

## Understanding Sustainable Development: Ambiguity and Conflict

Fikret Mazi\*

**Abstract:** The shibboleth of global environmental politics today, sustainable development has got a variety of implications and definitions. Some of these definitions and interpretations overlap, whereas some of them openly contest and conflict with one another. This controversial nature of the term turns it into an overarching discourse which becomes a parameter with many other derivatives for all development-related discussions. Having too many definitions and therefore being ambiguous and unclearly defined, the politics of sustainable development is moving towards futility, or in other terms complete inefficiency. In order to settle down this interpretation debate, I propose a heuristic scheme in which the most basic perspectives are introduced while at the same time listing the basic weaknesses in this interpretation procedure, so as to clarify the inherent paradox in sustainability

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development, Ambiguity, Futility

### Sürdürülebilir Kalkınmayı Anlamak: Belirsizlik ve Çatışma

**Özet:** Bugünkü küresel çevre politikasının sloganı haline gelen sürdürülebilir kalkınmanın birçok anlam ve tanımı bulunmaktadır. Bu anlam ve tanımların bazıları örtüşürken diğerleri açık bir biçimde birbiriyle çatışmakta ya da bir diğerini reddetmektedir. Terimin tartışmalı doğası terimi merkezi bir söylem haline dönüştürmüş ve kalkınmayla ilgili bütün tartışmalarda birçok türevi de olan bir parametre haline getirmiştir. Çok çeşitli tanımlara sahip olduğundan belirsizleşen ve tanımı zorlaşan sürdürülebilir kalkınma sonuçsuzluğa, diğer bir deyişle de topyekün başarısızlığa doğru ilerlemektedir. Çalışmada, bu yorumlama tartışmasını oturtmak ve sürdürülebilirliğin kendi içindeki paradoksu netleştirmek adına, yorumlama sürecindeki temel sorunların belirlenmesi kaydıyla, temel bakış açılarının takdim edildiği analitik bir şema sunulacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma, Belirsizlik, Sonuçsuzluk

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is the famous perennial phrase among a wide range of governmental and nongovernmental institutions, academic studies; the slogan of planners and activists as the paradigm of development. It was popularized through the highly effective Brundtland Report<sup>1</sup> or *Our Common Future* which was the third<sup>2</sup> in a series of UN

\* Yrd.Doç.Dr. Adıyaman Üniversitesi, İİBF, Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü

<sup>1</sup>This report was published by the intergovernmental commission of the UN, presided by Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, prime minister of Norway, in order to evaluate environmental issues.

<sup>2</sup> The first one was the Brandt Commission's Programme for *Survival and Common Crisis*. The ensuing one was the Palme

initiatives. Beginning with the emergence of the global environmental discourse by the 1960s<sup>3</sup>, the concept of providing the prospective generations with equal environmental opportunities gained widespread acceptance and familiarity. The formal addressing to this issue firstly by the report *Our Common Future* not only enhanced civil and non-civil participation but it also turned 'sustainable development' into a sensational promotion which was effective nearly at all levels of environmental governance and commercial spheres.

However, even if the mention of intra-generational and inter-generational equity were constantly made, the boundaries of sustainable development were not rigidly defined because what sustainable development simply meant and ways of achieving sustainable development were confused (Lelé, 1991; Pearce et al., 1990; Pearce, 1993; Pearce and Warford, 1993). A variety of concepts and conditions for sustainable development have emerged, and for some people, this has created confusion (Tisdell, 1993). Instead of commitment to beneficial solutions and practices, sustainable development was more a matter of politics and discussion full of stock phrases. Palmer, Cooper and Vorst (1997), Pezzey and Toman (2002) mention of sustainable development as a fuzzy buzzword, which is always talked about but nothing considerable is achieved. The metaphor is so much abused that it may become meaningless (O'Riordan 1988:30). As a result, more than 20 years have passed since the 1980s but, even if there have been many rigorous efforts by different circles to operationalize the concept within their own terms (Mebratu, 1998), there is not yet a clear and overarching definition of the concept.

There are no major scientific breakthroughs in theory or method but rather, it represents a political and moral shift, legitimized by the underlying science and capitalizing on the residual uncertainty (Aguirre, 2002: 105). Moreover, a trend which was initially based upon ecological and environmental concerns has turned out to be hovering around the hinges of economy by means of the institutionalization fostered by increasing journals, bureaucratic discussion, training programs and international treaties (Aguirre, 2002:107; Fergus and Rowney, 2005).<sup>4</sup>

Commission's work on security and disarmament, *Common Security*. But the most influential of all was that of the Brundtland Commission's (Pearce et al., 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Malthus (1776/1798) towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Jevons (1877/1865) in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were concerned about how Britain's ever increasing daily demands could be supplied; the President's Materials Policy Commission (1952) in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was concerned about how post-war America's growth could be sustained as during war time the finite resources had been exploited to a large extent. Moreover, just contemporary with the Brundtland Report, Barbier (1987) discussed many concepts and notions that still have been enduring in the modern world when both developed and developing countries are handled in terms of sustainability.

