

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT- A DEVELOPING COUNTRY PERSPECTIVE

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Sustainable development is a notion that has been widely talked about in development fora. In general, the term sustainable development means the ability to maintain and continue a certain level of economic progress over a prolonged period with the available natural and economic resources of a country.

The idea of sustainable development has been emphasized by the World Commission on Environment and Development in their report "Our Common Future". According to this, sustainable development is viewed in relation to the environment and the availability of natural resources in individual countries as well as in relation to the planet Earth as a whole. The definition of sustainable development in this report reads —

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without

cated as a goal to be pursued particularly by the rich industrialised nations. Sustainable development has, in fact, been subject to much debate among world leaders, economists, and ecologists among others. It is observed that the environmentalists have taken rather an extreme view, suggesting that, to ensure sustainable development, the consumption of natural resources has to be slowed down by all countries whether they be poor or rich to match their carrying capacity and their renewable rate.

The developed countries' concern for the protection of the planet's resources can be appreciated but their perspective appears to be limited. The question that remains is whether the poor countries would see it entirely from the perspective of developed countries. The poor countries are responsible for over ¾ of the world's population most of whom live in

economic growth has to be increased to a desirable level until it reaches a self-sustaining level. However, in practice, it is clear that growth alone is grossly insufficient to satisfy the basic needs of people. There are a number of requirements to be fulfilled if development is to achieve a sustainable level. These requirements vary from country to country depending on social, economic, and political conditions. However, when all poor countries are taken into consideration, the requirements for sustainable development can be examined from several crucial aspects.

Objective

The ultimate objective of development, as endorsed by many, is the improvement of the quality of human well being. Accordingly, human resource development is placed at the centre of the development equation. All developing countries in general experience similar problems in respect of human resources and, therefore, "putting people first" in the development process seems rational. Besides, other socio-demographic characteristics such as a large population, rapid population growth, a large youth population, higher infant mortality, high prevalence of disease and malnutrition, illiteracy, etc. are common in many developing countries.

The root cause for the poor living standards is poor family incomes or lack of the necessary resources to engage in table income generating activities. The potential for finding stable means of employment is seriously hampered as the people are either illiterate or do not have access to acquiring the necessary skills. Moreover, it is observed that only a few countries have been able to adjust their educational policies to suit the changing economic and social needs of their countries which are still going through the process of transition from a primary or subsistence level of economies towards industrialized economies with higher growth.

Investment in the area of human resources is a necessary condition for sustainable development in most of the developing countries. Transferring of adequate resources for education will contribute to improvement in the level of literacy. Higher literacy especially among

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compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Inherent in this definition is the responsibility of each generation to ensure that the next generation inherits an undiminished stock of natural resources endowment. It appears here that too much emphasis has been placed on the future needs of the people or, in other words, on the needs of those not yet born. Sharing the resources between present and future generations may sound somewhat altruistic, particularly in a developing country situation where even the present needs of the majority of the poor are not met.

Since the last decade, the idea of sustainable development has been advo-

dire poverty without sufficient resources to meet their basic needs. In this situation, will the poor be able to comprehend what sustainable development means, as understood by the developed countries? This paper attempts to examine the idea of sustainable development from the point of view of poor countries in general, and how best it could be redefined to give practical meaning to the development planners, policy makers, and professionals concerned with growth vs. development and environment & natural resources in these countries.

The major objective of development is to satisfy the human needs and aspirations of the people. To achieve this end, the classical growth theory suggests that

women, will result in higher family incomes, improved family health and smaller family size, leading to overall improvement in living standards. Adequate opportunities for the acquisition of vocational skills for the labour force in general, is a fundamental requirement for making people actively involved in productive activities which will increase their incomes and thus enhance their quality of life. Not providing for human resources development would mean that the poor are forced to over-exploit natural resources for their survival. Also, increased dependence on primary resources such as land, minerals, forests, etc. can be environmentally harmful as the carrying capacity of these resources remain at a marginal level. Therefore, the development of human resources should be considered a practical and necessary step towards sustainable

the environment and on man-made resources in urban areas. Such a move will help slow down not only urban sprawl, but also the rate of growth of urban conglomerations, which has become a major challenge for maintaining environmentally healthy living atmosphere in most big cities of the developing world.

Economic and Technological Perspective

Another important dimension of sustainable development for developing countries is economic and technological sustainability. From the economic perspective, all developing countries share more or less similar characteristics. Their major source of income is related to the agriculture, mining and forestry sector which produces raw material for the industries of the developed countries. Despite many development programmes

off, it is evident that growth itself has faced many challenges.

Firstly, take off requires resources in massive doses i.e., money, manpower, material, and technology which the developing countries always find scarce. Most of the intermediate goods needed for industry have also to be imported. The industrial sector often operates with inefficient technology which tends to increase the amount of resources and waste per unit. Moreover, the quality of goods produced through this technology is often of less than acceptable standards. The adoption of appropriate technology to improve efficiency in resource use, and to reduce waste, emissions, effluents etc., is a necessary condition to maintain adequate levels of growth in these countries.

Secondly, heavy reliance on export-oriented development is costly, and seems to be unrealistic considering its high vulnerability to external factors. Perhaps policies to encourage agro or raw material based industries would be a more realistic goal to be pursued by developing countries, as such an approach will have many beneficial impacts in terms of efficient usage of resources, absorption of excess labour, reliable and enhanced income for the primary sector etc. These changes will invariably accompany a favourable environmental impact which will reduce the over-exploitation of primary resources.

