

Environment, Poverty and Sustainable Development: A Nexus

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Abstract: Developing countries are facing the dilemmas such as unsustainability, poverty. Threats to sustainability of a system require vital attention, there rate of change begins to approach the speed with which the system can adequately respond. As the rate of change overwhelms the ability to respond, the system loses its viability and sustainability. The sustainability of human kind is now threatened by both of these factors: the dynamics of its technology, economy and population accelerate the environmental and social rate of change, while growing structural inertia reduces the ability to respond in time.

Development processes a primarily resource -driven. Even technological and institutional changes are triggered by human resources; people are the prime movers in processes that utilised both renewable and non-renewable natural resources. However, resource utilisation strategies vary from society to society, and the measure of how effectively and efficiently a society manages and sustains its resources such that development processes are not impeded due to resource depletion or degradation.

A multitude of problems relating to resource depletion and degradation exist. The basic concern among the countries still focus on the economic growth and the general uplifting of living standard, there are concern that this goal cannot be reached if corresponding attention is not given to examining and providing remedial and preventive measures to avoid degenerating environmental conditions.

This study is an attempt to throw a valuable light on the environment, poverty and sustainable development nexus. The study indicates that unsustainability and poverty are linked. The linkage among environment/agriculture, poverty and social capital are complex and, in many cases, poorly understood. There is a need for improving of social capital to integrate environment and people to alleviate poverty and to receive sustainable development.

Keywords: Environment, Sustainability, Poverty, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

Generally speaking, environment means surrounding. Environment includes air, space, water, land, plants and wildlife. Human beings are living beings and are product of their environment. A good environment helps all round development of one's personality and a bad environment inhibits its development. It affects human beings and living beings directly and indirectly.

Ten years ago, the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) called for sustainable development "to ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations." It is widely recognized that economic well-being, social development, and environmental stability must be addressed together if development is to be sustainable. Ignoring any of these three pillars can bring down the other two.

In preparing for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Governments, UN institutions and development agencies are focussing on economic well-being by targeting poverty alleviation as prime concern to achieving sustainable development.

The drive to alleviate poverty brings with it the caveat that social development and environmental stability must be included as essential elements. In 21st Century, human institutions, from local to global, are facing many economic, social and environmental challenges. Sustainable development is that which is economically viable, socially acceptable and environmentally sound. Development is not sustainable if it does not integrate all three elements. It implies long term synergy through changes in business practices and lifestyles, as well as the adoption of environmental and social standards to stay within the limits of available resources.

Environment and Sustainable Development

Causes of pollution and environmental degradation are of two types:

- i) Natural Causes
- ii) Man-made Causes

i) Natural Causes:

Drought, flood, cyclone, Earthquake, Molten lava of volcano, Hurricane, Twister, Torrents, Epidemic are main natural causes/factors which cause environmental pollution. Since they are agents of nature and man has no control over them, they are known as natural causes.

ii) Man -made Causes:

There are four main man-made causes

- a) Population growth
- b) Poverty
- c) Urbanization
- d) Industrialisation

There have been three main semiological phases in human development. The world is experiencing extremely rapid economic change, including powerful trends towards the use of market forces and market-based policies throughout the world; Global economic integration driven by trade liberalisation; and increased economic interdependence among nation states and reductions in national economic sovereignty. The same time, the disparity between rich and poor continues to grow, both within countries and between them.

Pressure to develop and achieve economic wellbeing through a primary focus on financial, human and physical capital is driving short term unsustainable exploitation of the natural resource base and eroding social capital. This is occurring more rapidly and over larger areas than ever before. Such resource exploitation, while providing immediate benefits to some, imposes both short- and long-term cause on many others. These “others” are often the poorest of the poor, who depends heavily on natural resource use and the maintenance of biological diversity. As a result, poverty reduction strategies are under mined by the breakdown of the social fabric and the laws of the environmental services upon which all life depends.¹

Many countries are struggling with these strains of poverty, rapid population growth and migration, the replacement of subsistence by a market economy, and massive environmental impacts. In many developing countries faced with the rapid decline of traditional value system, a major challenge is the need to enlarge, strengthen and empower a stable civil society that will build the trust and public self-confidence which enables participatory governance. Democratic, culturally diverse and socially inclusive societies are essentials parts of modern sustainable development.²

