the state is crucial to realizing the goals of sustainable
development, even more so now than during the cold war period” (p. 22). Unfortunately, most
states today are increasingly aligned with business and corporate interests, ones that focus on
growth at the expense of social equity and environmental protection. A state-led initiative is the
only way that more environmentally viable, sustainable technologies for the production of energy
may be implemented, as such a venture would require an initial forfeit of pure economic growth.
It is also the only means by which environmental indicators can be reliably measured, recorded,
and acted upon. Unfortunately, at present, most states of the developed and developing worlds
alike fail to adequately recognize such measures as being paramount to their futures or livelihoods.

In addition, the flawed and inherently contradictory ideology of sustainable development may be improved by placing greater emphasis on social and economic equity (Fernando, 2003). It has been recognized that poverty is a key ingredient to global insecurity and instability; what is now needed is a broad recognition and acknowledgement of the links between poverty and the current world economic order. For, as articulated by Fernando (2003), “the gigantic concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few is a major threat to sustainable development. The challenge is not redistribution but the changing logic of production and social relations that produce inequality and difference” (p. 27). Equally important is the acknowledgement that fundamental and meaningful change is necessary – the changing of world order: “It is imperative that we shift the debate on sustainable development toward the consideration of what ought to be the nature of a just world order and what type of forces and relations of production are ideal for its sustainability” (Fernando, 2003, p. 28). Without such ideological shifts, any future reform of sustainable development will continue to reflect this dominant world order, thereby missing the means through which such change may be implemented.

In conclusion, in its current form, sustainable development represents an altogether vague, inherently contradictory approach to mediating the impasse to development. Three main critiques were made: 1) sustainable development is Western construct, perpetuating the ideological underpinnings of former approaches, 2) it focuses its efforts on the unsustainable expansion of economic growth, and 3) its broad nature creates dangerous opportunities for actors to reinterpret and mould the approach the way they see fit. Although these shortcomings are detrimental, there is room for improvement within the discourse. Most fundamentally, the future of sustainable development as a method of overcoming the impasse must more meaningfully attempt to change world production processes in order to render a more equitable, just, and sustainable world order into which the rights and interests of all are incorporated.

REFERENCES


