

International Relations and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Sustainable development (SD) is the buzz word across the globe currently and it is taking a center stage in the academics, corporates, governments and non-governmental entities and international organizations. It is an interwoven concept having influence on business and economics, corporates and societies, communities and governance. SD is playing a vital role in shaping and redefining international relations among the nations and international organizations. With the signing of the Rio summit, leaders across the globe thought that they are heading towards a greener world, but things are not as green as expected. Developing nations blamed the developed countries for increasing carbon emission and making the world more unfit to live. But, on the other end the developed countries put the ball in the court of developing economies who are polluting and causing more damage to ecosystem and environment. From the Rio Earth summit in 1992 to Paris agreement in 2015 many new developments have taken place in the international arena which directly or indirectly influenced climate change, environment management, pollution control. These developments in many is making attempt to bring in SD in its true spirit. Thus, by enhancing SD, nations across the globe are trying to better shape their international relations. This conceptual paper is making an attempt to highlight the developments taken place in the forefront of SD and the role played by different international organizations towards the same. The paper also raises the so-called unanswered questions which needs to be addressed if not now but at least in the near future for not only enhancing international relations but also to ensure this world a safer place to live.

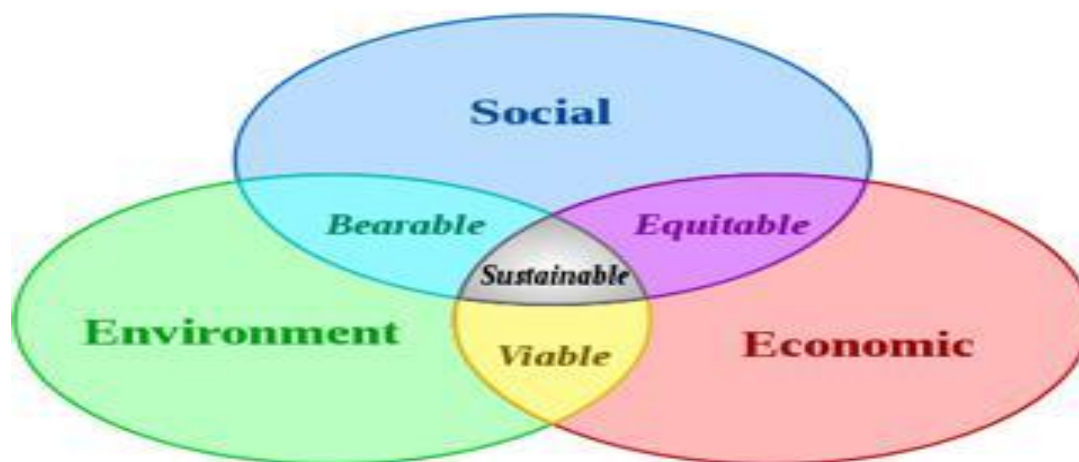
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Introduction

International cooperation and sustainable development (SD) are interwoven. The language and principles of sustainable development influenced the shaping of major international accords and the redefinition of international relations and security agendas. International cooperation is a necessary factor in the pursuit of sustainability, when dealing with global environmental issues. In 1987 Brundtland report published by the United Nation through the Oxford University Press, synthesized the first world commission on the environment and development of the United Nations. Its targets were multilateralism and interdependence of nations in search for a sustainable development path. For the first time, sustainable development is officially defined as a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Le Blanc, D., et al. 2012:1).

Sustainable development has currently become the “buzzword” for the current world. “Sustainability” has been present for the last decades in academic papers, syllabuses of Faculties, boardrooms of local authorities and corporations and offices of public relations officers. Unfortunately, sustainability has become a “fashionable” concept in theory, but it is considered extremely expensive to put in practice by major corporations, firms and local or national governments (Elkington, 1997, p.18).