High worldwide military expenditure is continuing to affect sustainable development. New instabilities, often linked to enter ethnic tensions and the demand for the sub division of existing states, are emerging. This situation has manifested itself in a large number of armed conflicts which current international mechanism are unable to resolve. At the same time social cohesion is declining in many societies. Societal and cultural dislocation, fuelled by globalisation of communications, is endangering the existence of many small cultures- especially those of indigenous people. One result is a decline in the sense of community, leading to social unrest and a weakening of environmental responsibility.³

Although the credit for promoting the concept of sustainable development goes to the World Commission on Environment and Development, (Brundtland Report), the origin of the term can be traced to World Conservation Strategy document. However, World Commission Report on Environment and Development, defined sustainable development as paths of human progress which meets the need and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

It is stated that to achieve sustainable development, we will require (a) Political system that ensures effective citizen participation in decision making, (b) Economic systems to generate surpluses and technical knowledge on a self-reliant and sustained bases, (c) Social systems that provide solutions to the tensions from disharmonious development, (d) Production systems to preserve the ecological base for development, (e) technological systems that continuously search for new solutions, (f) An International system that fosters sustainable patterns of trade and finance and (g) Administration systems that are flexible and self-corrective. Thus, the sustainable development affords have not to be static but dynamic, ever changing and constantly requiring adaptations to various systems for meeting human needs and aspirations and not only that of one country or region but for all those who live on this planet, Now and in the future.⁴

¹See, IUCN (The World Conservation Union), WWF, “Sustainable Development, Poverty and the Environment: A Challenge to The Global Community” available at: <https://cmsdata.iucn.org> (last visited on 12-1-2018).

²Ibid

³Ibid

⁴See, S.R Mehta, Poverty, “Population and Sustainable Development: Issues and Perspectives” in S.R. Mehta (ed.) Poverty, population and sustainable development14(Rawat Publications, Jaipur and New Delhi).

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development the Earth Summit at *Rio de Janeiro*, made a clarion call that without better environmental stewardship, development will be undermined and without accelerated development in poor countries, environmental policies will fail.

The whole approach to sustainable development has to be trans-disciplinary. Any agenda for sustainable development must include research on farming, extension service to small farmers, improved seeds, credits, change in land tenure systems, reliable markets and prices, improvement in infrastructure, integrated pest management programmes, reducing wastes, preservation of trees, better management of livestock, preservation of genetic stock of trees and plants, education and training of personnel to implement the measures for control of water borne diseases and family planning practices. Perhaps, women farmers can play a vital role in the activities. Some of these may be relevant for Global sustainable development while most of these are necessary for local or national sustainability for development.⁵

In order to achieve environmental and social responsibility through development, one must recognize the existence of economic and environmental interdependence, cooperation between men and women in an interdependent world and the shift from an ego-centric human life to God-centric vision of life.⁶

The cry of the present for the future generation is complex, intricate and knotty. It requires worldwide concern for the mass of poor on this planet and their increasing population would pose questions that need to be tackled through careful planning on a well-informed basis and through world leadership showing concern for the humanity at large.

The concept of sustainable development signifies policy formulation or goal rather than substantive prescription. For the benefit of future generations, present generations should be modest in their exploitation of natural resources has found wide spread international support since the '*Maltese Proposal*' at the UN General Assembly of 1967, which contented that there was a common heritage of mankind and that this also needed legal protection by the international community at large. The whole theory is based on the postulate that natural resources such as sea bed are not the fruits of labour of present generations and thus such resources can only be exploited with adequate consideration of the rights of future generations.⁷

Poverty and Environmental Sustainability

Environmentally, it is clear that much of our industrial, agricultural and other uses of renewable and non-renewable natural resources are unsustainable. It has been widely acknowledged, both during UNCED and subsequently by bodies such as the World Bank and the OECD Development Assistance Committee, that the current trends in environmental degradation are major threat to the achievement of sustainable development. The ongoing loss of biodiversity; decline of forest, fresh water, marine and soil resources; changing climate; loss of stratospheric ozone; and accumulation of toxic substances in soil, water and living organism are all threats to the environmental goods and services upon which all human life depends for food, fodder, crop production, and innumerable other goods and services. It is usually the rural poor who are the first to suffer when these systems fail, but not even the most insulated of city dwellers in the industrialised countries are immune from these effects.⁸

