

**IS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT DESIRABLE AND  
POSSIBLE?**

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## IS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT DESIRABLE AND POSSIBLE?

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*Tracing roots of destruction of life-support system in inequalities—inter and intra-generational and inter-species—the author contends that the popular notion of sustainable development neither grapples with the latter two inequalities nor thwarts the linear material growth mould. He, therefore, emphasises incorporating respect for cultural and biodiversity in the concept and practice of sustainable development.*

IS SUSTAINABLE development desirable? Does it fulfil the goals currently put topmost on the human agenda: equality, happiness, justice, peace? Or is it a contradiction in terms, with development being inherently unsustainable?

### *Why Are We Where We Are?*

An answer to these questions will depend on what is thought to be 'sustainable' and what is meant by 'development'. As an environmentalist, I cannot but express my unease by the way this phrase is bandied about by everyone from the neighbourhood development consultant to the Indian Prime Minister, not to mention the President of the World Bank. Admittedly, the concept of sustainable development originated in the fierce debates raised by environmentalists in the last two-three decades, but its recent cooption by the very forces which are destroying the environment is occasion for us to take a step back and re-examine its meaning and validity.

It is obvious to anyone with even a bit of sensitivity that humanity is dreadfully out of tune with its surrounds. In the last couple of centuries, it has blundered about like a drunken bull in a china shop, ripping to bits the fragile natural webs on which all life depends. I will not repeat here the dreary and by-now clichéd facts regarding the extent of damage caused to the earth by human hands, and the ways in which this damage has rebounded on us. A society which condemns its new-born members to ingesting high doses of pesticides in their mothers' milk, cannot but be called perverted. Not to mention the fact that the same pesticides also end up damaging the health of penguins thousands of kilometres away, carried there by complex ecological inter-connections which are beyond the grasp of our development

planners.

#### RELATIONS OF INEQUALITY

But why are we in the midst of an ecological crisis? Is it the so-called population explosion? No, for countries and regions with low population densities are often far more ecologically damaged than those with high densities. An average American consumes 40 times more resources than an average Somali. A similar ratio is probably seen in the Indian context, if one compares the resource consumption of upper class urban dweller with that of an average villager. The American population with its profligate consumerism is far more destructive of the earth's environment than a much larger Asian population; similarly, the richest five per cent of Indian society probably cause much more ecological damage than the poorest 25 per cent. Clearly, it is not mere numbers which are critical, but rather *who* consumes *what* and *how much*. This, in turn, is dependent on relations of power, on *who* decides what is to be done with an area's natural resources.

Fundamentally, it is these relations of inequality which catalyse environmental destruction. Three main forms of inequity can be distinguished in this context.

##### *Intra-generational Inequality*

Hierarchical relations between classes, castes, races, communities, countries, and the sexes, within one generation, can create conditions for environmental destruction. Those in power are able to dictate use of natural resources to suit their own needs, regardless of its consequences on others. For instance, the 'nationalisation' and take-over of India's forests by the British in the last century was primarily meant to establish control over a valuable resource. It was then that large-scale deforestation began, mainly to fuel the needs of British industry and the colonial expansion. In the process, those living closest to forests were systematically alienated. Unable to take decisions regarding their own local resources, they have gradually lost their incentive to protect forests; increasingly deprived of their sources of livelihood due to the demands of the urban-industrial sector, they have been forced to plunder the remaining forests to earn a pittance. And so is built-up a situation in which both rich and poor, both the powerful and the powerless, indulge in environmental destruction.

##### *Inter-generational Inequality*

Entire generations of human beings as yet unborn, who will be depending on the same natural resources we are currently using, have no voice in decisions taken regarding these resources. Humanity is clearly over-exploiting the earth's natural gifts—water, top-soil, minerals, forests, fossil fuels—eating into their 'stocks' at a rate which is likely to leave little for future generations. What we *are* likely to leave for them in massive quantities, on the

other hand, are toxic wastes, barren wastelands, polluted waterways, and a handful of pest species which have thrived on human wastes. If future human citizens had some way of protesting, they would have a lot to say about our selfishness and greed. Sometimes, in a flight of fantasy, I have visions of deformed, starving, desperate children marching through the streets of the world's capitals, demanding justice—children not yet born, but already condemned to pesticide—induced genetic defects, the total loss of food-producing top-soil, and the pollution of every drop of fresh water.

### *Inter-species Inequality*

Humanity shares the earth with a mind-boggling diversity of life-forms, perhaps up to 30 million plants, animals, and microbial species. This extraordinary explosion of biological diversity is not merely a source of wonder, but as fundamental a bedrock of human existence as air, water, and land. The world's agriculture remains heavily dependent on wild relatives of crop plants for continuous upgradation of cultivated varieties; over three-fourths of humanity depends on wild plants and animals for medicinal and nutritional needs; and our most basic aesthetic and cultural desires are fulfilled by other species. At another plane altogether, the fundamental right of other creatures to live on earth has also been recognised by various human faiths and cultures, and must increasingly become as much a part of our consciousness as the recognition of the rights of fellow human beings. Put simply, if I value my life and would not want others to take it away, I should be prepared to respect the lives of others, including of non-human creatures.