<sup>4</sup> Fergus and Rowney (2005) add yet another dimension to this discussion by saying that sustainable development evolved also within a scientific paradigm.

In addition to this, there is lack of consistency in how the contemporary world conceives sustainable development. This is because of the existence of an incomplete perception of the problems of poverty and environmental degradation, and confusion about the role of economic growth and about the concepts of sustainability and participation (Lélé, 1991:607). Pezzey (1992: xi) says that the most dominant model of sustainable development in the modern world is neo-classical theory combining ecology and trade but even it has flaws and clashes within itself.

Even if two decades went by, the concept of sustainable development is rather elusive. This most possibly stems from the concept's dynamic and unfixed nature. The aim of this study is to introduce the diverse meanings of sustainable development acquired within these twenty years since 1987 and both to classify and clarify the rapidly expanding concept. Instead of reiterating and proliferating both contradictory and competing views, I aim to construct a general base by which the concept can be more settled. I avoid trying to prove that the concept is paradoxical and utter an ultimate meaning and instead focus on the state of affairs that have rendered sustainable development ineffective and related concepts confusing.

This article is an examination of the discourse of sustainable development while at the same time elaborating how such an upsurge happened to be. Though I will not build a framework to entail suggestions to cope with the sensational structure of the concept, I will critically assess the ambiguous path of sustainable development and concede that as all the discourses evolve upon time, how we understand and interpret the couple of sustainable development and sustainability is much subject to the context created by various conjunctures.

### **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: WHAT IS IT EXACTLY?**

In spite of the fact that the literal meaning of the phrase 'sustainable development' is clear and simply signifies permanent development, it is quite difficult to give an exact definition of sustainable development that entails all the relative dynamics within the concept.<sup>5</sup> However, the definition given in the Brundtland Report, development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own ends (WCED, 1987: 43), is the most commonly cited of all. In many circles there is surely a context and usage of sustainable development. Does it actually imply a strategy whereby the future generations are considered? Does it amount to a set of rules to ensure the development of developing countries; does it target the susceptible groups of the world or is it a guise that is used by developed countries to go on their arbitrary industrial behavior?<sup>6</sup> The range of possible explanations to what sustainable development is and the extension of literature make it difficult to arrive at an endpoint; and the content is too broad to manage, meaning something else for different groups (Campbell, 1994; Marshall, 2002). It is the

---

<sup>5</sup> Fowke and Prasad (1996) have identified at least 80 different definitions.

<sup>6</sup> See also Jacobs (1999), Kacowicz (2007) and Moon(2007) for a broader version of sustainable development within the North-South context.

main currency of almost all players in environmental arena from radical greens through technocentric environmentalists to capitalists defending economic growth (Jacobs, 1999: 22) So, all these political underpinnings included in the definition of the term reflect subjective biases and most usually they are inadequate and counterproductive.

There are yet various other contexts the term sustainable is applied to. For instance the terms ecological sustainability, sustainable economical development, sustainable trade, sustainability of natural resources are commonly observed in the environmental jargon. All these various contexts develop a distinct definition of their own, creating the problem of ambiguity. What set out as a target of the environmental agenda turns out to be a discourse with a broad range of definitions. This diversity of meanings appears to be inevitable to us due to the efforts of individuals and organizations to create meanings (Graham, 2006: 5). As Graham draws on it too, current understandings of sustainable development depend on a broad interrelation and coexistence of ideas and perceptions on social, economic, and environmental issues.

Though the word 'development'<sup>7</sup> entails a change towards the better and the inserting of the adjective 'sustainable' implies a going on development at face value, the instable nature of the term and its being molded within different ends complicate the efforts to understand what sustainable development and sustainability are exactly in their own fashions.

If we set out with the definition of the Brundtland commission, which still endures, we can all at once notice the subtle nature behind the discourse from the bi-lateral facet of the definition. The second part of the definition 'Meeting the demands of the poor while at the same time reconciling the future and present' makes us aware of the paradox that is inherently located in the definition because this second part implicitly involves the limitations of the environment to supply the demands posed by both existing and prospective generations. Hence, this hidden clash allows for a variety of outlooks on the subject.

The first step to cope with the broad range of definitions and conceptualizations of sustainable development, we should first of all and therefore eliminate the so called 'environmental paradox' which simply can be posited as 'more demand than supply' as also included in the WCED definition. This in other terms refers to the mismatch between what is demanded of the earth and what the earth is capable of supplying (Cahill, 2001; Cahill and Fitzpatrick, 2001; Hansen, 2004; Pezzey et al., 2005).