Poverty is often associated with degraded rural environments. Environmental degradation has many consequences, because a healthy natural environment sustains non-monetary economies and can be viewed as the "social security" of the rural populations. When the productive functions of healthy rural environments degrade, or when people lose access to those productive environments, movement to cities in search of alternative livelihoods can exacerbate urban poverty. Environmental degradation therefore undermines sustainable livelihoods and effects the rural poor by this proportionately affecting their health, livelihoods and security, and can aggravate poverty in already stressed urban environments.⁹

A sound environment alone will not alleviate poverty, but attempts at poverty alleviation in isolation of the environment will sooner or later be undermined. It is evident today that the costs of past environmental mistakes are being borne by the current economy. Recent data have shown that natural disasters, exacerbated by the mismanagement of natural systems, have the greatest human impact on the poorest countries.¹⁰

⁵See, S.R Mehta, Poverty, "Population and Sustainable Development: Issues and Perspectives" in S.R. Mehta (ed.) Poverty, population and sustainable development 16 (Rawat Publications, Jaipur and New Delhi)

⁶Ibid

⁷See, J. J. R. Upadhyay, *Environmental Law* 134 (Central Law Agency, Allahabad, 3rd Edition /2012).

⁸See, IUCN (The World Conservation Union), WWF, "Sustainable Development, Poverty and the Environment: A Challenge to The Global Community" available at: <https://cmsdata.iucn.org> (last visited on 12-1-2018).

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

Poverty is a major cause and effect of global environmental problems stated the influential Brundtland Commission in a sentence that captures widely held beliefs; poor people are often seen as compelled to exploit their surroundings for short term survival and are assumed to be the once most exposed to natural resources degradation. Despite these intuitively plausible statements, the debate on the characteristics of poverty environment interaction has been likened to a puzzle, where we possess several pieces, have identified some crucial links and features, but still lacked the entire picture.¹¹

The assumptions of relationship between poverty and environmental degradation in developing countries have long prevailed in the debate on poverty-environment linkages.¹² The assumptions were first launched in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, the so-called Brundtland Report) and have later been echoed by a wide range of organisation.¹³ Due to lack of resources and their struggle just to ensure day to day survival, poor farmers are believed to offset concerns with the long term sustainability of their resource management and to degrade already fragile resources, such as steeply sloping, erosion prone hill sides. This resource degradation, in turn, aggravates their poverty even more. Thus, poor people are seen both as victims and agents of environmental degradation.

The linkages between poverty and environmental issues are affected by how poverty is defined, by the type of environmental problem in question and by which groups among the poor are affected. Research and policy has tended to focus on the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation in terms of pointing out that the poor are both victims and agents of environmental degradation: victims in that they are more likely to live in ecologically vulnerable areas, agents in that they may have no option but deplete environmental resources thus contributing to environmental degradation.¹⁴ However, it is also acknowledged that the poor often have practices that conserve the environment. Great physical and spatial variability in natural resource endowments also seem to complicate the picture. Harrington believed that un-sustainability causes are complex and vague and are poverty, population growth, ownership/possession of national resources and national policies. A researcher said that population affected poverty and environment that impressible with Malthus theory.¹⁵

Jalal, the Asian Development Bank's Chief of the Environment Department says, it is generally accepted that environmental degradation, rapid population growth and stagnant production are closely linked with the fast spread of acute poverty in many countries of Asia.¹⁶

While governments are now well aware of the three pillars of sustainable development, the market economy has taken priority over social development and environmental concern in recent decades. In many parts of world, global economic integration has led to social and cultural fragmentation. Changes in land ownership and resource tenure, changes in agricultural policies, declines in government services, and economic disruptions all have a disproportionate impact on the poor. As old political system is replaced by new democracies, and as economies are decentralised, social tensions are leading to a desire to build a sense of community through local sovereignty in separatist groups of various kinds. Perhaps the most disturbing form of inter connectedness is that linking environmental degradation, economic development, population growth, refugee movements, and violent conflict.

It is clear that weakening in any one of the pillars leads to problems in the others. Addressing any of the pillars in isolation, without considering their interactive effects, can give rise to unanticipated consequences. For example, raising energy prices significantly to reduce energy emissions may disproportionately affect the urban poor, who often spent a greater proportion of their income on energy, thus increasing income disparities. And agricultural subsidies in food surplus countries may ironically undermine food production by rural poor, who are forced to sell their crops at an unrealistically low price. Such an inequities contribute to social un-sustainability, which may in turn be reflected in decreasing ability to design and implement sound environmental, economic and social policy. The end result is a failure of governance.

