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“Transcending Economics:

Understanding sustainability and its practice through a sociological lens”

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Abstract: We use ‘sustainable’ as a prefix more often now than ever before, for example, sustainable housing, sustainable clothing, sustainable food, and many others. But how true is the prefix to its use? Questions need to be raised about the authenticity of its application, especially in the context of the growing environmental concerns that define our times. In order to understand the ‘true meaning’ of sustainable development (SD) and the accountability of its deployment, it is essential to look at it in the light of the fundamentals & development of the term ‘sustainable development.’ The objective of this paper is to bring forth that in the contemporary essence of sustainability there is a complete denial of restraining physical limits to economic growth and further to understand the dialectical relationship and antagonisms between sustainability and development as practices as well as concepts. This paper also delves into the alternative development strategies (ADS) drawn by many in order to build a truly sustainable future. Through a sociological lens, this paper redefines sustainability as a multidimensional concept that requires a shift in both policy and practice to achieve a genuinely sustainable future.

KEYWORDS: SUSTAINABILITY, GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT, ECOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ECONOMICS, GOALS & IMPACT, ANTHROPOCENTRIC, POLITICS AND POWER RELATIONS, ALTERNATE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES, INCLUSIVITY AND CONTEXTUALITY.

Introduction

Since the early 1970s, sustainable societies appear to have been a research topic. The 1970s oil crisis and its economic ramifications raised the sustainability issue in a somewhat different way. It brought to light the precariousness of economies reliant on finite resources and the risk of their collapse once those resources are used up. Action plans were sparked by this, and efforts were made to increase energy efficiency, create alternative energy sources, such as nuclear power and renewable energy sources, and focus on the sustainability of human progress.

But sustainable development was most famously popularised by the Brundtland Commission or World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) through its report “Our Common Future” in 1987. Since then, the concept has provoked a significant political debate, opened an entirely new discourse across contesting interests, and has become one of the most rapidly spreading intellectual concepts of the modern age, as well as a buzzword.

The idea of sustainable development simply came into existence as a philosophy that aimed to grow the economy without endangering the environment. Given its emphasis on maintaining a harmonious balance between societal, economic, and environmental imperatives, sustainable development is vital for individuals, societies, and nations as a whole. Several worldwide conferences and efforts at different levels were held afterward, but none of them appears to have had the expected impact on halting environmental degradation, social injustice, or pertinent economic difficulties.

Its reflection can be seen in the current situation of our globalized world where wars – both security & trade – have threatened the existing global order and have challenged the global ideals of development and sustainability laid down in the past. The point to be highlighted here is that the modern world invested in implying sustainability measures has done so far even before realizing what sustainability actually means. The present understanding of sustainability not only reflects its economic & anthropocentric nature but also its practices which reinforce the dominant social discourses (like Western knowledge systems) and the power dynamics of the world order.

Relationship with Growth & Development

Sustainability as a concept and strategy has been conceptualised keeping in mind the goals of growth and development and therefore, it becomes essential to understand the basic components of these concepts. As well as differentiate between them. In common usage of language both these terms are used interchangeably to refer to ‘change of increment’. But what gets ignored is the specific context that they both have, growth is basically quantitative and linear in its nature but development is a complex & comprehensive concept constituting multiple aspects – societal, economic, and environmental. In a way, growth is one of the parts of this wider spectrum of development. Now, their relationship with sustainability is not based upon this difference as sustainability does not guarantee growth & development brings its own spectrum to be added to the meaning of sustainability to form the concept of ‘sustainable development’, which in its true meaning is the real point of enquiry and keeps evolving with time.

Sustainability as it is understood

The report ‘Our Common Future’ defines the concept as “Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). This highlights the two key concepts that need to be discussed to understand the true meaning of sustainability: the concept of needs and limitations. The question of needs comes first, and here, economic growth is regarded as crucial for addressing basic human needs as well as for reducing poverty (the state of unfulfillment of basic human needs). The second concern is the environment's capacity, basically the physical limitations to provide for both current and future generations. As a result of pressures brought on by expanding human needs, societies are utilising cutting-edge technologies to harvest and use natural resources. This allows us to predict that future generations won't be able to meet their own demands if we keep using up the earth's finite natural resources as we do today. And suggests that the capacity of the environment to satisfy the future requirements of the present and future generations is constrained.