If this paradox is taken as the root cause creating the definition tension and political vagueness, then the truest measure would be balancing the scale by way of either increasing the natural supplies or decreasing the demands. Although the gap cannot be bridged completely, it can still be

---

<sup>7</sup> For more information about the definition of development see Pearce et al., (1995). In the book it is maintained that development is a vector of desirable social objectives which are increases in real income per capita; improvements in health and nutritional status, educational achievement; Access to resources; a fairer distribution of income; and increases in basic freedoms.

eliminated to large extent. Therefore, the questions, answers and discussions within this paradoxical context comprise the base via which we can understand sustainable development. This paradox resolution also requires the eradication of the confusion between 'growth' and 'development' as they are two distinct referrals. Though they seem quite parallel, in fact they are nearly on different paths. While the term 'growth' implies an increase in the number or size of indicators of economy like GNP per capita, 'development' implies a broader set of indicators related to the quality of life.<sup>8</sup>

Here will be emphasized the most common perspectives with their subunits related also to the overall discussion about the lack of a rigid definition of sustainable development, which in turn gives rise to futility.

### *The Neo-Classical Economics*

'The more effective the resources are used, the more will be the economic growth' is the adage of neo-classical economists. To put simply then, the definition of the neo-classical economics can be articulated as 'the maintenance of a constant per capita consumption for all generations (Solow, 1956; Tietenberg, 1988; Costanza and Daly, 1990; Costanza, 1994b) or the maintenance of non-declining per capita income over the indefinite future (Pezzey, 1989). Sustainable development can be achieved as long as the stocks of capital available to future generations are at least equal to the stocks available to the current generation (Asafu-Adjaye, 2005: 309)

Critical theorists from a wide range of disciplines have worked to highlight the issues inherent to the sustainable development thesis, especially as it is conceived within the neo-classical economic development model. To oversimplify this model is to claim it involves maximizing aggregate economic growth by adopting either the capitalist 'free market' or the planned 'state monopoly capitalist model' (or appropriate combinations and variations thereof). Such an idea assumes that, in the long run, the 'trickle down' effect of growth will make the inequality of wealth distribution palatable. Critics, however, point to the high poverty rates among minorities and lower-class citizens in industrialized nations as evidence of the failure of the neo-classical approach. After more than two hundred years of economic growth, these groups remain poor and the critical theorist might quip that the tide does not raise all boats (Graham, 2006:7).

As is understood, the famous Brundtland definition cannot be reconciled with the neo-classical perspective of sustainable development. The Brundtland Report includes the following: if needs are to be met on a sustainable basis the Earth's natural resource base must be conserved and enhanced (WCED, 1987:57). Neo-classical economic standing has nothing to do with environmental preservation and merely pays attention to stocks of wealth or capital. The driving force being economic growth, the neoclassical economics

---

<sup>8</sup> See Ackoff (1992), Daly (1987) and Georgescu-Roegen (1988) for a comparative contrastive analysis of growth and development.

unfortunately cannot appreciate the critical state of many resources and environment. What is more, environmental growth can perhaps be useful in third world countries but applying the same theory to developed countries can only bring about futile development in the sense that it increases impairment even in relatively short periods of time. Even in developing countries it is not a wise solution to exploit natural resources to improve income per capita or lessen external debts.

### *Weak Sustainability: The Fallacious Anthropocentrism*

Also known as shallow environmentalism (see Gough, 1990; Devall, 2001; Williams and Millington, 2004)<sup>9</sup>, weak sustainability entails that human development and well being<sup>10</sup> are the targets of sustainable discourse and technology can substitute most of the resources on earth. If the resources are more carefully exploited and technological solutions can be put forward so as to combat the depletion of natural resources and pollution, then development can be sustainable.<sup>11</sup>

This approach can be viewed as quite non-revolutionary in the sense that it is content with the environmental bad going of the world. Naively assuming that technology can replace natural resources and ignoring the fact that most of the developing countries rely upon these to live and get by, weak sustainability is somewhat an ungrounded, implausible approach though the modern world is too much embedded in this.

The idea that nature is a 'resource' to be used for the benefit of society and individuals, and the mankind has the right to dominate nature might be considered as a Judeo-Christian conceptualization of the connection between people and nature (Bourdeau, 2004; Williams and Millington, 2004). However, this conceptualization is a fallacy having induced gradual loss of what is thought to be owned and mastered.

The cultivator, as artist or critic, like the scientist, has so often regarded nature as low, as threat, as transcended

---

<sup>9</sup> Devall (2001) and Gough (1990) criticize shallow environmentalism as being too heedless towards the fact that human being is an integral part of ecology and therefore environment should be valued.

<sup>10</sup> 'Well-being' or 'welfare' is the catchword of weak sustainability perspective. It is even the very measure of sustainable development according to Daly and Cobb (1989). There exist also other studies about the indicators of weak sustainability such as Cobb et al.,(1995), which shows the very fragmentation beneath how sustainable development should be interpreted, even though they overlap up to some extent.