¹¹See, Ali Asadi, Morteza Akbari, Hossain et.al., "Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Development: The Role of Social Capital" in 4(3) *Journal of Social Sciences* 202(2008).

¹²See, Ali Asadi, Morteza Akbari, Hossain et.al., "Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Development: The Role of Social Capital" in 4(3) *Journal of Social Sciences* 205 (2008).

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

Interlinkage between Poverty and Sustainable Development

The two concepts of 'poverty' and 'development' have a pronounced relationship especially in the case of so-called developing societies. An inverse relationship has usually been conceived between poverty and development.

Poverty is a disease that stickens the society. As a phenomenon of disease, it needs to be analysed in its larger socio-ecological context in which the disease agents such as occupation, social class, value orientations and location or residence of a group of persons, may have differential effects on hosts, depending upon their characteristics such as age, sex, lifestyle, general physical conditions and social psychological capacities, within the larger socio-cultural environment.¹⁷

According to the report of World Development Report on Poverty (1990), to combat poverty two pronged approaches are suggested. First, there is a need to ensure the production use of the poor's most abundant asset that is labour and secondly, there is a need to increase basic services to the poor through education, health and nutrition and family planning.

Environmental degradation affects the health of a poor by exposing him to the pollution damages caused by polluted water and insanitary living conditions. Further, it lowers the poor's productivity by diverting his labour to activities which are less rewarding than his main occupation. Further, poverty imposes short time horizons on the poor and he faces higher risks in managing his productive resources. There is also a linkage established between population growth and the environment which needs to be analysed in relation to resource base of population, its rate of growth and its redistribution across resources through migration.¹⁸

Poverty promotes large families and therefore it must be alleviated if the demand for the children is to be reduced. Migration to better developed areas may contribute towards reducing poverty. Degradation of tree, range of drinking water resources, can increase the time cost of fuel wood gathering, livestock pasturing and water fetching activities.

Rapid population growth will complicate social and economic adjustments of people in regard to physical infrastructure, institutions for property rights and induced innovations to provide solutions. Migration may have mixed impact on the environment as greater urbanization trends may tend to prove more hazardous for the urban population due to environmental health problems while in certain situations, migration from rural areas may put less pressure on rural environment. To provide an environmental perspective to the issues of poverty and population, a five-pronged strategy suggested is to promote poverty alleviation programmes, reduce rural risks and land tenure insecurity, address maldistribution of resources, strengthen the education and public health programmes and expand family planning services.¹⁹

Poverty and population are the twin problems affecting sustainable development of the developing nation. One is a disease while the other is a menace, together these are eating the vital organs of our society. Both have adverse effects on the environment as a result of which natural life support system is becoming weak. To tackle the three headed crises of continuing existence of poverty on a large scale, threat to the natural environment and resource base and continuing rapid population growth interacting both with poverty and environmental damage, where it is recommended a rethinking on economic and development theory. Economic theory fails to tell us how to eradicate poverty and there is a need to emphasize on human development for maximizing contribution and benefit directly at the individual, family or community level. Development theory needs revision not only for the developing but for the developed nations whose per capita energy use is two hundred times greater than in the South. Needs of both the groups have to be emphasized and social development should become part of the development planning of all the countries. Education, health care and balanced population growth, with special focus on the status of women, are crucial for a modern productivity-oriented development.²⁰

Sustainable development is a hue and cry of the developed as well as the developing World. It caught up the imagination of development a lists all over the World from mid-seventies and eighties onwards, in response to mega crises faced by the globe due to unlimited economic growth and expansion on one side while social and ecological collapse on the other. There are efforts to bridge economy, ecology with social life and these are referred to as sustainable development. Sustainable development has to be tackled in time and space dimensions, such as one can pursue it within a time frame at global, regional, national or at local community level. In the context of developing nations, issues like poverty, regional disparities, unemployment, socio-cultural and environment friendly programmes are centre to sustainable development.

¹⁷See, S.R Mehta, Poverty, "Population and Sustainable Development: Issues and Perspectives" in S.R. Mehta (ed.) Poverty, population and sustainable development 18 (Rawat Publications, Jaipur and New Delhi)

¹⁸ Id at 19.

¹⁹ Id at 20

²⁰Ibid.