Figure 1: Interwoven Structure of Sustainable Development



Source: Authors Own

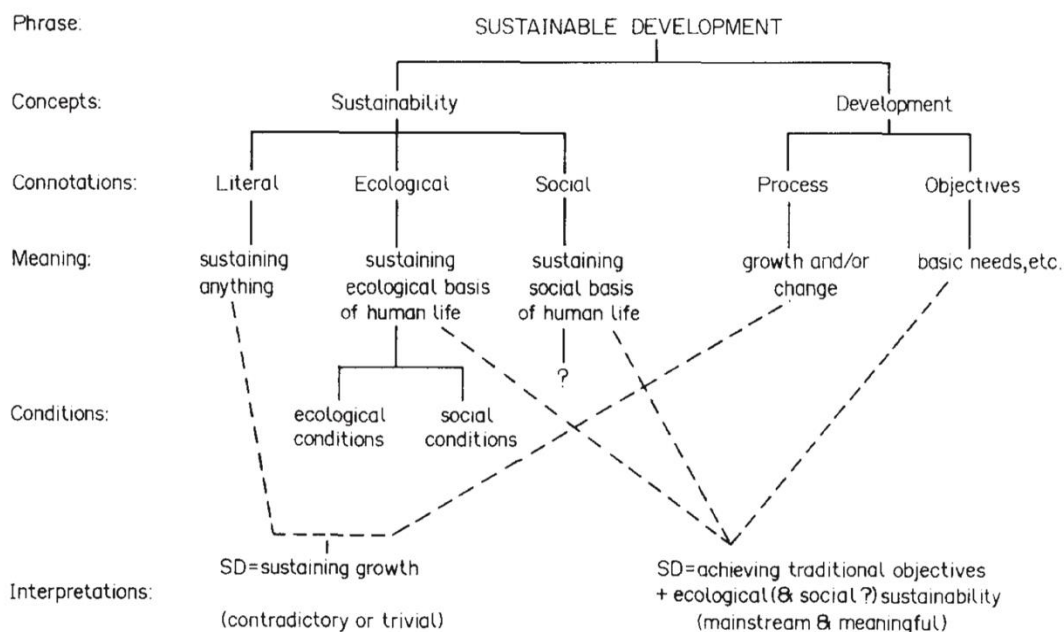
One of the defining moments for SD was the “Earth Summit”, held by UNCED (United nations Conference on Environment and Development) at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 with the agreement by member States to launch a process to develop a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) that could become a useful tool for pursuing focused and coherent action on sustainable development (United Nations 2012:15; Le Blanc, D., et al. 2012:17). It also recognized that sustainable development

includes the recognition that all the crisis is interlocked and part of a single world crisis, and the recognition of a vital need for the active participation of all sectors of society in consultation and decisions relating to sustainable development. Sustainable development is a new way of organizing the society so that it can still exist for a long time. It implies considering the present imperatives as well as the future ones, like the protection of environment and natural resources, social and economic equity. Unlike economic development, sustainable development considers three dimensions: economic, environmental and social. They are the three pillars of sustainable development. At the intersections of these three pillars comes sustainable development.

Twenty years later was celebrated the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, was the agreement by member States to launch a process to develop a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) that could be a useful tool for pursuing focused and coherent action on sustainable development. On the 18th of August 2018, the young 15-year-old Swedish high school student Greta Thunberg organized the first strike for environment. All over the world, among the young generations rose a new environmental awareness along with new alarming publications and scientific reports on climate change, biodiversity, pollution, rise of the ocean and natural disaster.

This conceptual paper covers the major global goals of sustainability, developments taking place at different fields with their outcomes. The paper raises questions on the unresolved current situations and the road ahead in this discipline. The figure given below gives us a better understanding of SD with its multiple stakeholders.

Figure 2: The Semantic of Sustainable Development



Source : Adopted from Sharachchandra M Lele, (1991)

The first steps toward an International Awareness

In the second half of the 19th century, during the industrial revolution, the western societies started realizing that their industrial and economic activities had a significant impact on the environment and social balance. Several ecological and social crises all over the world forced people to admit the need for a more sustainable model. Some examples of these crisis are the oil crisis in 1973 and 1979, the over-indebtedness of developing countries in 1982, Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 and the sinking of the French oil ship Erika. The idea of sustainable development was relatively unknown till the second half of the 20th century, it quickly imposed itself along with scientific breakthroughs on issues like global warming, species extinctions and the ozone layer depletion. The international community progressively became aware of the necessity of finding an economic model respectful of the ecosystem for its own survival. This progress by the governments couldn't have been possible without the awareness of more and more citizens, ecologists alter globalization movements.