<sup>11</sup> Some economists led by Pearce developed the capital-based standard of weak and strong sustainability to integrate the capital and natural dimensions into the assessment of sustainable development (Pearce and Atkinson, 1995). Theirs is also an empirical review of 18 different economies within the context of weak and strong sustainable development.

origin and therefore in need of conquest and domination. The cultivated subject is seen to be the mind grown above nature and in command of it, totally separate from the baseness of body. This discourse has self-evidently failed. Humanity has damaged its own ecosystem, its collective and interdependent body, through the alienation of self from a nature that is external, other. An ecology of survival extols neither a rationalist command of nature nor a romantic return to it—nature never went away—but a major reassessment of social and economic actions according to their effects on wellbeing within the biological and social ecology. If humanity is to survive, we must recognize that there is no ‘outside’ from which to speak or act; we must gain a new normative matrix for the conception and production of the world. Survival is the one universal value that transcends the proclamation of difference. (Fry and Willis 1989: 230-1)

At the very heart of weak sustainability there is the idea of economic progress. This is the indicator of development.<sup>12</sup> Coupled with technology, economic progress or growth<sup>13</sup> is the ultimate aim and the ultimate hope of ‘weak sustainers’. The groundless optimism that this couple can remedy the stock of resources and allow people to manage the environment within the context of their economical needs is perhaps the solution provided by this party to the problematic environmental paradox.

It is possible therefore to lay a claim that weak sustainability theorists are not much concerned with and worried about environmental protection. The advocates’ economic or capital based stance taken into account, weak sustainers propose to build up more efficient institutionalization to control and manage exploitation and distribution of natural resources in addition to the distribution of economic outputs and to produce better equipment in the extraction and processing of the natural resources so that economic growth would go on, the costs and gains being equitably allocated.

Besides the continuant referral to the possibility of increasing economic efficiency and growth via the means mentioned above, the weak sustainability theorists enunciate that in this newly formed system, the net costs and benefits should be evenly distributed, which in other words can be defined as ‘ecological modernization’.<sup>14</sup> This modernization in turn

---

<sup>12</sup> According to O’Riordan 1996, one of the best indicators of economic development or progress is economic growth, without considering the reckless abuse of nature.

<sup>13</sup> The growth component implies the creation of further productive capacity in any nation, reflected in a long-run increase in its output of goods and services (Veeman, 2008:15)

<sup>14</sup> Though the semantic emphasis seems to be on ecology, the modern capital based economies pay attention to the net gain. For more information see Christoff (1996). He maintains that the concept of ecological modernization is increasingly being used in policy analysis to indicate deeply embedded and ecologically self-conscious forms of cultural transformation. Its meaning varies significantly depending on author and context and there is a danger that the term may serve to

brings forth the idea of ‘environmental justice’<sup>15</sup> by stressing out the need of equitable distribution between and within the generations.<sup>16</sup>

The nature of the weak sustainability theory unfolded as ecological modernization and environmental justice, it can be maintained the theory apparently strives for the bridging off the gap between the rich and poor even if the underlying concept is drastically the opposite. Having a growth and capital oriented stance,<sup>17</sup> weak sustainability puts little emphasis on the tension created by ever more increasing demands by human populations whether rich or poor, and wrongfully mistakes the human being as the master of environment who has the authority to exert arbitrary power on it.

Hence, the neoclassical economist stance and the perspective of weak sustainability define sustainable development in their own terms, with the recurrent emphasis on economical growth including the stock of capitals, human resources, technology and well being.

### *The Kuznets Curve*

Studies which were carried out in the 1990s indicated that, during the usage of some pollutants, environmental quality first deteriorates. However, it improves at a later time. This is the so called Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC).<sup>18</sup> As it is to be understood, this curve is invented somehow to feign to alleviate the adverse impacts of economic progress and growth. It is true that technology can to some extent mitigate the impacts of some pollutants and chemicals. But how come can economic growth substitute for the critical resources of the environment. Think of non-renewable fuel reserves. Perhaps, nuclear energy can replace it completely at one time in the future. But, at the same time let’s also consider the fisheries. Is there any way to reverse the loss of marine biodiversity in addition to other general scale biodiversity losses?

---

legitimize the continuing instrumental domination and destruction of the environment (p. 476).

<sup>15</sup> For a broader discussion of ‘environmental justice’ see Rawls (1971).

<sup>16</sup> Rees (1995) points implies that the idea of equitable distribution is nearly a dream in that tenfold reduction in the energy and material intensity of economic activity would be required to accommodate anticipated economic growth safely, which in the modern world seems to be rather impossible.

<sup>17</sup> One can see that capital in its various forms has occupied a dominant position in the attempts to determine whether development is sustainable or not- so much so that a recent *World Development Report* (World Bank, 2003) discussed sustainable development in terms of managing a portfolio of capital assets (Veeman, 2008:16-7)

<sup>18</sup> This is an inverted ‘U’ shaped curve.