K. R. Nayar (1994) comments that “the need” concerning sustainable development is affluence rather than basic, or opulence rather than squalor. Because, when basic needs become an integral component of a developmental model, the question of unsustainability does not arise. But the question that remains is whether or not limitations are being put to check upon the increasing ratio of consumers to resources. Additionally, the Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs) developed over time in their conceptualisation, across the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 through Agenda 21, then 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000, and finally took the shape of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have not advanced. And to explain this failure, experts have criticised the economic ideology that gave rise to those "Global Goals" as well as the intellectual framework that underlies them. Although the recent COVID pandemic hindered the targeted timeline of SDGs, it also brought to light the flawed approach to the goals.

Sustainability through intellectual traditions

A review of the literature reveals two main opposing intellectual views, environmental economics and ecological economics regarding sustainability, that can help interpret the true sense and use of sustainability as well as understand the development path that we are moving forward with. From the perspective of environmental economics, environmental issues are a component of broader economic issues that can be examined by extending the neoclassical economic tools and principals currently in use (such as the "random utility model" and "household production function approach") without affecting the models' tractability. According to neoclassical economics, nature is only a source of raw materials that is available for human use as the economy's main force, preferably as decided by market desires. Additionally, an environmental resource is only valuable for economic management if it is relatively rare and has the potential to benefit people. According to the utility method, resources should be safeguarded for enhancing individual welfare, which indicates that investing in resources that produce little economic gain is possibly a socially inefficient allocation. Therefore, the paradigm of "weak sustainability" rests on the foundations of neoclassical capital theory.

According to the neoclassical tradition of Robert Solow and Joseph Stiglitz, natural capital and manufactured capital are sufficiently interchangeable for aggregate output to be maintained at any given level of natural capital. According to this supposition, whatever natural resources are lost during economic expansion can be made up for in the long run by economic accumulation. Furthermore, environmental resource scarcity is a "relative scarcity" phenomenon for environmental economics, which suggests that the physical limitations on economic growth imposed by environmental scarcity can be removed by imposing higher

economic costs. In light of this, the pace of technological advancement and the rate of capital accumulation determine growth.

However, ecological economists continue to make their case based on the idea that all economic activity must be seen as a part of the ecosystem that the economy is embedded in and that it depends upon. Ecological economists contend that manufactured capital and natural capital are not interchangeable in production, in contrast to frequently held beliefs by environmental economists. They contend that the single sector, single product variety production function models—whether Cobb-Douglas, CES (constant elasticity of substitution), or trans-log—cannot adequately reveal the issues of scarcity.

Therefore, environmental economists are thought to have a limited understanding of the environmental system, which contributes to their inability to recognize natural limits to growth. Furthermore, ecological economists contend that downplaying the importance of time, insufficiently handling path dependency, invention, technological innovation, and irreversibility will lead to growing injustice while ignoring the crucial interdependency of capital. Clearly, commitment to justice, the environment, and time are fundamental elements of ecological economics. And strong sustainability is promoted by ecological economics, which calls for more profound changes from the views that are currently prevailing.

For instance, K.R. Nayar (1994) claims that "the cyclical relationship between poverty and environmental degradation is conceptualised in simplistic terms". The idea is that when poverty rises, the environment deteriorates naturally, and when the environment deteriorates, future possibilities for subsistence decline. This cycle of poverty and environmental degradation is therefore accelerated. While the fundamental causes of poverty are not included in this framework, it also does not take into account the role of unequal development that degrades 'natural' capital and the problem of the poor's artificially inflated impact on a lower quality of 'natural capital' set in motion by causes other than poverty.

Therefore, although the idea is widely accepted, there is little consensus on what sustainability actually is. When analysed in the context of neoliberalism, - the dominant political ideology of the modern era and the political response that developed to create circumstances for the restoration of active capital accumulation - sustainability can be defined as how neoclassical economics and neo-liberal politics have teamed up to dominate the world with growth compulsion since they share similar ideas and view labour and capital as the primary means of production (often leaving out land). It would appear that the effects of an economic system

based on the notion of a rational, self-interested, and utility-maximizing individual, while ignoring the relationship between social equity and the environment, places the issue of growth at the centre of realization of our planet's slow but steady ecological degeneration. And brings out the illusion of nature as a commodity created by the politics of liberalisation which has paved the way for the survival of capitalism through economic growth.