Among the first step taken by the international governance in favor for a more sustainable world there is the first Earth Summit in Stockholm in 1972 and the Brundtland report by the United Nations in 1987 assumes significance. The Rio Earth Summit in 1992 marked the first major international commitment for sustainable development. More than 100 heads of states met in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil to collaborate on sustainability, an issue considered too big for individual member states to handle. Its aim was to stabilize the greenhouse effect by considering the different responsibilities between the industrialized and developing countries. This summit resulted in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, consisting of 27 principles intended to guide countries in future sustainable development. It includes formulations of the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle. It also resulted into a non-binding action plan called Agenda 21. One major objective of the agenda 21 was that every local government should draw its own local Agenda 21. This summit opened the path for many international meetings and treaties.

International Relations and Sustainable Development: From Rio's Summit in 1992 to the Paris' agreement of 2015

A number of factors can be singled out as driving the rapid growth of international environmental agreements. A number of cases of transboundary air and water pollution problems pointed to the need for cooperation among states to address them (acidification due to transboundary air pollution, pollution of shared seas and rivers). Changing societal perceptions of the environment led to the emerging of environmental movements and green parties in several countries. Through them, organized pressure was put on governments to act and to cooperate with other countries to protect the environment

After Rio summit and the world commitment to reduce greenhouse effect, each country had to prepare their own plan to reach its goal. In 1997, President Bill Clinton presented the American proposition to stabilize by 2010 the greenhouse emissions around the 1990's level and to create an international emissions market. In 2003, an important progress was made within the

European Union. The European parliament approved the creation of a European emissions trading in order to respect the Kyoto protocol. In 2005, the Kyoto protocol officially entered into force. In 2011, 191 states had ratified the Kyoto Protocol 36 industrialized countries had the obligation to reduce their emissions by 5,2% on average by 2012. However, one third of the world's emissions came from USA and Australia that didn't ratified the agreement. In 2007, the intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published an alarming report showing the future consequences of global warming: Extinction of 30% of animal and vegetal species, negative impacts in every areas of the world. However, the developed countries did not take it seriously.

The same year, a new major progress was done for the fight against global warming. The United Nations launched an "adaptation" fund to help developing countries to cope with the climate change's consequences. But the conflict between industrialized countries and emerging countries supported by developing countries carried on slowing down the negotiations. They refused to pay for western countries' actions. In 2009, the United Nations conference in Copenhagen, the necessity of limiting global warming to 2°C was recognized for the first time without any concrete actions taken. Finally, in 2015 countries agreed for the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. The conference resulted in the Paris agreement, a global agreement on the reduction of climate change.

The agreement will enter into force when joined by at least 55 countries which together represent at least 55% of global greenhouse emissions. On 22 April 2016, 174 countries signed the agreement in New York, and started adopting it within their own legal systems. The expected key result was an agreement to set a goal of limiting global warming to "well below 2°C" compared to pre-industrial levels. In the adopted version of the Paris Agreement, the parties will also "pursue efforts to" limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C. The 1.5°C goal will require zero emissions sometime between 2030 and 2050, according to some scientists. Among the signatories, China, USA, the European Union and India, the four most polluting countries in the world, are included. Moreover, this agreement was historical because, for the first time, almost every country recognized by the United Nations and signed a common text. For the whole world, the Paris agreement was considered as a real hope. However, the results are not so hopeful.

International treaties: which results since the Kyoto protocol?

As mentioned before, the Kyoto protocol was one of the major agreements signed by the international community. The aim was to reduce by 5,2% the greenhouse emissions of industrialized countries by 2012. Has this goal been reached? The outcome was mixed but not as bad. Regarding the United Nations' data, the Kyoto protocol signatories' emissions decreased by 24% between 1990 and 2012. However, this result is not representative because it excludes the former USSR that collapsed in 1991 along with their emissions. The USA's emissions are also excluded because they never ratified the protocol as well as Canada which

withdrew itself from the agreement. After excluding these factors, the Kyoto protocol allowed a 4% decrease of the signatories' emissions, which is not so far from the 5,2% target. Nevertheless, this improvement can also be explained by the 2008 financial crisis which slowed down the world activity and so its emissions. Even if this protocol did have a positive impact, it doesn't weight much against the enormous rise of emissions from emerging countries like China and India, excluded from the Kyoto protocol.

