

Sustainable Development:

Sustainable development is "Economic development that is conducted without depletion of natural resources." Sustainable development has been defined in many ways, but the most frequently quoted definition is from *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

It was widely adopted as a policy goal in the 1990s by many international agencies, governments and non-government organizations (NGOs). Sustainable development was originally devised as a compromise between two contradictory aims: on the one hand, the pursuit of environmental conservation and, on the other, the pursuit of economic growth and the development that generally followed as a result. Unfortunately, however, sustainable development has assumed two contradictory meanings among different governments and NGOs around the world. Broadly, from the perspective of developed countries, sustainable development is primarily about conserving the environment; while, as viewed from the developing world, it means the continued pursuit of development with the aim of reducing poverty and attaining the status of modern societies.

The idea of sustainable development was first specifically identified in 1980 in an attempt to overcome two fundamental conflicts that became increasingly apparent during the last half of the 20th century. The first of these is the seeming incompatibility between maintaining a healthy environment and the economic growth needed for development. The second is the continuing gap between the quality of life in developed countries (the global 'North') and developing countries (the 'South'). These concerns have given rise to the two conflicting ideals of sustainable development that continue to this day.

Conflicting political ideals

The environmentalist ideal: bridging the gap between conservation and economic growth

Mounting and widespread disquiet about the environmental impacts of unfettered human population growth and industrialization sparked off an 'environmental revolution' during the 1960s. What began as a critique of relatively localized pollution had, by the end of the decade, developed into a conviction among environmentalists that the entire planet was under severe threat from resource depletion and pollution driven by population growth and capitalist greed. During the 1970s these emergent concerns led to environmental protection being accepted as a minor, but significant, goal by the governments of the leading developed countries. However, they still tended to regard a healthy environment as rather a luxury and as something separate from economic activity. This attitude did not begin to change until the 1980s, when there was a realization that the environmental impacts of economic activity could rebound on the whole of humanity, through stratospheric ozone depletion and global climate change.

The rise of environmentalism as a political force was paralleled by increasing efforts on the part of conservationists to protect as many of the planet's remaining pristine natural ecosystems as possible. Yet they encountered major obstacles, particularly in developing countries in the tropics where a significant proportion of the Earth's surviving biological diversity is located. Setting aside large areas for conservation was incompatible with the demand by the peoples of these countries for more space to accommodate their rising populations and for the right to exploit their natural resources in order to achieve more development. National parks whose boundaries had been designated on maps to give maximum protection to a country's natural wealth therefore often remained mere 'paper parks', as it

was not feasible to protect them against expanding human numbers. Poor people would not relinquish their hopes for development simply to safeguard the beauty of nature, primarily for the enjoyment of rich people in their own countries and abroad.

Sustainable development was recommended, in particular, to developing countries as a development path that would not replicate the environmental degradation that had been incurred in the industrialized countries. However, at this stage it was expressed in rather general terms, and lacked both proper definition and any accompanying guidance as to how it might be achieved in practice (Adams, 2001).

The developmentalist ideal: a new beginning for development

Political leaders in developing countries, on the other hand, had a different agenda during the 1980s. The last major political ideal that the governments of the developed countries had persuaded them to adopt was the notion of 'development', by which they would replicate the success of developed countries. From the perspective of the developed countries, this was intended as a well-meaning attempt to reduce the gap that separated them from the poorer countries of the world and thereby increase intra-generational equity. The developed world also backed up its advice with financial aid. However, with a few notable exceptions such as South Korea and Taiwan, most developing countries failed to realize the development ideal. They still suffered from poverty, famine and ill health, and so were in no mood to adopt the new environmental goal that had become popular in developed countries or the supposedly more realistic ideal of sustainable development. Developed countries had become wealthy by despoiling their environments and those of developing countries too. So it was seen as hypocritical of the former now to ask developing countries to protect their environments and control population growth at the expense of the chance of economic development. Indeed, in some countries, such as Malaysia, governments saw population growth as vital if they were to achieve the kind of development that they wanted.

The governments of developing countries, therefore, also wanted a new development ideal. But their priority was for a type of development that could be sustained over a long period of time, rather than brief periods of economic growth, as experienced in the 1970s followed by periods of stagnation. This would allow them to rid their countries of the scourges of poverty, famine and ill health, and to replicate the modern societies they could see in developed countries.

The most strident critics even claimed that development was a cruel hoax' (Esteva, 1992) imposed on developing countries by their developed counterparts, whose sole aim was to extract their economic surplus and leave them in poverty. Any attempt by the poorer countries of the world to follow the path of economic modernization undertaken by developed countries, and to participate in the world trading system, could only, in their view, lead to further underdevelopment because the structure of the world economic system was biased against them. This would divert the bulk of any income they generated to the developed countries, making it unavailable to fund their own development. The ideal of 'development as progress' was therefore an illusion promoted by developed countries to perpetuate a pattern of exploitation that was only transformed, not replaced, when developing countries gained political independence from the industrialized countries that had colonized them.

Reference: Purvis, M., & Grainger, A. (2013). *Exploring Sustainable Development: Geographical Perspectives*. Earthscan.