Environmental Kuznets curve is for sure the backbone of neo-liberalized or neoclassical perspective of sustainable development. Simply accepting that economic growth has inevitable effects on nature initially, it tries to make up a scene where there are even environmental benefits in the long term. It is true that economy and environmental quality can coexist. Cole (2007) sounds out that the relationship between emissions and income, even if an inverted U-shape is likely to be country specific (p.240). Therefore, it is a wrong assumption that technology and economic growth are the central pathways of the modern world's sustainability. They are surely more than abstractions as they have conquered and molded today's mentality and shaped the sustainable agenda, therefore the very definition related to it; however, it is not at all reasonable to stick to technology and growth as the prerequisites of sustainable development.

As this is also an invention by a Westerner, it is easy to see the parallelism between Western ecological disinterest and the Kuznet's curve appreciation and approval of economic growth. Policy makers in developing countries tend to ignore environmental concerns and instead target at accelerating economic growth. By doing so, they ignore the potential enormity of economic, social and ecological costs and the reality that sometimes the damage incurred is reversible (Prizzia, 2007: 22). To hold the instantly developed countries up as examples to the adverse impacts of environmentally insensible economic growth, I will mention China, Thailand and Malaysia which had two or three-fold carbon dioxide emissions per capita after the reforms bringing about economic growth and transformation (World Bank, 1999).<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Ecological Perspective***

As far as the ecological perspective is concerned, sustainable development can be defined as preserving ecological integrity and the capacity of nature to remain steadfast despite increasing natural resource consumption due to population growth and industrial expansion. This can be evaluated as a rather naïve approach unconcerned with the devastating velocity of industrial production and consumption both in developed and developing countries. Solomon (1990) and Costanza (1994a) point out to the necessity of a balanced consumption of natural resources without distressing the environment and letting it maintain its autonomy over economy. However, the modern economical trends have reversed the balance, indicating that the very ecologist perspective of sustainability is devoid of realism and endeavoring somehow in vain in a world of economy.

### ***Strong Sustainability: Just a Fantasy?***

Contrary to the anthropocentric worldview of the weak sustainable development, strong sustainable development<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> There have also been pre-mature deaths and knockout health damages in China and surrounding urban centers (World Bank, 1999) due to the extravagant attention on economic growth.

<sup>20</sup> One of the eminent constructors of strong sustainable development Daly (1987,1990) assertively maintains that

has got an eco-centric perspective and focuses on the natural supply part of the scale if we metaphorize the environmental paradox to a scale where demand and supply are at imbalances. Even though it has been usurped by weak sustainability in modern economics, the green politics and many contemporary arguments still subsist on strong sustainability. Tolba (1984) explains that most people's perception about sustainable development is ecologically sustainable or sound environmental development despite the unfortunate fact that there are also economical underpinnings of the phrase.

The earth is finite in its resources and technology can replace these up to some extent. Hence, that the large scale dependency of the human upon nature is unavoidable, which in turn mandates the controlled use of nature so as not to rapidly disrupt the assimilative and adaptive capacity of the environment is the motto among the proponents of strong sustainable development.

Unlike the weak sustainable development perspectives of ecological modernization and environmental justice focusing on economy and welfare, the strong sustainability perspective takes in the biotic rights of the nature and vocalize that just as there are inalienable human rights, the environment has also rights which require no justification. Even if these biotic rights are unattained in practice, it calls for an opposition to the human centered view regarding the human as the sole measure of everything.

Rhetorically speaking, born as an anti-movement, the eco-centric perspective articulates its position as being against the commutability of natural resources through technology and economical development. Material goods should only be a means of achieving well-being and it should not be the final aim. Thus, human-nature relationship should be redefined by way of establishing a more small-scale decentralized way of life based on greater self-reliance, so as to create a social system less destructive towards nature (Williams and Millington, 2004:102). This process requires the pursuit of self-sufficiency and reliance and looking inward first (See also Iyoha, 1977; Sunkel, 1993; Tiranutti, 2007).

The definition therefore given to us by the advocates of weak sustainable development implies less dependence on nature, more self reliance and less destructive social and economic system, the credibility and applicability of which have long been questioned in a world of 'capitals'.

### ***The Sociological Perspective***

The social perspective deems the attention paid to social structures and human as vital in sustaining development. This may sound like the anthropocentric view in that it pays attention to human; nevertheless it is much milder and does not validate aggressive growth and destruction. Organization plays a crucial role according to this perspective because only in a given order the problems can be handled with ease and solutions can be readily proposed. A societal system that can maintain its structure and autonomy over time and can be flexible at times is the goal of socialist sustainability. Preservation of culture and all other cultural assets are also considered as backbones by the social mindset.

---

there is few if little chance of a capital-resource substitutability.