The term “sustainable development” was used at the time of *Cocoyoc Declaration on Environment and Development* in 1970s. Since then, it has become trademark of international organisations dedicated to achieving environmentally benign or beneficial development.²¹ The concept of sustainable development further received impetus with the Stockholm Declaration resulting from the United Nations Conference on Human Environment of 1972. The concept of “Sustainable Development” was brought into common use by *World Commission on Environment and Development* (the Brundtland Commission) in its 1987 report over Common Future. The Brundtland Commission defines Sustainable Development as follows: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs.”²²

According to the Brundtland Report the concept of sustainable development contains two key concepts:

- (a) The concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given.
- (b) The idea of limitations imposed by the State of technology and Social Organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.²³

Brundtland report emphasizes that sustainable development means an integration of economics and ecology in decision making at all levels. The sustainable development is viewed as a strategy which would integrate the apparently conflicting goals of economic development and ecological integrity.

The Brundtland report as well as caring for the Earth has developed the World Ethic of sustainability which may be summarized as follows:

- 1) Every human being is a part of the community of life, made up of all living creatures.
- 2) Every human being has fundamental and equal rights including the right to access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living.
- 3) Each person and each society is entitled to respect of these rights and is responsible for the protection of these rights for all others.
- 4) Every life form warrants respect independently of its worth to people.
- 5) Everyone should take responsibility for his acts or impacts on nature.
- 6) Everyone should aim to share fairly the benefits and costs of resource use.
- 7) The protection of human rights and the rights of nature is a worldwide responsibility that transcends all cultural, ideological and geographical boundaries.

According to the Brundtland report the goals of economic and social development must be defined in terms of sustainability in all countries- developed or developing, market oriented or centrally planned. Development involves a progressive transformation of economy and society.²⁴ Sustainable development does not imply absolute limits to growth and it is not a new name of environmental protection. It is a new concept of economic growth. It is a process of change, in which economic and fiscal policies, trade and foreign policies, energy, agricultural and industrial policies all aim to induce development paths and are economically, socially and ecologically sustainable. The report emphasized that sustainable development cannot and will not be achieved in a world ridden by poverty.

As regards non-renewable resources, like fossil and minerals, their use reduces the stock available for future generations. However, this does not mean that such resources should not be used. The rate of depletion should take into account the criticality of that resource, the availability of technologies for minimising depletion, and the likelihood of substitutes being available. Sustainable development also demands that adverse impacts on quality of air, water and other natural elements are minimised so as to sustain the ecosystem’s overall integrity. In this way, essentially, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources; the direction of investments, the orientation of technological and institutional changes are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.²⁵

The Brundtland report further clarifies that the critical objectives for environment and development policies that follow from the concept of sustainable development include- reviving growth, changing quality of growth, meeting essential needs for jobs, food energy, water and sanitation, ensuring sustainable level of population, conserving and enhancing the resource base, reorienting technology and managing risk, and merging

²¹See, J. J. R. Upadhyay, *Environmental Law* 135 (Central Law Agency, Allahabad, 3rd Edition /2012).

²²See, J. J. R. Upadhyay, *Environmental Law* 137 (Central Law Agency, Allahabad, 3rd Edition /2012).

²³Ibid.

²⁴Id at 138

²⁵Ibid.

environment and economics in decision making. Thus, in its broadest sense, the strategy for sustainable development aims to promote harmony among human beings and between humanity and nature.²⁶

Conclusion

The United Nations with its extensive experience and various sphere of international cooperation in the field of environment and development is uniquely positioned to help governments to stabilize more effective patterns of economic and social development.

These efforts were to be made in the context of increased national and international efforts to promote sustainable environmentally sound development in all countries. Along with these, efforts were to be directed towards the promotion of economic growth in developing countries. National and international efforts must mutually benefit and support each other.

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is a UN body charged exclusively with international environmental matters, and has played an important role in the development of international environmental law. The UN commission on sustainable development is a Functional Commission of United Nations Economic and Social Council. Increasingly, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also involved in negotiating environmental matters.

Poverty has the most direct effect on the environment via cropping where poverty influence the household technologies and investment path in intensification of cropping, where there is a land constant. The linkages between population, poverty and environmental quality have long been the subject of debate and concern. In sum, the concept of sustainable development suggests a potentially positive relationship between socio-economic development and environmental sustainability.

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²⁶Ibid.