Sustainability through a new lens

A variety of difficulties are hidden in the way the concept of sustainable development is formulated. As the sustainability paradigm is based on an ecological view of the globe, it conflicts with the still-dominant school of economic development theory, which dates back to the 1970s, the dawn of neoliberalism, and maintains that the earth and its resources have no absolute limit. It has been argued that accepting sustainability says nothing in particular about the subject matter. Those who can somewhat concur with the assertion can yet engage in the competitive pursuit of diametrically opposed objectives.

Simply put, sustainable development has been defined as economic development with the preservation of nature as an environment of human life. In this sense, the existing concept of sustainable development is from an economic perspective. However sustainable development from an economic perspective is faced with some limitations and problems, as the human-made environment is excluded from the concept of sustainable development. Its ideology becomes anthropocentric in the sense that the sustainability of nature is a necessary condition for the economic development of humans. For example, the rise in stringent regulations of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) all over the world to take forward the mission of sustainable development needs to be restructured in its methodology as the impact of such initiatives many times misses the actual essence.

In this direction, the Brundtland Commission's "Our Common Future" report (WCED, 1987) made a point of stressing the significance of taking a sociological perspective into account because it emphasizes people as the primary contributors to social organization patterns, and explores how these social patterns can affect our sustainable development goals (SDGs). Therefore, understanding from a sociological lens can make significant contributions to sustainable development studies and their application for creating solutions to sustainability issues. For instance, changes in social behaviour cannot be understood outside of the field of sociology. Similarly, topics like poverty, urban design, quality of life, and others can be better

understood with a sociological lens in use. Thus, this acknowledges the need for sociological research concerning sustainability and development in its true essence.

Culture for example is an important component of sustainable development because it encompasses all three of its major components—social, economic, and environmental—even though it is frequently overlooked as a key pillar for achieving it. Culture, for instance, might allude to the variations in sustainable lifestyles found throughout the world. Thus, culture is a fundamental as well as an essential component of sustainable development. The Brundtland Report outlined how local, national, and international development strategies must be combined with economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental balance to create a network of sustainable development solutions. These factors, however, do not fully capture the complexity of our modern civilizations. And because culture serves as a social glue and facilitator in the face of economic, sociological, and environmental issues, it may be used as an effective method to support the three main pillars. Since then, groups and occasions like UNESCO and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) have pushed for the inclusion of culture in this approach. Because it shapes our understanding of "development" and influences how communities behave around the world, culture is a complementary factor.

Sociological observations also produce insights that show how sustainability is incorporated into modern institutions, cultural norms, and society as a whole. Most crucially, the sociological study explains how sustainability is connected to social power relations. It takes into account how social hierarchies and patterns influence the way sustainability is defined and the decisions that are made about it. As on various levels of power, there is a clear case of hierarchy in the process of sustainable development and around its planning. Be it internationally, where many dependency theorists have aligned with this view. Or be it in a city and its inequitable spaces. Or within a nation, where some marginalised sections, for example, tribals face the repercussions of policies and decisions fulfilling the developmental needs of others.

Additionally, planning has also ignored many areas of concern such as growing inequality, exclusion, historical specificity, collective action, social construction, and other social issues that are crucial for our sustainable future. In such matters, sociological approaches can prove to be an effective tool for policymakers and governments all over the world to better understand the problems and identify appropriate solutions. According to the sociological point of view, since all social forces, including the economy and the natural world, are connected causally,

neither the economy nor the environment can be sustained in isolation from other social factors. This implies that sustainable development should be seen from a variety of angles. The term "sustainable society," which denotes not mere sustainable development but also, societal development, can be used to describe this multi-dimensional approach as a framework for future development.

However, due to its complexity, some sociologists treat sustainability as the issue rather than the solution. They see it as a challenge for modern civilization, which must search for sustainable living alternatives. Therefore, a sociological approach considers the various paradoxes, dilemmas, and contradictions associated with sustainability from a reflexive and problem-oriented perspective. A non-sociological viewpoint, on the other hand, will approach sustainability as something that can be examined through societal conditions and addressed through guidelines and principles that are intended to reach the desired state. It is the sociological emphasis on studying socio-economic transitions, societal inequities and hierarchies, rising conflicts, and activities that serve to justify the social order that gives rise to such variance in these approaches. As a result, these social issues go unaddressed in many of the actions taken today towards a sustainable future.