According to Coomer (1979) a sustainable society lives within the self-perpetuating limits of its environment. Though it is not a no-growth society, it organizes the limits of growth and looks for alternative ways of growing (p.1). 'Development' is surely for communities and society. However, limiting the politics of sustainability to merely the societal base would bypass the ecological and economical dimensions.

## **WEAKNESSES WITHIN THESE CURRENT INTERPRETATIONS**

### ***Poverty causes environmental degradation and economic growth is therefore of vital importance***

The neo-classical pretext justifying the infinite exploitation of natural resources perceives the igniter of environmental degradation as poor countries' dependence on resources to survive. So, in order to eliminate poverty, economic growth is highly essential. However, economic growth is dependent upon resource input. But there is no environmental turn-back as the outputs are either for consumption or polluter agents.

And there is no sense of increasing the per capita consumption in already developed countries through sustaining economic growth. As previously mentioned, this may be practical for poor countries but supporting economic growth in affluent countries solely contribute to more resource exploitation and extravagant consumption. This is most possibly the reason why the balance of the whole world is being set up between 'produce and consume' mentality.

### ***The Inconsistencies between Theory and Practice***

The neoclassical economic theory is well aware of the fact that economic development cannot be yielding without taking into account how the natural capital is affected due to the adopted policies. However, in practice the neoclassical economists concentrate on the welfare phenomenon, whose boundaries are also unclear and which is central to many debates. This heedlessness turns the prospective generations into vulnerable entities whose share is uninsured, therefore abusing the shibboleth that there is intergenerational equity.

### ***Ambiguity of Terms and Lack of Knowledge***

'Sustainable development' and many other stock phrases that coexist with it have not yet been translated into theoretical accounts applicable to policy and decision making. There are not clear and objective definitions of sustainable development, sustainability, resilience, growth and development. The world has a blend of subjective definitions for all which are in an unsolvable knot. All this total ambiguity delays empirical approaches and today there is still a wide-scale lack of analytical knowledge to be resorted to in all kinds of assessments. Indeed, not only does this chaotic multiple-definition state make sustainable development an unattained construct but also it turns it into a paralyzed, hollow discourse.

### ***Lack of Cooperation between Environmentalists and Economists***

The prevailing theories are mono-faceted in that they either focus on the possibilities of making tradeoffs between

economy and nature or with an optimal control theory and within the context of renewable and nonrenewable sources they endeavor to conceptualize sustainable development. As for how these mono-faceted approaches contribute to the incoherency between theory and practice, it can be alleged the other sides are neglected, paving way for desegregated political spaces.

Moreover, the weak sustainers basically pay attention to the growth component and the strong sustainers revolve around environmental sustainability. 'Growth' component ignores the environmental dimension of social welfare and the idea of 'environmental sustainability' short-circuits the vitality of social welfare, although their underpinnings have some superficial references to the domain of one another. Furthermore, Common and Perrings (1992) insist that the concepts of ecological and economic sustainability show remarkable differences, even if it is utterly insisted on the fact that sustainability is an intertwined set of both economic and ecological parameters.

The very existence of two varying paradigms of sustainable development -weak and strong- sharply illustrates the departure points of environmental and economic sustainability proponents. While the strong sustainers recklessly entitles that man-made capital can be commuted with the natural one, they cannot notice the consuming nature of the man and the altruistic nature of environment. If they could, they would be aware of the peril that each substitution pretense makes prevailing and future generations more susceptible.

## **CONCLUSION**

It seems that the foremost confusion about sustainable development stems from an incomplete understanding the problems of poverty and environmental degradation. Moreover, the role of economic growth is still unsettled. The imbalance between economical and ecological aspect of development tend to perpetuate this incomplete conception of sustainable development. My proposal is that if development is targeted towards the more susceptible groups of the world and ecological considerations are given priority over the economical ones, the debate will lose heat.

Given that the term is too broad to be defined, it is normal that various spheres operationalize it according to their individual expectations. However, as the term directly concerns the state planners and political activists, the essential component of sustainability should be that of the WCED definition implying intra and intergenerational equity.

A monolateral conceptualization of sustainable development will always lack the essential components to provide development that is progressive. Hence, all strategies of sustainability should take in both the human element and the ecological system as a whole.

It is impossible to deny that the 21<sup>st</sup> century neoclassical philosophy disregards the ethical issues while defining sustainable development. If particularly the policy planners pay attention to ethical issues such as the biotic rights and equity within and between generations in various aspects, then 'sustainable development' may grow out of being an ambiguous discourse heading towards futility.