Thirdly, the selection of appropriate technologies to be adopted in both agricultural and industrial development is a necessary condition to achieve sustainable development. The adoption of policies favouring appropriate technology will yield far reaching benefits to these countries. Some of these benefits are:

- (a) Making the necessary changes in the policies on education, and science & technology, so that new and indigenous innovations will be encouraged. Technologies will then be built upon indigenous know how and resource bases, and the harmful environmental effects of development resulting from inappropriate technology could thus be averted.
- (b) The ability to choose suitable production technologies so as to minimize waste and increase resource

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development, and one which will also help to avert detrimental consequences to natural resources and the environment.

The need for minimum health services is also crucial for sustainable development. Investment in primary health care including preventive health, family planning, nutritional care etc., while bringing direct benefits to families, will reduce the welfare expenditure of Governments, and thus save funds which can then be diverted to development work, particularly education, training, technology etc.

The provision of decent shelter for the poor is another means of improving human welfare. Homelessness is both a physical and mental barrier for self-improvement. Investment in shelter and associated infrastructure such as safe drinking water, safe human waste disposal, schools, rural roads etc. will help reduce rural-urban disparity and will create a socially and economically sound atmosphere for rural people to remain in their habitat. Moreover, this will help control urban sprawl resulting from a rural push and thus reduce pressure on

for increasing the efficiency of production in this sector, it is observed that the income from this sector continues to decline. Moreover, the prices of primary commodities are severely vulnerable to downward fluctuations on the international market. As a result it is not only the income but also the living conditions of the people engaged in the primary sector that are at stake. This situation is further aggravated when one takes into account the income loss due to natural catastrophes such as drought, floods, and similar calamities.

During the past few decades most of the developing countries have been trying to overcome the problems associated with economic instability. Diversification of the economic base has been chosen as a remedy, not only for getting rid of the countries-old dependence, but also to achieve the most needed economic growth. The goal of rapid industrialization has been the popular choice and, to this end, strategies are being tested and adopted by all countries. Although rapid industrialization is expected to inject the necessary growth momentum for take

efficiency. For example, the use of primary resources as raw material for industries will ensure a sound market for locally produced commodities and thus increase GDP through value-added products as against the export of unfinished primary commodities.

- (c) Allowing for the selection of less capital intensive technology over technologies favouring economy of scale or high capital investment. Less capital intensive technologies are particularly favourable, because of their relatively higher capacity to absorb abundant labour, thereby enhancing the living conditions of the rural people engaged in the primary sector.
- (d) Development of appropriate standards to protect the environment from harmful effects of development. Incentives for the use of clean technology and also enforcement of standards and adoption of policies

deforestation, erosion of the sea bed due to excessive mining of coral, sand etc., consequences of haphazard development such as floods, inundation of low lying areas, vector borne diseases etc., are on the increase in developing countries. Problems such as the depletion of ozone layer and resulted global warming, the threat to the bio-diversity of the planet, disposal of toxic waste etc., which are large in scale and extending across boundaries of continents are primary concerns of the many developed countries.

In order to solve local environmental problems, active public participation by a well informed public is imperative. This could only be done by launching a well concerted plan of action, which focusses on environmental education and awareness creation. The sensitization of the politicians, planners, and the decision makers is a necessary precondition towards achieving environmentally sustainable development in developing countries.

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such as the "polluter pays principle" etc., will be feasible instruments in environmental management.

Political Perspective

Sustainable development requires strong political will and commitment. The achievement of higher economic growth will be one of the major developmental goals for many developing countries for many years to come. Elected governments are always committed to fulfilling their election promises given to voters, and it is observed that the protection of the environment has never been a popular promise in election manifestos, or on public platforms. The fact remains, however, that the greater the rate of development, whether it be in industry, agriculture, settlements, infrastructure, or any other area, the greater the possibility for environmental degradation.

Environmental problems faced by the developing countries are very much local in nature. The drying up of water courses and erosion of top-soil due to excessive

The perception of "better living conditions" also calls for review and redefinition if the developing countries are to achieve sustainable development. This is possible through a change in attitudes of the rich to their needs and aspirations. "Better life styles" for the people should be reflected by reduced consumption of scarce resources, whether they be locally produced or imported. A commitment from the rich to abandon over-consumption and indulgence in the accrual of wealth will definitely go a long way towards developing countries achieving sustainable development.

Some developed countries, since the Stockholm Summit in 1982, have been advocating a change in the lifestyles of the rich, and this has had a great positive impact on resource consumption. A reduction in the waste produced, recycling or reuse of waste material, adoption of environmentally friendly production technologies, public lobbying to safeguard the natural resources and the environment etc., are testimony to the

public commitment towards sustainable development by some of the rich developed countries.

A genuine commitment from the international donor community and the rich nations is necessary for the attainment of desirable levels of development by the developing countries. This commitment should be reflected particularly in the granting of development assistance. It is very important that the developing countries are left with adequate leverage to select the right mix of development policies and strategies, based on the resources potential and socio-economic-political-cultural background of individual countries. Furthermore, the developed countries could also take more practical steps by transferring adequate financial resources and technical know-how to the developing countries enabling them to adopt environmentally sound and socio-economically feasible development strategies.

In the wake of continued population increase, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment etc., survival itself will become more and more difficult for the poor in the years to come. The governments should be genuinely committed to helping the poor to break their vicious cycle and live a decent life without being a burden on scarce natural resources or on society. The adoption of equitable and sustainable distribution policies, aimed at the alleviation of poverty, is of utmost importance for sustainable development in developing countries. Investment in human capital to benefit the poor will bring far reaching benefits towards the creation of sustainable societies with characteristics such as a stabilized population growth, high quality labour force, narrowed inequality between the rich and poor, and less political unrest. Improvement in the quality of life of the poor in particular, should be the main characteristic of sustainable development for the developing world.

Source: World Resources 1992-93, Oxford University Press, 1992.

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