That is why a new global agreement like the Paris agreement was necessary. However, many scientists are now pessimists towards the chances of success of this agreement. President Donald Trump withdrew the USA from the agreement and only 16 countries are currently respecting their promise. Moreover, the global greenhouse emissions increased again in 2017 after three years of stability. This is mostly due to the industrial activities and fossil energies like carbon, oil and gas. Critical actions should be taken quickly to hope for reaching the Paris' agreement goal. The novelty and essential contribution of SD as a concept and policy approach resides in its requirement to develop interpillar links (Murphy, 2012).

And Now?

According to the intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a global warming between 1.5°C and 2°C would provoke the loss of 8% of the vertebrates' habitats, the annual fish catches would decrease by 3 million tons. In Africa, the food production could be reduced by 10%. The sea level would also increase by 77 centimeters by 2100. According to the IPCC, stopping global warming to 1,5°C would require urgent, unprecedented, global actions in every sector. Industrial, energetic, agricultural and urban systems have to be transformed in the next 20 years. Moreover, the nongovernmental entities should integrate global actions to imagine new policies on issues like employment, security and technology. Non-binding international treaties won't be enough, and governments would have to make sustainable development an absolute priority. Finally, the United Nations agenda defined 17 goals to transform the world. These goals that are going from erasing poverty to fighting against climate change are guidelines for the international governance to follow. Goals and solutions are now globally known but they still need to enter into force at an international level.

Conclusion

Since the Brundtland report that defined sustainable development at an international level in 1987, heads of states gathered many times to debate and warn each other against the critical consequences of the ecological crisis. The reduction of emissions and the limitation of global warming came out as the main international goals that can be easily measured. Many countries, including the emerging countries in 2015, agreed and committed themselves to take actions quickly (United Nations, 2017). Throughout the decades, scientists published many reports on every issue regarding sustainable development and it helped figuring out solutions. These

solutions are often including a drastic change in our way of consumption but also the transformation of the societies at all level.

The Rio-Declaration (UNCED, 1992) states that the protection of nature should form an integral part of the development process. Chapter 8 of Agenda 21 (UN- CED, 1992) notes that the prevailing systems for decision-making in many countries tend to separate economic, social and environmental factors at the policy, planning and management levels, influencing the actions of all groups in society and affecting the efficiency and sustainability of development. Therefore, it proposed integrated systems of management to ensure that environmental, social and economic factors are considered together in a framework for SD. Four broad areas of work are identified: integrating environmental concerns and development at the policy, planning and management levels; providing an effective legal and regulatory framework; making effective use of economic instruments and market and other incentives; and establishing systems for integrated environmental and economic accounting. It argues that an adjustment or even a fundamental reshaping of decision-making may be necessary in order to put the environment and development at the centre of economic and political decision-making. The integrative approach for achieving sustainability, according to Agenda 21, seeks to bring together all stakeholders. It argues that the responsibility for bringing about changes lies with governments in partnership with the private sector and local authorities, and in collaboration with national, regional and international organizations. In addition, national plans, goals and objectives, national rules, regulations and law, and the specific situations in which different countries are placed are the overall framework in which such integration takes place.

As mentioned by Sachs (1993) SD has attracted a large following because it seems to hold the promise of bringing about a rapprochement between ecological (sustainability) and economic (development) interests. SD is accordingly deemed able to cope with the ecological crisis without affecting the existing economic relationships of power. Capitalism and ecology are no longer contradictory when brought together under the banner of SD (Baeten, 2000). The 'limits to growth' have become negotiable and manageable

Today, despite the international governance's efforts, the situation is still worsening every year and scientists are warning us that we still have a couple of decades to move on the right path before facing inevitable and tragic consequences. The countries' sovereignty is currently overcoming the power of the international institutions. That is why the USA could easily withdraw itself from the Paris Agreement or that most of the countries are not respecting their commitment. However, a new hope is coming from the non-governmental institutions and citizens' movements whose commitment is getting stronger. These institutions like Greenpeace or Sea Shepard are pressuring the political system along with citizens, forcing them to act. Now many questions are remaining for the international governance to solve: how can they force countries to respect their commitment? How can they help emerging and developing countries to follow a sustainable path to develop themselves? How can they fight against industrial lobbies that are slowing down the society's transformation? How will they deal with climate refugees whose number could reach one billion in 2050 in the worst scenario?

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