## REFERENCES

- Ackoff, R. L. (1992). "Some notes on a working visit to South Africa". *Systemic Practice and Action Research*. 231-233.
- Aguirre, B. E. 2002. "Sustainable Development as Collective Surge". *Social Science Quarterly* 83(1):101-118.
- Albala-Bertrand, J. M. (1994). "Review Article. Development from within: Toward a Neoliberalist Approach for Latin America by Osvaldo Sunkel(ed)". *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Cambridge University Press. 26(3): 788-789.
- Asafu-Adjaye, J. (2005). "Environmental economics for non-economists: techniques and policies for sustainable development". Singapore; River Edge, N.J. : World Scientific, 2nd ed.
- Barbier, E. B. (1987). "The Concept of Sustainable Economic Development". *Environmental Conservation* 14 (2):101-10.
- Bourdeau, P.(2004). "The man-nature relationship and environmental ethics". *Journal of Environmental Radioactivity*. 72 (1-2): 9-15.
- Cahill, M. (2001). "*Social Policy and the Environment*". The Gilredge Press, Brighton.
- Cahill M and Fitzpatrick, T.(2001). eds. *Environmental Issues and Social Welfare*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Campbell, S. (1996). "Green Cities, Growing Cities, Just Cities? Urban Planning and the Contradictions of Sustainable Development." *Journal of the American Planning Association*.62(3):296-310.
- Christoff, P.(1996). "Ecological modernization, ecological modernities". *Environmental Politics*, 5(3): 476 – 500.
- Cobb, C., Halstead, T. and Rowe, J. (1995). *The Genuine Progress Indicator: Summary of Data and Methodology*. San Francisco, CA: Redefining Progress.
- Cole, M. A. (2007). "Economic Growth and the Environment." In Atkinson, G., Dietz, S. and Neumayer, E. (eds.) *Handbook of Sustainable Development*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.240-253.
- Common, M. and Perrings, C. (1992). "Towards an Ecological Economics of Sustainability." *Ecological Economics* 6(1): 7-34.
- Coomer, J. C. (1979). "The nature of the quest for a sustainable society". In Coomer, J.C. (ed.), *Quest for a Sustainable Society*. Pergamon Press, New York.
- Costanza, R. and Daly, H. E. (1992). "Natural Capital and Sustainable Development". *Conservation Biology*, 6(1): 37-46.
- Costanza, R. 1994a. "Environmental Performance Indicators, Environmental Space and the Preservation of Ecosystem Health". In *Global Change and Sustainable Development in Europe*, Manuscript on file at the Wuppertal Institute, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany.
- Costanza, R. 1994b. "Three general policies to achieve sustainability". in A. M. Jansson, M. Hammer, C. Folke, and R. Costanza, (eds.), *Investing in natural capital*. (pp.392-407) Island Press, Washington, D. C.
- Daly, H. E. (1987). "The economic growth debate: what some economists have learned but many have not". *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* 14(4): 323-336.
- Daly, H. E. and John B. Cobb Jr., (1989). *For the Common Good*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Daly, H. E. (1990). "Toward Some Operational Principles of Sustainable Development". *Ecological Economics* 2 (1):1-6.
- Dasgupta, P.S. and Heal, G. M. (1979). *Economic theory and exhaustible resources*. James Nisbet and Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Devall, Bill. (2001). "The Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement 1960-2000-A Review". *Ethics & the Environment* 6(1):18-41.
- Fergus, A.H.T and Rowney, J.I.A. (2005). "Sustainable Development: Lost Meaning and Opportunity?". *Journal of Business Ethics* 60(1):17-27.
- Fowke, R. and Prasad, D.(1996)."Sustainable development, cities and local government: dilemmas and definitions". *Australian Planner* 33(2):61-66.
- Fry, T. and Willis, A. (1989). "Criticism against the current". *Meanjin* 48 (2):223-40.
- Georgescu-Roegen, N.(1988). „About economic growth-A variation on a theme by David Hilbert". *Economic Development and Cultural Change*. 36(3): 291-307.
- Gough, N. (1990). "Healing the earth within us: environmental education as cultural criticism". *Journal of Experiential Education* 13(3): 12-17.
- Graham, Scott.(2006). "The Sustainable Development Discourse: A View Through the Social Constructivist Lens". SPARC BC News, Winter 2006. *Sustainability*. (10.01.2009) <http://www.sparc.bc.ca/sparcnews>
- Hansen, K. W. (2004)." Political Risk Insurance and the Rise (and Fall?) of Private Investment in Public Infrastructure". In Theodore H. Moran(ed), *International Political Risk Management*.(pp.75-99) *The Brave New World*, World Bank.
- Jacobs, M. (1999). "Sustainable Development as a Contested Concept". In A. Dobson(ed.), *Fairness and Futurity: Essays on Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice*. (pp.21-45) Oxford University Press.
- Jevons, S.J (1866). "The Coal Question: An Inquiry Concerning the Progress of the Nation and the Probable Exhaustion of Our Coal Mines". London: Macmillan and Co. 2nd edition, revised.