Socio-political Issues in defining sustainability

- **Global North-South disparities**

Another overlooked dimension in defining sustainability is the socio-political aspect of development and its practice. K.R. Nayar (1994) looks at the concept of "sustainable development" as a political instrument and is critical of many aspects of the Brundtland Commission's definition. He argues that "the concept of sustainable development has emerged from those countries which themselves practice unsustainable resource use", and further adds that "the politics of 'sustainable development' is that at present it is anti-south, anti-poor, and thereby anti-ecological".

Nayar (1994) expresses the opinion that "sustainable development is visualised as a solution to make raw materials available on a continuous basis so that the production system, the expanding market, and the political system are not threatened" while exposing the covert political motivation behind the Western concern for slowing down population growth in developing countries for sustainable development. Therefore, to ensure that resources are still

readily available, developing nations' raw materials must be safeguarded and population growth restrained.

Again, in Nayar's (1994) opinion, "The Not-in-My-Back-Yard or Nimby syndrome is mainly responsible for ecologically unsustainable development projects including hazardous industries shifting out of these countries to developing countries. When the aim is to suggest patchwork solutions to the unsustainable production system of the north, population growth in the south automatically becomes the target of the debate on sustainable development".

Debal Deb (2009) examines the concept of developmentality and its impact on global politics and economies. The author argues that developmentality, which is the belief that economic growth and development can be achieved through Western-style capitalism and modernization, is a flawed approach that perpetuates inequality and undermines sustainability. Debal Deb (2009) contends that developmentality emerged from the colonial era, where European powers used economic and political power to dominate and exploit the global South. This resulted in a legacy of underdevelopment, poverty, and inequality that persists to this day. However, the author suggests that the world has changed significantly since the colonial era, and developmentality is no longer a viable strategy for addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

Overall, Debal Deb (2009) challenges conventional wisdom about economic development and offers a thought-provoking critique of the dominant economic model. It advocates for a more inclusive and equitable approach to development that prioritizes the well-being of people and the planet over corporate profits.

- **Structural transformation**

The narrative of "Structural Transformation," which is based on the experience of developed countries, envisions a gradual "modernization" of the economy, which is another significant theme that predominates the literature on development economics. Similar processes are anticipated to take place in the economies of the global South, where the importance of non-agriculture, high-productivity, capitalist sectors in terms of their contributions to national income and employment would rise and those of agriculture, low-productivity, pre-capitalist sectors would decline. This process is expected to result in the dissolution of this dualistic economic structure. It is anticipated that this change will increase productivity across all

industries, alleviate poverty, and result in significant economic prosperity. However, many economies in the global South have not been able to go through this anticipated transformation. For example, in 2021, for India, the average contribution of agriculture to GDP has been around 17% while the proportion of the population employed in agriculture is 42%. The GDP contribution and employment figures range from 8% and 27% for East Asian and Pacific economies to 17% and 42% for South Asia respectively (World Development Indicators, 2021).

The prevailing development narrative, which has been largely promoted by international organizations, continues to support the validity of the process of structural transformation, uses this framework to comprehend the change in labour and employment in the global South, and promotes policies to do the same. Contrarily, there is growing recognition in many critical literary subgenres that the nature and pattern of the structural revolution that took place in the global North might not be transferable to the global South. This is because the global South is no longer able to take advantage of the socioeconomic and political framework that permitted the structural transformation of the economies of the global North. The process in the North was, in large part, encouraged by colonialism, which permitted these economies to engage in expropriation and resource extraction without much regard for ecological limits and to transfer a portion of their population to the newly discovered lands in the temperate regions. Because of this, conventional thinking in development economics no longer offers a sufficient framework for comprehending and further ensuring the sustainability of capitalist growth in the global South.

- **Ecological limitations**

The constraints placed on capitalist expansion by ecology are also a significant topic that is yet widely ignored. In the past, the global North's industrialization process has progressed via a variety of resource control regimes without any consideration for the harm that such unrestrained exploitation would cause to the environment or future generations. According to economists, anytime capitalism experienced a crisis of expansion, it found 'spatial fixes' to save itself. Even now, the North keeps up its unchecked global resource exploitation and massive consumption of goods and energy sources without any regard for ecological boundaries.