Yet, ignoring all of the above, humanity has messed with the lives of countless other creatures in ways that bring no credit to evolution's most intelligent species. Simply because we have the might, we have considered it our right to colonise most of the earth's land surface, and increasingly even its aquatic habitats. Never before in evolutionary history has one species achieved such destructive dominance: over one-fourth of all plants and animal species are condemned to extinction within the next few decades due to the human hand. By the time you go through the motions of a day's life, at least one and possibly 25 species would have died out, never to be reborn. The inequality between humans and other species is the most pervasive of all inequalities, and its consequences the most tragic.

### WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

In the context of the preceding discussion, one may now try to answer the questions posed at the outset, regarding the desirability and feasibility of sustainable development. It seems to me that mere transformation of 'development' into 'sustainable development' does not necessarily integrate concerns regarding equity, except perhaps those of inter-generational equity. In other words, while the resource-exhausting properties of the current model of development are conceptually dealt with in a thrust towards sustainability,

the other issues of intra-generational and inter-species inequity are not adequately tackled.

The notion of development too needs closer examination. It has been forgotten that the term is the opposite of 'envelopment', and signifies an 'opening out', an expansion of possibilities. I would think, therefore, that development would include not merely material growth, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the blossoming of cultural, intellectual, spiritual, and other non-material aspects of human existence. Unfortunately, the Western notion of development has sidelined all of these aspects, and brought materialism to the centre-stage. Even all intellectual and cultural growth today seems to be geared towards the aim of making money and accumulating goods. *Many of those advocating sustainable development, appear not to be able to get out of this mindset, so that all they are rooting for is a continuous growth in material wealth, albeit in a sustainable manner.*

The contradictions and limitations of such an approach are very well typified by that seminal work, *Our Common Future*. An outcome of the World Commission on Environment and Development, and known also as the Brundtland Report, this book is increasingly being adapted by countries in national planning. In identifying many of the world's ills while analysing the deteriorating environment, the report took a major step forward. Unfortunately, in its prescription for the future, it remained trapped in the narrow Western notions of development, and more or less sidelined the issues of inequity raised above. If this is what the world's governments are going to mean by sustainable development (though none of them have even got as far as recommended by the book), I have no hesitation in expressing my opposition to the concept.

#### *The Bulldozer of Homogenisation*

One of the major flaws in the Brundtland Report is that it does not challenge modern development's most pervasive effect, the homogenisation of biological and cultural systems. The notion of linear material growth does not respect the incredible biological and cultural diversity which the earth has harboured till not so long ago.

Conventional economic activities have been enormously destructive of diversity. Take, for instance, forestry practices in India. Starting with the 'scientific forestry' of the British, mixed stands of vegetation were replaced by single-species plantations in an effort called 'improvement'. While enormously successful in enhancing the financial value of the resource, the concomitant destruction of biodiversity was great. The problem is that at least theoretically, it may be possible to continue such 'improvement forestry' indefinitely. Indeed, the relationship between biodiversity and sustainable development (as currently defined) is not at all clear; in other words, *there appears to be nothing inherent in the notion of sustainable development which is biodiversity-conserving.*

The same is true for cultural diversity. Western modernism with all its

material trappings is sweeping the globe, road-rolling a multitude of cultures into oblivion. With that is also lost a wealth of beliefs, knowledge, and skills relevant to the wise use of natural resources: the intimate relationship of traditional farmers with their land, the acute tuning of the senses of forest-dwelling tribals to their surrounds, the uncanny intuition of fisher-folk communities to the movements and surges of marine fauna, the spiritual integration of conservationist ethics into economic practices by many traditional societies. Yet again, *there appears little to suggest that the concept of sustainable development necessarily incorporates the conservation of cultural diversity*, for it is possible to argue that development (read: economic growth) can be continued indefinitely in a culturally homogenous world.

Sustainable development, as currently defined, does not adequately address the perpetuation of intra-generational and inter-species inequity, and is, therefore, not acceptable from the point of view of the larger human goals of happiness, equality, justice, and peace. Thus, it is possible for Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and World Bank President Lewis Preston and American President Bill Clinton and myriad other shapers of our destiny to mouth platitudes about sustainable development, while at the same time perpetrating the very policies which are bulldozing entire cultures and species off the face of the earth.

#### SUMMING UP

If, as a species, we are truly attempting to live peacefully and wisely, then we will have to learn to respect life and diversity much more than we have in the last couple of hundred years. Biological and cultural diversity must become the keystones of our endeavour. As Such, after fulfilling the basic human material needs of food, water, and air, we must ask ourselves: *What more can we obtain for ourselves without violating the rights of other humans and non-human creatures? And if we get an answer that our material desires are impinging on the rights of other human beings and other creatures, then it is time to call a halt to the process of economic growth.*

No such self-checking mechanism is inherent in the current concept of sustainable development. Therein lies my unease. We need wise living, and sustainable development does not yet promise to deliver it.