- Kacowicz, A. M. (2007). "Globalization, Poverty, and the North-South Divide". *International Studies Review* 9 (4):565-580
- Lele, S. M. (1991). "Sustainable Development: A Critical Review". *World Development* 19 (6): 607-621.
- Malthus, T. R. (1976). "*An Essay on the Principle of Population*". New York: Norton. (Originally published in 1798.)
- Marshall, G. (2002). "*LA21: success or failure in the Western Australian context*". Paper presented at the Sustaining Our Futures Conference. Adelaide. March 3-6 2002.
- Mebratu, D.(1998). "Sustainability and sustainable development: Historical and conceptual review". *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* 18(6):493-520.
- Moon, B. E. (2007). "Reproducing the North-South Divide: The Role of Trade Deficits and Capital Flows". *International Studies Review* 9 (4): 581-600
- O'Riordan, T. (1988). The politics of sustainability. In Turner R.K. (ed.), *Sustainable Environmental Management: Principles and Practice*. Belhaven Press: London.
- Palmer, J., Cooper, I., van der Vorst, R.(1997). "Mapping out fuzzy buzzwords-who sits where on sustainability and sustainable development". *Sustainable Development* 5(2): 87-93.
- Pearce, D. W., Barbier, E and Markandya, A.(1990). *Sustainable Development: Economics and Environment in the Third World*. London: Earthscan.
- Pearce, D. W.(1993). *Blueprint 3: Measuring sustainable development.*, London: Earthscan.
- Pearce, D. W. and Warford, J. J. (1993). *World Without End: Economics, Environmental and Sustainable Development*. Oxford University Press: World Bank, New York.
- Pearce, D. W. and Atkinson, G. (1995). Measuring sustainable development. D. W Brompley (ed) In *the Handbook of Environmental Economics*.(pp.166-181). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pezzey, J. (1992). *Sustainable Development Concepts: An Economic Analysis*. World Bank, Environment Paper.
- Pezzey, J and Toman, M.A. (2002). *The Economics of Sustainability: A Review of Journal Articles*. Discussion Paper 02-03. <http://www.rff.org/documents/RFF-DP-02-03.pdf> (10.01.2009)
- Pezzey, J., Hanley, N., Turner, K. and Tinch, D.(2005). "Comparing augmented sustainability measures for Scotland: Is there a mismatch?". *Ecological Economics* 57(1):60-74.
- President's Materials Policy Commission. (1952). *Resources for Freedom*. June. Washington, DC: U.S.Government Printing Office.
- Prizzia, R. (2007). Sustainable Development in an International Perspective. In Kivi V. Thai, Dionne Rahm, Jerrell D. Cogburn(eds.), *Handbook of Globalization and the Environment*.(pp.19-40) Boca Raton F.L: CRC.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Rees, W E. (1995). Achieving Sustainable Development: Reform or Transformation. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 9(4): 343-361.
- Solomon, A. (1990). Towards Ecological Sustainability in Europe: Climate, Water Resources, Soils and Biota, USA RR-90-6, Laxenburg, Austria.
- Solow, R. M. (1956). A Contribution to the Theory of Economic Growth. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 70: 65-94.
- Sunkel, Osvaldo (ed.) (1993), *Development from Within: Toward a New Neostructuralist Approach for Latin America*. Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Tietenberg, T. (1988). *Environmental and Natural Resource Economics*, 2nd ed., Scott Foresman and Company, Glenview, Illinois.
- Tiranutti, V. (2007). *Is 'Delinking' a Path to Sustainable Development?: The Case of How Conventional and Organic Farmers in Guatemala...*International Institute for Trade and Development(10.01.2009) <http://www.itd.or.th/en/node/468#attachments>
- Tisdell, C. A. (1993). *Environmental Economics*, Edward Elgar, Aldershot, UK.
- Tisdell, C A.(1997).*Weak and strong conditions for sustainable development : clarification of concepts and their policy application..* Working papers on economics, ecology and the environment. Working Paper No. 11, Department of Economics, University of Queensland. (10.01.2008) <http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/eserv/UQ:120458/VOL11.pdf>
- Tolba, M. K. (1984). *The premises for building a sustainable society, address to the World Commission on Environment and Development*, October. Nairobi: United Nations Development Programme.
- Veeman, T. S.(2008). Development, Productivity and Sustaining Natural Capital. *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics* 56:13-25.
- Williams, C. C. and Millington, A. C .(2004). The diverse and contested meanings of sustainable development. *The Geographical Journal* 170 (2):99-104. (10.01.2009) <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.0016-7398.2004.00111.x>
- WCED, (1987). The World Commission on Environment and Development. Our Common Future. Oxford University Press. (The Brundtland Report)
- World Bank.(1999).*Environmental implications of the economic crisis and adjustment in East Asia*, East Asia environment and Social unit discussion paper, Volume 1. World Bank Publications, The World Bank Group, Washington, D.C, 1999. (10.01.2009) [http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDS/IB/2000/11/03/000094946\\_00092805302328/Rendered/PDF/multi\\_page.pdf](http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDS/IB/2000/11/03/000094946_00092805302328/Rendered/PDF/multi_page.pdf)