Environmental deterioration and the impending threat of climate change present significant difficulties for a variety of production activities, particularly in agriculture, which in turn restricts the capacity of economies in the South to increase production and productivity. It is claimed that the prospects of maintaining global capitalism by locating regional solutions are no longer feasible because it "has reached, or will soon reach, its limits" as an ecological system. It is "a systematic impossibility and an ecological dead end" for the global South to "converge" with the North in terms of capitalist expansion.

- **Way Forward**

Due to its fixation on looking through a North-centric lens, the conventional wisdom in development economics largely ignores the political and historical origins of capitalist development and remains rather puzzled in its comprehension of the contemporary nature of transformation taking place in the South. Therefore, there arises a need to look at our sustainable development narratives from a multi-dimensional – social, political, cultural, and economic - perspective in order to resolve these issues. The best course of action is to reject North-centric ideas of development and transformation and shift our focus to formulate frameworks that consider the structural factors and the reality of the whole by making it more inclusive, equitable, and context-specific.

Conclusion

Maser et. al (2010) says that we need to learn to think positively and should not move away from negatives but instead should acknowledge them in order to think in a positive mode, singling out that we should shift from being symptomatic in our thinking to being systemic in our thinking, to create a sustainable world. Simply, this means that we need to look at the underlying causes of present-day global crises that are problematic in the pathway to sustainability rather than just moving away from them while focusing on treating the problems on this pathway. He says one major cause of this crisis is the richness of the Western industrial lifestyle. The symptoms of the crisis are a warming climate, per-capita shrinking of natural resources due to a human population that is rapidly exceeding the global carrying capacity, and the ever-growing disparity between the rich and poor peoples and nations. We cannot however move away from the negative and unwanted circumstances but we can only move towards a

desirable and positive outcome. And to do that we need to study the multidimensional nature and aspects of sustainable development, in a positive frame.

Even though environmental changes are occurring and there are natural limits to economic growth, adjustments need to be made to these new realities in order to be sustainable. Our emphasis should be on finding solutions to these issues that are based on the principles embedded in the concept of Sustainable Development itself. According to Maser et. al (2010), Sustainability is not an end goal to achieve but an ideal way to conduct our lives. It has various dimensions to it and needs a participatory, holistic, interdisciplinary approach to program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Therefore, it becomes an important aspect to be taken care of while policy-making and requires a broad (systemic) vision and freedom of ideas. But it also requires concrete and real-time plans, with appropriate tools and systems and their interactions to implement these ideas. Sustainable development, therefore, provides a unifying and holistic factor to integrate the myriad interactive components into a functional whole, for a healthy future.

For example, recently a lot of resource-rich Latin American nations have been in the spotlight for drawing various alternative development strategies (ADS) like the ‘buen-vivir’ and others. It came up in opposition to the Western notions of neo-extractivism, the primary commodities export model, and other unsustainable strategies that have been followed for years. But recently, the impacts of these latter models came to the surface and posed significant challenges, which increased the need for ADSs in these nations. Although these strategies are still at a very nascent stage and need a lot of further refinement, they are still steps in the right direction.

Even in India the year 2023 has been declared as the ‘International Year of Millets’ and has been promoting its use through various campaigns. These highly nutritious and cheaper grains can not only prove to help tackle malnutrition and poverty as SDGs but also are climate resilient and locally grown which can play a vital role in tackling climate change, food insecurity as well as loss of indigenous knowledge & practices. It’s a step forward in inducing sustainability in both production as well as consumption (SDG 12).

Therefore, alternative frameworks for organising action on social and environmental issues appear to be the need of the hour. Debal Deb (2009) also explores alternative approaches to development that prioritize social justice, environmental sustainability, and democracy. He argues that such approaches require a fundamental rethinking of the current global economic

system, which is dominated by multinational corporations, neoliberal policies, and a focus on short-term profit over long-term sustainability. It is argued that a future framework must relate to a new eco-social contract between citizen and state and engage existing capabilities that are relevant to an increasingly disrupted world.

There is a saying that ‘a belief that allows for hope is surely better than one that counsels despair’. Therefore, even if sustainable development strategies today may not be wholly accurate, the idea that with further refinements it will reach a stage of positive change should be our driving force to keep on working towards it.

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